

# Measuring Success in Summer Bridge Programs: Retention Efforts and Basic Writing

Matthew Kilian McCurrie

*ABSTRACT: The current economic and political environment has increased the pressure on higher education to deliver education that is cost-effective, standardized, and accessible. Summer bridge programs have traditionally been one of the economical ways to increase the access and retention of non-traditional, first-generation, or at-risk students. Retention efforts like summer bridge programs often require the collaboration of administrators and basic writing instructors who each may possess a different set of values and priorities. This article examines how administrators, basic writing instructors, and students define a successful summer bridge experience and how varying definitions of success influence programmatic revision.*

*KEYWORDS: retention; summer bridge; basic writing curriculum; student success*

Retention experts have developed summer bridge programs as one tool to strengthen students academically and socially in preparation for the challenges of the first year of college. A summer bridge program is a short, intense introduction to college designed to assist underprepared first-year students. Incoming students may be required to successfully complete a summer bridge program as a condition of their being admitted. Or participation in such a program may be recommended to incoming students who show potential but are judged to lack academic or social readiness. Many two-year and four-year colleges as well as universities with a variety of missions offer bridge programs in an attempt to connect students' educational experiences with institutional expectations. The "bridge" may consist of both academic and social components, often with emphases that reflect the overall mission of the institution. Since many programs focus on academic content such as composition, part-time instructors of basic writing often provide valuable help developing and staffing these programs. The reading and writing that students do in summer bridge initiate them into the discourse practices of higher education, and therefore teachers of basic writing should help ensure that bridge programs do not lose sight of the most important aspects of teach-

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ing and learning. The basic writing teacher's role as an advocate for student learning has become especially important as retention policies and practices have been influenced in recent years by politically interested reform efforts that are at odds with the values and priorities of basic writing instructors. President Obama's recent proposal to spend twelve billion dollars to address remedial education demonstrates the values and priorities of policy makers and politicians. Ashley C. Killough reports that much of the money will be directed at new facilities, online education and assessment tools, and the development of standardized national curriculum. Killough represents the predominant attitude of lawmakers towards remedial education by quoting Julie Davis Bell, education program director for the National Council of State Legislators. Bell characterizes remedial education as a "drain" on the state budget, wasting taxpayers' dollars by re-teaching skills and content (Killough). For basic writing teachers this proposal and the attitude it reveals ignores meaningful investments in teaching and learning.

By examining one institution's revision of a summer bridge program and the role of basic writing instructors in this revision, I hope to show how varying notions of success impact programmatic reform. Understanding what success means from various perspectives—administrators in Admissions and Student Affairs concerned with retention and costs; basic writing teachers committed to student learning; and students themselves—will demonstrate how truly complex retention efforts are. The striking differences in the ways administrators, teachers, and especially students define success should be a starting point for efforts to revise any developmental program. By investigating stakeholders' changing notions of success, I also hope to initiate a broader discussion of how educators can energize and promote student learning throughout the curriculum.

## **SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS AND HIGHER ED REFORM**

While summer bridge programs have been one popular element in institutional efforts to improve access, retention, and student learning, the 2006 Spellings Commission Report has prompted institutions to re-examine the effectiveness of programs designed to increase access and retention. The underlying theme of the report is that higher education must refocus its energies on meeting the needs of the nation for the twenty-first century. Key findings in the report include higher education's failure to increase the enrollment and retention of minorities and first-generation college students in postsecondary institutions and a low completion rate for those minorities

who do enroll. The report is also critical of the failure of administrators to align high school graduation and college admission and placement requirements.

Summer bridge programs were designed to address some of these concerns, but the criticisms of higher education have cast doubt on the effectiveness of retention programs like the summer bridge. Since the report was published in 2006, many groups like the American Diploma Project (ADP) have expanded their membership. The ADP is a joint effort of Achieve (a partnership between government and business executives), the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (whose mission is promoting school choice), and The Education Trust, which believes “all children will learn at high levels when they are taught to high levels” (“About The Education Trust”). I think there is little doubt that these sponsors bring an agenda to efforts to improve access and retention: the first group’s primary aim appears to be to create workers for the corporate world, the second’s to dismantle traditional public education funding, and the third group believes more rigorous standards (whatever this may mean) will lead to greater access and retention. Through the ADP network “governors, state education officials, postsecondary leaders and business executives work together to improve postsecondary preparation by aligning high school standards, graduation requirements and assessment and accountability systems with the demands of college and careers” (“About Achieve”). In fact, the Common Core Standards agreement promising one set of national education standards for K-12 education is being modeled after the ADP standards with little input from professional organizations like NCTE (the National Council of Teachers of English).

