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EDUCATIONALLY UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF  
THEIR EXPERIENCE IN A PRE-FRESHMAN BRIDGE PROGRAM

by  
Mary C. Schell

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
May 6, 2010

Thesis Chair: Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.

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## ABSTRACT

Mary C. Schell

EDUCATIONALLY UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR  
EXPERIENCE IN A PRE-FRESHMAN SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM

2009/10

Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.

Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of underprepared students regarding their participation in a pre-freshman bridge program. Data were collected through a series of interviews conducted over the course of three months. Interviews focused on students' perceptions of their classroom and out-of-classroom experiences, as well as their overall reflections on their participation in the program. Analysis of the interviews showed that students perceived that their participation in a pre-freshman summer bridge program readied them for the academic rigors of college and developed in them the skills to be successful first year students. Students also reported that the program expanded their capacity and desire to initiate conversations with and learn from peers who were different from them. Additionally, this study shed light on the importance of mentoring relationships for first-year college students from underprepared backgrounds.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments		ii
List of Tables		v
CHAPTER		Page
I.	Introduction	1
	Statement of the Problem	2
	Purpose of the Study	3
	Significance of the Study	3
	Assumptions and Limitations	4
	Operational Definitions	4
	Research Questions	5
	Overview of the Study	5
II.	Review of the Literature	7
	First Year Students' Success	7
	Obstacles to Underrepresented Students' Admission and Success	10
	Pre-freshman Summer Bridge Programs	13
	Rowan University's Pre-College Institute	17
	Summary of the Literature Review	19
III.	Methodology	21
	Context of the Study	21
	Population and Sample Selection	22
	Instrumentation	22
	Data Collection	23
	Data Analysis	24
IV.	Findings	25
	Profile of the Sample	25
	Analysis of the Data	27
	Research Question 1	27
	Research Question 2	32
	Research Question 3	37

V.	Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations	44
	Summary of the Study	44
	Discussion of the Findings	45
	Conclusions	50
	Recommendations for Practice	51
	Recommendations for Further Research	52
	REFERENCES	53
	APPENDIXES	57
	Appendix A: Demographic Survey for Interview Participants	57
	Appendix B: Interview Schedule	60
	Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter	64
	Appendix D: Informed Consent Form	66

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		Page
4.1	Perceived Beneficial Experiences in the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students	28
4.2	Perceived Challenging Experiences in the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students	29
4.3	Perceived Value Placed on Things Learned in the Classroom of Selected PCI Students	30
4.4	Perceived Important Academic Decisions During PCI Among Selected Students	32
4.5	Perceived Beneficial Experiences Outside the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students	33
4.6	Perceived Challenging Experiences Outside the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students	35
4.7	Identified On-Campus Mentors of Selected PCI Students	36
4.8	Value Placed on Things Learned Outside the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students	37
4.9	Selected Students' Response to the Question "Are You the Same Person You Were Before PCI	39
4.10	Perceived Role PCI Played in Identity Shaping Among Selected PCI Students	41

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Erica is a 17-year-old high school senior who had never thought about college. She grew up in a single-parent home and for the past two years she has been working 20 hours per week at the local grocery store in order to contribute to the family income. For as long as she can remember, Erica has been helping to care for and raise her younger siblings. She has had little time to become involved in extracurricular activities in high school because of her job and babysitting responsibilities.

Erica's school district is underfunded and understaffed, and although her grade-point-average placed her in the top third of her class, she is a poor test-taker, and received no preparation for the SAT. Still, with the encouragement of a teacher and guidance counselor, Erica took the college entrance examination; however, her low test scores placed her below the threshold for admittance at all four year colleges and universities in her home state of New Jersey.

This study investigates an alternate admission and preparation program for students like Erica: pre-freshman summer bridge. Through the lens of the work of Kuh, Astin, Chickering and Gamson, and Tinto, as well as other researchers in higher education, this study explores the effectiveness and impact of a summer bridge program on underprepared and educationally underprepared students entering the first year of higher education.



## Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, students like Erica, who are talented, hard-working, and have untapped academic potential, are often not admitted to four year colleges, or may not even think to apply (Kezar, 2000; Myers & Drevlow, 1982; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; York & Tross, 1994). Erica and her counterparts face a myriad of obstacles, including subpar educational opportunities in their K-12 institutions; families, friends, and communities who fail to encourage or understand the goals of college (Walpole, 1997); and colleges and universities that may avoid reaching out to them due to restrictions on the institutions' financial resources as well pressure to gain prestige by maintaining high academic standards (York & Tross, 1994). Many gifted but educationally underprepared students will never give a second thought to applying to college.