Recent discussions in the press and academe (like those prompted by the Spellings report and ADP) have linked access and retention to standards and the economy. More and more business models applying cost-benefit analyses to value-added products are replacing discussions of students, curriculum, and learning. As a result of these critiques, summer bridge programs have found themselves trying to demonstrate that they are an educationally sound and economical way to help students bridge the gap between high school and college.

## **COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM**

Enrolling approximately 12,000 students, Columbia College is an urban, four-year college emphasizing the arts and media. With twenty-two buildings spread throughout Chicago’s South Loop, Columbia College

shares its home with the Chicago Symphony, the Art Institute, the Museum Campus, as well as nine independent film festivals, 200 theater groups and venues, thirty-five radio stations, and twenty-five magazines and newspapers. The city inspires and instructs students as they pursue degrees in film, theater, music, and other fields related to the media and arts. As a tuition-driven institution, Columbia College Chicago (CC) has historically focused on issues relating to recruitment, retention, and graduation as measures of its success. According to the Columbia College website, “The Bridge Program provides the opportunity for selected students who have struggled academically to demonstrate they are prepared for college and committed to their own *success* . . . . Bridge provides a unique opportunity for students to *succeed* through refining their academic skills, gaining a better understanding of the rigors of college life through academic coursework in reading, writing, and mathematics. Bridge students also learn about the latest research Columbia College faculty are working on and get an early opportunity to experience CC’s campus.” Students who are required to attend The Bridge Program must “*successfully* complete it for admission to Columbia College” (“Summer Bridge,” author’s emphasis). The term “success” appears frequently in our Bridge literature just as it does in the discourses of access and retention, but the definition of success is not always clear. Basic writing teachers need to understand how these varied definitions of success influence student access and retention.

### **Success as Defined by Administrators in Student Affairs and Financial Services**

From the perspective of those who work in student affairs, bridge programs like Columbia College’s succeed when their at-risk students are “made acceptable” to the institution by meeting admissions requirements for basic academic standards. Administrators create statistical models representing students likely to succeed and fail in order to accurately predict retention and graduation rates. The statistical model is then used to identify students who need the support of a summer bridge program. At the end of Columbia College’s four-week bridge program, students should have made visible their academic readiness through their reading and writing as well as their habits and dispositions. Many scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have looked at the models used by student affairs and asked why, for example, issues of race, class, and gender are never critically examined. A generous admissions policy like Columbia College’s offers some level of

access to higher education to underprepared students, but bridge programs, basic writing programs, and first-year writing have all also been implicated in numerous critiques for obscuring the power of race, class, and gender to affect access and retention. Minority students and first-generation college students are often penalized for not meeting higher education's culturally determined norms for academic success. While administrators in the office of student affairs see themselves as advocates for expanding access and improving retention, the "fix-it" approach they often take in creating many student supports like bridge, writing centers, and disability services leaves unexamined important questions about how race, class, and gender influence teaching and learning.

The retention literature that most influences administrators emphasizes the need for starting at-risk students in motivating and supportive environments as a way to improve what Vincent Tinto calls students' "academic and social integration" (16). Other scholars from various fields argue that Tinto's notion of integration asks minority students to sacrifice their cultural identity for the culture of the academy. Many alternatives to Tinto's theory have been studied, but the findings and conclusions do not present a clear course of action. Some research studying individual program effectiveness, like that of Patrick Velasquez at the University of California San Diego, has shown how an individual bridge program aimed at addressing academic and social/cultural issues can consistently influence retention and student success (3). Kevin Carey's research into graduation rates for African American students led him to Florida State University, where 72% of African American students graduated within five years. Carey found that the high graduation rate was related to the university's CARE program. CARE offers more generous admissions standards for low-income, first-generation students who agree to participate in a comprehensive support program that begins with a summer bridge program where students have time to adjust to college-level course work while living on campus. Less encouraging is Patricia Gandara's meta-research on several studies of individual bridge programs, which found that while overall programs made an impact, bridge students never measured up to better prepared students in either grades or graduation rates (97). In a recent report on the role of state policy in improving student success, Michael Lawrence Collins concludes, among other things, that "summer bridge and other intensive academic readiness programs designed to accelerate progress through developmental education warrant further policy support to test their effectiveness and scalability . . . at eliminating deficiencies in particular subject areas" (13). For example, Texas's

2006 education reform law has provided funds for high school and summer bridge programs, and while “the evidence is not definitive,” Collins argues that these are the types of institutional innovations that states should be supporting (13). The efforts Collins describes are not as comprehensive as the CARE program and his support of these programs seems based solely on their promise to “fix” students quickly and reduce the length of time and money spent in developmental courses. When programs like the ones Collins supports are driven by simplistic assumptions about students’ academic deficiency, the danger is that the academic elements of these programs, like composition courses, are often represented as something that must be quickly and painlessly delivered to students.

Over the past ten years, administrators in Student Affairs and Admissions at Columbia College have also supported the Summer Bridge program as a quick and efficient way to open access and aid in retention. The program was initially a collaboration between Student Affairs, English, and Math. As with other bridge programs, Columbia College’s data show that students who successfully complete Summer Bridge are retained in greater numbers than at-risk students who did not attend Summer Bridge, but as these students move beyond their first semester, retention diminishes and GPAs are lower than non-bridged peers. Data show that Columbia College’s Summer Bridge students do not match the retention rate of non-Bridged students from first semester to second semester, but their 61% retention rate is above the national average for open admissions institutions (“Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates”). Examining the data further, however, reveals that, in fact, the withdrawal rate for Summer Bridge students is significantly higher than non-Bridged peers in the second and third years. Since 2005, 602 students have successfully completed Summer Bridge, but less than 15% remain enrolled in classes at Columbia College beyond their first year. Our institution’s data on the retention and progress of Summer Bridge students echoes the longitudinal research on basic writers conducted by Genevieve Patthey-Chavez and her colleagues in several California community colleges. Their research also found that while some students who started at basic levels in the course work progressed to college-level coursework, many never progressed past the basic course, and those that did never performed as well as other students in their college-level course work (275). Retention scholars acknowledge the difficulty of conducting meaningful assessments when programs for at-risk students are multifaceted with assistance spread throughout the curriculum, but these research findings along with other shifts in Columbia College’s institutional culture and within higher educa-

tion in general have led administrators at Columbia College to question the success of the program.

Even with low retention, administrators had been satisfied and felt successful because the institution maintained an open admissions policy and provided many supports like Summer Bridge to help students at risk for failure or withdrawal, but new realities have challenged this model. Part of this new reality results from a changing financial environment. Since the Summer Bridge program was initiated almost ten years ago, Columbia College's tuition has risen considerably as the options and opportunities for government assistance have been scaled back dramatically. As administrators try to both account for the large increases in tuition and locate more money for needy students, access for students narrows. In researching the problem of student debt, institutional research discovered a link between bad debt and at-risk students. Administrators' concerns over credit card debt, exorbitant interest rates for private loans, and default rates were colliding with the commitment to open access and support programs like Summer Bridge. An honest cost-benefit analysis would have to answer if it were, in fact, ethical to allow students to incur this kind of debt when data showed that they had little chance of remaining in school or completing a degree in five years.

Administrators concluded that a successful Summer Bridge program would not only help students adjust socially and prepare them academically, but it would also provide guidance in applying for financial aid, grants, and scholarships. The tough financial times would also lead administrators to demand a revision of the curriculum to reflect higher standards so that students who do not demonstrate academic or social readiness can be spared from going into debt. Their efforts to make the program more accountable for the students it serves and the resources it consumes may also have sacrificed the college's commitment to open access for all. As vexing as this story is, it is not unusual. Mainstream news outlets as well as sources like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* have been reporting and analyzing the debates over access, standards, and retention ever since work began on the renewal of the Higher Education Act in 2003. A reoccurring theme in all these debates has been academic and financial accountability. Margaret Spellings' report in 2006 encouraged many reformers to push for greater fiscal and academic accountability through a common set of high standards and meaningful assessments with more transparency in the ways colleges report their findings.

Large-scale assessments of college students may help legislators and policymakers to more accurately assess student success and failure as they

make funding decisions. As Tom Fox has argued, however, the mastery of new, institutionalized literacy standards may promise students access to college and higher education, but these standards do not make assessing learning any easier. While Columbia College's provost has been advocating greater "rigor," faculty have only a fuzzy sense of what this means in terms of our standards. Instructors for the Summer Bridge program create its rigor through locally developed curriculum, pedagogy, standards, and assessments, but administrators funding bridge programs often favor the presumed rigor found in large-scale, standardized curriculum and assessments. Many advocates of increased access and support for at-risk students argue that institutionalized standards articulated from the top down often fail students. Too often these standards resemble a kind of conveyor-belt-to-success or one-size-fits-all model of standards and success. Avoiding the conveyor belt means administrators must collaborate with program directors, teachers, and students to contextualize and frame standards.

In "Class Dismissed," Mary Soliday supports Tom Fox's critique of standards by describing her efforts at CUNY to advance a more accessible basic writing curriculum. Her experiences show that collaborating with administrators and teachers to expand ideas of access and learning beyond notions of the quick fix demands effort and attention, not just to teaching, but also to context (783). Even private institutions like Columbia College, which feel political pressures less directly, have narrowed the path for first-generation, working class, and minority students. By not offering the necessary financial assistance and by uncritically following calls for standardization, private colleges like Columbia risk straying from their mission to educate the widest spectrum of students. The work of teachers/scholars like Soliday and Fox shows that reformers must prioritize understanding their context, especially shifts in administrative attitudes and priorities that inevitably also affect teachers, students, and learning. At Columbia College administrators in Admissions, Student Affairs, and Financial Services wanted a Summer Bridge program that was more "cost effective" in order to quickly and cheaply "remediate students." They concluded that students who could not succeed in Summer Bridge were not academically ready for college or prepared to take on the financial responsibility this entails.

### **Success as Defined by Basic Writing Teachers**

As the picture of access and retention becomes more complex, teachers may be tempted to think their role in promoting student success is mini-



mal, but opening access and improving retention ultimately depends on their efforts. For the basic writing instructors charged with developing and maintaining the English curriculum for Columbia College's Summer Bridge program, the goal had always been to assist students in developing academic literacy while also using this literacy to enrich the students' cultural experiences. Achieving these goals, however, has meant understanding the changing, larger context for teaching and learning at Columbia College. Since over half of the Bridge students are minorities and many come from a troubled, urban public school system, Bridge teachers use students' experiences as opportunities for reading and writing in personally meaningful ways. The changing demographics of Columbia College's typical first-year student, however, brought into stronger relief the academic and social otherness of students enrolled in Bridge. The general profile of the first-year student has become more traditional: a white, eighteen-year-old from a middle-class suburban high school living in campus housing. These students are more academically prepared and significantly more skilled in navigating the culture of school than Bridge students. Surveys of students and parents show that one of the reasons that students select Columbia College is because it offers an urban, multicultural environment. But less prepared, less affluent, minority students are paradoxically becoming more invisible on campus. Increased changes in the first-year demographic prompted some Summer Bridge instructors to begin rethinking what they were helping students transition into and what kind of reading and writing would be best to construct a bridge between mostly urban, minority students and the more middle-class, white first-year students.

Almost ten years ago Columbia College's English curriculum for Bridge had been influenced by scholarship in retention and developmental education. The course goals for summer 2000 encouraged teachers to "use reading and writing to generate interest in and motivation for college learning," and "create a community of matriculating students to ease the transition from high school to college." As these goals suggest, the course was designed with attention to the many nonacademic problems students face when they enter college. In an attempt to develop the whole student, the Bridge English course put more stress on affective issues related to motivation than a typical first-year writing course would in the hopes of retaining students. As Patricia Smittle explains in "Principles of Effective Teaching," many college teachers, especially those with "graduate school mentalities," fail to acknowledge their role in motivating students, but in developmental education this element is crucial to student success (4). In order to motivate students, the Bridge

English course might, for example, have included reading *Finding Fish* (Fisher and Rivas) or *Stand and Deliver* (Edwards) and writing a series of short reflections that allowed students to think about and make use of their background knowledge. Since the Bridge English course was not credit bearing or connected to the first-year curriculum, students were not expected to write for other genres or audiences, and homework was never assigned. Basic writing instructors believed students benefited because they had a fairly quick and easy experience of success in school by connecting their own experiences to their reading and sharing these reflections with their classmates. Teachers felt the reflective writing enabled students to see the relevance of what they were studying and how the course could connect to their personal learning goals. In “Classrooms as Communities: Exploring the Educational Character of Student Persistence,” Vincent Tinto concludes that feelings of belonging and classroom connection are significant factors in retaining students, but these experiences are not present in most content-based courses (620). This developmental approach, with its emphasis on helping students feel successful and connected to a community, also assumed that more motivated students would behave more independently with increased self-regulation. Instructors felt that by learning more about the lives and circumstances of the students they taught, they also benefited. Knowledge of students’ backgrounds was critical for instructors as they helped students build a bridge from their home cultures to academic culture.

While the Bridge English course was also constructed to introduce students to college level reading and writing, the way the course had been constructed by individual teachers and experienced by the students did not reflect Columbia College’s reading and writing goals. For example, because the course had evolved to emphasize a more general, developmental education perspective, it did not include learning about or practicing strategies for reading critically or writing that included workshops for drafting and revising. Those teaching in the program thought that the curriculum would motivate students, increase their confidence, and prepare them academically for the first year of college. This curriculum was successful to the extent that students did gain some confidence and opportunities to read and write. Our data indicate that over half of the Summer Bridge students who enrolled in the college were able to pass their first-semester writing course. This represented one measure of success. However, in a survey of Bridge English instructors conducted in 2005, many expressed the belief that the curriculum did offer students beneficial reading and writing experiences, but in other significant ways the overall curriculum was not giving students

the information and experiences they needed to make wise choices beyond their Summer Bridge experience. This survey was given to twelve Bridge English instructors with at least five years of experience teaching Bridge English. They were asked to write a brief response to two questions: What are the most effective elements of the Bridge curriculum and what revisions would improve the curriculum? Of the ten teachers who responded, each praised some element of the curriculum that helped students find personal connections to the reading and writing activities. Four teachers responded that reading *Finding Fish* and watching the film helped students discuss the obstacles and challenges they must overcome. Three teachers felt that in-class freewriting activities helped students develop confidence and fluency. Three teachers recalled students reading their poems at the closing ceremony as the strongest element of the curriculum.

Despite the great strides students had made, teachers in the survey also concluded that the Bridge English course did not sufficiently introduce students to the kinds of reading and writing expected in college. Of the ten teachers responding, all called for revisions to the curriculum that tied it more closely to the curriculum in first-year writing. Five instructors suggested including reading and writing workshops. Three others called for student work to be collected and graded through the creation of a portfolio, and two instructors suggested integrating more technology into the curriculum. Generally, instructors reasoned that if the challenges of entering college were never realistically addressed, students could not make informed decisions about whether to enroll and commit themselves to college. As student populations and campuses change, the curriculum for a program like Summer Bridge also needs to be revised to provide students with opportunities for both social and academic integration.

In 2005 and 2006, a small group of Bridge English instructors began to revise elements of the course, piloting some of these ideas in their own classes. In the spring of 2006, instructors and administrators at Columbia College came together to create a new vision and curriculum for Summer Bridge. The most significant change was to envision Bridge English as part of the first-year writing curriculum. The new course goals reflect a deeper understanding of the program's connection to the first-year writing curriculum. According to the revised statement of goals and outcomes, by the end of the four-week Summer Bridge Program, students who successfully complete the English segment should be able to:

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1. Become fully engaged with the college experience at CC, connecting the academic, social, and artistic aspects of critical and cultural inquiry with their own personal scholastic and career goals.
2. Use multiple strategies to read and comprehend substantial texts.
3. Use multiple strategies to produce substantial written texts.

As these goals suggest, Bridge English was no longer constructed as supplemental to the first-year curriculum or as narrowly focused on affect and motivation. The new curriculum was designed to be an introduction to college, not a make-up for a bad or disappointing high school experience. Each class of twelve students had a lead teacher, co-teacher, and writing center consultant. For each 90-minute class, students worked to accomplish these goals through reading and writing workshops, individual conferences, and the creation of a class blog to question, extend, and connect the other aspects of Summer Bridge. In a typical class, students might begin by working in reading groups organized along the lines of Harvey Daniels' reading circles. Divided into three groups based on their selections, students might be reading Chuck Palahniuk's *Stranger Than Fiction*; Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*; or Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. To connect students' reading experiences and provide a different context for writing, students might then move into writing on the class blog. Each student takes a turn working with the teacher or co-teacher to develop two questions for the class blog. These questions ask students to think about the larger, more global issues or themes in their reading. For example, students might respond to a question about the importance of place for each author, or they might respond to a question about the writer's attitude towards authority. Even though students are only reading one text, through the blog they are able to learn about the ideas and experiences of other students. For the remainder of the class, students might work in their writers' workshop, which is introduced to students using the ideas of Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* as modeled by the teacher and co-teacher. For homework, students might be asked to compose responses to their gallery visits, lectures, or reading. In regular mini-conferences with the writing center consultant and teachers, students develop ideas for a five-page essay that they workshop in class.

To successfully complete Bridge English, students must submit their polished essay along with their drafting materials. The essay and other student work including blog posts, responses, and written elements of peer

reviews and reading groups form the basis of evaluation. Students' classroom engagement is also evaluated in weekly progress reports. In order to pass and be allowed to register for fall classes, students must demonstrate multiple strategies for drafting and revising as well as sustained effort in other elements of the class.

Summer Bridge meets Monday through Friday, and each day, in addition to the 90-minute English class, students also have a 90-minute math class. Each afternoon students may attend a lecture, visit a museum, gallery or other cultural venue, and participate in small-group discussions of these experiences led by the co-teacher. The lectures are a way to provide Summer Bridge students with an introduction to Columbia College faculty and their research/teaching interests and to present material that instructors could incorporate into the English and math classes. Every week students also visit one of the galleries on campus or one of the city's cultural venues. Co-teachers lead these tours, which are structured to ensure that each visit is focused and related to the curriculum.

The revised Summer Bridge curriculum is engaging and challenging. Students who participate in this program come to understand what the demands of college reading and writing will be and the kinds of support they will need to be successful. Anyone familiar with the work of scholars like Patricia Bizzell can see that the theoretical grounding for this course goes back to the 1980s. Bizzell argued against pedagogical models that ignored the political dimension of the basic writing classroom and blamed students for their deficiencies. Instead, she asserted that basic writing teachers must "not prejudge those unequally prepared" but work to ensure students' full participation in their education and the life of the university (112). Her argument is still relevant today because this vision for basic writing continues to be controversial for higher education and the general public. This model did not emerge from the "one-stop-fix-it" approach that focuses on models of student deficiency. With this curriculum, basic writing teachers have tried to create an idealized, full-immersion into college writing: as tough, challenging, and rewarding a four-week curriculum as could be provided. Mike Rose has captured the aspirations of the teachers who created this curriculum when he says "successful remedial programs set high standards, are focused on inquiry and problem-solving in a substantial curriculum, use pedagogy that is supportive and interactive, draw on a variety of techniques and approaches, [and] are in line with students' goals" ("College Needs to Re-Mediate Remediation"). As Rose and many others committed to basic writing have observed, the opportunity we offer these students says something

important about our idea of education and learning: people can change, grow, transform, and do not need to be constantly labeled and re-labeled based on past experiences or missed opportunities.

The revised curriculum for Bridge English reflects a new awareness among teachers and administrators that all of the program's energy cannot be devoted to simply getting students through the program and admitted to the college. In the past, Summer Bridge teachers have felt that they might have relied too much on the college's first-year basic writing course and other supports to help a Bridge student who seemed to be borderline. Now, because of reduced financial aid and changing social and academic expectations, the program and its teachers think about access differently. We must question the generosity of our impulse to give students the benefit of the doubt when assessing their readiness, and instead we must consider the potential financial and personal damage to students who are not likely to succeed at the college. The re-design has also given teachers the opportunity to think critically about what they considered a vibrant college writing course, one that connects the arts and academic literacy. Teachers re-designing the curriculum believed that it would not be successful if it merely gave students opportunities to connect these elements: they had to create a curriculum that energized this exchange. Lectures, museum visits, and a discussion group were added to the schedule to create opportunities for students and teachers to practice the wide range of creative and critical skills needed for success in college while making them more comfortable with the social aspects of college. All of these experiences were integrated into the composition class through reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities that connected our students' lives with the academic skills of formulating ideas and developing them for academic audiences.

Instructors expressed their enthusiasm for the new curriculum during weekly faculty meetings held during the 2006 Summer Bridge session. The only difficulties they experienced with the new curriculum were related to using the reading groups and class blog, but those issues were addressed by offering instructors more pedagogical support. A more descriptive measure of the success of this revised program can be seen in the 2006 and 2007 Bridge Survey results. In 2006, the Summer Bridge program enrolled 84 students. About 70%, or 59 students, responded to the survey. In 2007, the Summer Bridge program enrolled 90 students. About 83%, or 75 students, responded to the surveys. These data suggest the positive influence the revised curriculum is having on students' experiences.

	<b>2006 (N=59)</b>		<b>2007 (N=75)</b>	
	<b>Mean<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Dev.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Dev.</b>
<b>English Composition</b>				
Books/Materials Helped Me Learn	3.83	0.94	4.53	0.72
Forums Interesting/Good Use of Time	4.10	0.99	4.11	0.62
Writing Helped Prepare Me for College	4.43	0.60	4.61	0.85
Reading Helped Prepare Me for College	4.04	0.82	4.25	0.92
<b>Mathematical Explorations</b>				
Materials Helped Me Learn	3.32	1.04	3.48	1.05
In-Class Activities Good Use of Time	2.91	1.03	4.13	1.23
Homework/Quizzes Helped Prepare Me for College	3.29	1.19	4.15	1.14
<b>Other Bridge Activities</b>				
Lectures Interesting/Good Use of Time	3.26	1.04	3.37	0.78
Post-Lecture Activities Interesting/Good Use of Time	3.71	1.19	4.23	0.77
Museum Visits Interesting/Good Use of Time	4.16	0.83	4.48	0.69
Salons Interesting/Good Use of Time	3.72	1.11	4.05	0.88
<b>Program Summary: The Bridge Program...</b>				
Improved My Writing	4.21	0.73	4.60	0.92
Improved My Reading	3.48	1.19	4.00	0.96
Improved My Understanding of Mathematics	3.05	1.15	3.47	0.65
Increased My Understanding of College-level Expectations	4.25	0.81	4.41	0.76
Improved My Understanding of Columbia College	4.30	0.80	4.51	0.86
Improved My Understanding of the South Loop (region of the city)	3.84	1.08	4.04	0.79
Was a Positive Experience for Me	4.39	0.68	4.69	0.68

<sup>1</sup>5-Point Likert Scale: 5 = Agree Strongly; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Disagree Strongly

The mostly positive response of students at the end of Bridge suggests that some of the goals of the program are being met. In the survey items included under English Composition, the highest scoring were those that asked students to rank how the course prepared them for college reading and writing. The mean for both of these items was over 4.0 with a low standard deviation, indicating that data points were very close to the same value and not widely dispersed. These data suggest that students felt they had been challenged in Bridge English and felt prepared to begin a college writing course. Student responses were less definitive when ranking specific elements in the curriculum. In evaluating their reading selection and use of online forums, students were approaching agreement that it helped their learning, but the mean in the 2006 survey was below 4.0 and the standard deviation was somewhat higher. These data may reflect the text students selected to read. The choices included *Into the Wild* (Krakauer), *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* (Palahniuk), or *The Freedom Writers Diary* (Gruwell and the Freedom Writers). Some students and teachers reported difficulty navigating between the narrow focus of the reading groups and the more global focus found in the online forum, but the 2007 survey indicates that students agreed the books and materials were helpful. The generally higher rankings for items in the 2007 survey indicate instructors' efforts to revise and improve elements like the reading groups.

The summary findings also showed that students felt prepared for college writing, but the highest rated items in the summary sections may also be the most significant: increased understanding of college-level expectations and an overall positive experience. Past program evaluations of Summer Bridge suggested that while most students reported a positive experience, they were less confident in their readiness to do college-level work. Focus groups of Bridge students interviewed in 2005 repeatedly referred to the work they did in their English course as "review," or a "refresher." When asked what they expected their college writing course to be like, most students responded that they expected it to be more difficult with longer assignments. The data from the 2006 and 2007 surveys suggest that more explicit goals and challenging standards for Summer Bridge influence students' perceptions of their own learning and their overall confidence. The revised Summer Bridge program also resulted in more students not completing or failing the program so that while the overall experience for students improved, a growing attrition rate during the program leaves unresolved questions about access and gate-keeping. The college's commitment to offering students access to higher education exists in tension with the reality that some students



will not be ready for college, even after a bridge program. To simply admit students who are not prepared may lead to expensive failures with lasting negative consequences.

In the revised Summer Bridge program, we do not subject students to the overly general, de-contextualized standards that basic writing scholars have objected to, but we are concerned that our four-week bridge program may be too short to adequately determine a student's readiness for college. Since the stakes are high, teachers and students can feel intense pressure, but Bridge English instructors know that they may encounter these students in their basic writing classes in the fall so being realistic in assessing them during Summer Bridge is a crucial first step in retention. The overall retention rate of first-year students at Columbia College from the fall to spring semester has been consistent the last two years at about 84%. The retention rate for Summer Bridge students has improved from 61% in 2004 and 2005 but is still lower at 68% than overall first-year retention. Given the complexities of studying retention, it is difficult to claim one program causes an increase in student retention, but summer bridge programs can play an important role in improving the learning experiences of at-risk students when they give prospective students a challenging college experience that prepares them for real college-level work and thus builds confidence.

### **Success as Defined by Students**

The most significant and perhaps perplexing part of revising this curriculum has been trying to understand what success means for students. Usually, student success is defined by teachers or administrators. In a Bridge English course I taught in 2006, a student came up to me after class and said that the biggest difference Bridge made was introducing her to teachers who were hard but believed she could be successful. Those two qualities: challenging and optimistic, have remained in my thoughts as I have seen them often echoed in the student evaluations that I have reviewed over the past four years. Many of the young people who enter Summer Bridge report that being treated like a student, like a reader and writer, was a first step for them in defining success and an important aspect of the Summer Bridge program. Part of the value in the Bridge program has always seemed to be its ability to draw in students who felt alienated or silenced in high school or in their lives generally and give them a space to re-position themselves as successful students. Students felt successful in the revised Bridge curriculum when they were able to use their own language, select their own texts, and pursue

their own interests. Students also identified success with writing and thinking that considered multiple perspectives like those found in writing and reading workshops. In summing up what I learned from reading responses to our course evaluations, I think these students see the college, especially one so committed to the arts, as a resource to help them build fulfilling lives. Our Summer Bridge students don't think about Columbia College as a place where they come to be made acceptable to institutionalized notions of literacy or to interrogate their race, class, or gender from the perspective of the teacher. They never mastered the culture of schooling and have little interest in doing so unless they see it as a skill or disposition with currency outside the college class. In 2006 some students reported suffering through some lectures, for example, because they weren't compelling or current enough to appeal to their interests. Teachers' first impulse when they saw students dozing off, talking, texting, and slipping out the back door was to confront them with their bad behavior. While teachers were explicit with students about the ways successful students engage with lectures, I wondered how willing we teachers were to re-think some of the key expectations of schooling and success, like sitting still through a class or lecture.

In research conducted with adult learners, Joseph Donaldson and his co-authors found that students made clear distinctions between success in college and success in learning ("Adult Undergraduate Students: How Do They Define Success?"). Students equated success in college with earning high grades, but they described successful learning as a feeling of owning the knowledge in a way that is personally relevant. In another study conducted by Anne M. Dean and William G. Camp, undergraduate students also tended to define success less in academic terms and more in terms of general life satisfaction ("Defining and Achieving Student Success: University Faculty and Students' Perspectives"). The students in this study believed happiness and satisfaction were the true measures of success, and academic achievement was less significant in defining a successful college career. These studies highlight the differences that can exist between teachers, students, and administrators when they define success. These differing perceptions account for some of the difficulty we experience in retention efforts like summer bridge programs. The plans, programs, and goals of teachers and administrators may only coincidentally intersect with what students want. Administrators feel successful when their programs advance the school's mission and use resources responsibly. Teachers feel successful when students enter the academic discourse community. According to the research, however, students are interested in personal and professional fulfillment.

Programming and academic discourse may only represent a means to an end for some students, and for basic writers the means often seem disconnected from their desired goal.

Over the last two years I have tried to keep in contact with the Bridge students I taught, and one of them, Brian, was good enough to reply to an e-mail I sent him. I asked for his reflections about Bridge from his perspective now as a successful student looking to graduate in a year. Brian replied:

Bridge was successful for me mostly because it helped me see that college could keep me close to what I love—music. After touring with my band for over a year, I knew I needed to try a different path. The classes really aren't that hard once you make that decision. (Smith)

Another student, Monica, who did not make it past her first semester, replied to my e-mail:

Bridge was hard, but it was good. You made us read *Into the Wild* and I really hated that guy, but I couldn't stop thinking about him. I loved writing and talking about why with you and the other students. Once I started classes though, all I saw was the hard, N. Stuff piled up and I got sick of it. . . . I still feel that I succeeded in Bridge. I remember the *Into the Wild*, the Lagston Hughes poem about his first day in college and our blog. I feel like some day I will go to college and get my degree but right now its not for me. (Jones)

Both Brian and Monica suggest that success cannot be limited to institutional goals for retention and graduation. As worthy as those goals are, students like Brian and Monica are not unlike the students in Dean and Camp's study or Donaldson's research. Brian and Monica see success related to living a life they deem fulfilling. For Brian, performing music and learning about the music business has been a good fit. For Monica, finding that "hard but good" fit she experienced in Summer Bridge has been more difficult, but her e-mail suggests she still considers herself successful. She's been able to identify for herself what she expects from school, and someday she believes she will find the right fit for her.

Teachers of basic writing will not be surprised by the reactions of Monica or Brian. However, the voices of students and basic writing instructors provide an important perspective, one that is often lost or ignored by

policy makers, politicians, and administrators. By using the advice and feedback offered by instructors and students, the revised Bridge course better reflects the goals of our curriculum. As a result, students, teachers, and administrators feel that the Summer Bridge program more fully represents the Columbia College experience.

## **CONCLUSION**

These changing definitions of success developed by administrators, instructors, and students can intersect, overlap, and oppose one another. As a professional working both in Composition Studies and English Education, I can see the importance of understanding the discourse on retention at my institution since it can directly affect curriculum, but the changing discourse on retention affects the future of the whole English department: its courses and programs; its teachers and students. If we, teachers and administrators, want students to view success differently, we may need to re-examine the value premises of our own arguments for academic literacy and be willing to involve ourselves in the places where success gets defined for young people, like K-12 schooling, churches, clubs, jobs, and the many other places where young people form their attitudes about success. Waiting until young people like Brian and Monica get to our bridge programs may be too little, too late for some. Realizing that some students will continue to withdraw or leave college regardless of the programs we create is humbling. This fact should, however, prompt us to consider how the courses we teach serve all the students: the ones who stay and graduate and the ones who leave. Recently, our professional conversations have been full of talk about transferability: how the skills we teach and the experiences we provide in our writing course transfer to other courses in the curriculum. If we allow that transferability must also include how our courses can transfer skills and experiences beyond the academy to the lives our students live, we can begin to develop a more comprehensive definition of success. The efficacy of open access programs like Summer Bridge demands that our teaching and learning be opened to the larger community to encourage the broadest possible participation in our efforts to pursue success.

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