Even if minority students, students from low-SES backgrounds, and first generation college students do apply to college, they are less likely to be admitted; and if they are admitted, due to their underpreparedness, they are more likely to struggle with both academics and campus culture, and may not persist. In these students' K-12 districts, there are disproportionately more under-qualified teachers, teachers and administrators with lower expectations, and schools that are poor in resources and have less access to rigorous coursework (Walpole et al., 2007). Furthermore, their schools are far less likely to distribute resources on topics such as college preparation, requirements, and admission standards and procedures, and as a result these students have inadequate information and inaccurate expectations regarding higher education (Kezar, 2000; Walpole et al., 2007).

Since access to higher education was significantly broadened almost 50 years ago, the leaders of colleges and universities have recognized that their role in our nation's quest for social improvement must include recruiting, retaining, and facilitating the success of minority and low-SES, students; however, these leaders must reconcile that task with their school's financial needs and the desire to win or maintain status as a top-ranking institution (York & Tross, 1994). While minority and low-SES students are disproportionately underprepared for college, report lower entrance exam scores, and may require more funding to successfully meet the requirements of graduation (Ami, 2001; Kezar, 2000; Myers & Drevlow, 1982; Walpole et al., 2007), colleges and universities have a duty to serve and support these students. Presidents, Boards of Trustees, and other leaders in higher education have the difficult task of finding a balance that addresses these seemingly at odds goals in their institutions.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact, both inside and outside of the classroom, of a pre-freshman summer bridge program on educationally underprepared students. Of related interest was how salient students perceived this impact to be as they reflected on their overall growth and evolution through a summer program and their first semester of college.

#### Significance of the Study

Gathering first-hand information on the impact that a summer bridge program had on a diverse group educationally underprepared students will add to the knowledge base. The findings of this study may help to develop plans and reevaluate services and practices related to this program and others that are similar to it. Furthermore, the results

of this study may help high school teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors to better make students aware of and prepared for higher education.

#### Assumptions and Limitations

This study was completed at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ and limited to participants in the 2009 Pre-College Institute (PCI), Rowan's summer bridge program for educationally underprepared incoming students. Five students participated in a three-part interview lasting over several months during the Spring 2010 semester. It is assumed that each subject was truthful and thorough in his or her responses. The time to conduct this research experiment was limited to three months. Finally, researcher perspectives and relationships to the subjects being interviewed may present bias in the findings.

#### Operational Definitions

1. Educationally Underprepared: “[Pertaining to] both [an] educational and social disadvantage, such as coming from a low-income family, attending a school with a limited college preparatory curriculum, being the first generation in one's family to attend college, and residing in a community with low college-going rates” (University of California, 2009).
2. Student: A participant in the 2009 Pre-College Institute; at the time of this study, a first-year student at Rowan University pursuing his or her Bachelor's degree.
3. Underrepresented: Underrepresented populations in higher education include but are not limited to African American, Hispanic/Latino/-a, Native American, women, and low-SES students (Perez, 2009).

## Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences that contribute to educationally underprepared students' success inside the PCI classroom?
2. What are the experiences that contribute to educationally underprepared students' success outside of the PCI classroom?
3. What are the experiences of selected PCI first-year students that contribute to the development of identity and self-concept?

## Overview of the Study

Chapter II provides a review of scholarly literature in relation to this study. It includes a brief history of seminal research on first year student success, particularly as it applies to educationally underprepared students; an overview of the obstacles to underrepresented students' success; a look at several different summer bridge programs as well as Rowan University's Pre-College Institute; and finally a summary of the chapter.

Chapter III discusses the methods and procedures used to gather information for this study. This chapter includes the context of the study, the population and sample selection, demographics, data collection instruments, the data collection process and analysis of the data.

Chapter IV presents the findings and results of the study. This chapter focuses on answering the research questions with content analysis.

Chapter V provides the complete findings of the study and summarizes the information. It concludes with discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for practice and further research.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

#### First Year Students' Success

First year college student success is among the most important and most studied issues in higher education today. Seminal higher education and student development theory, including Kuh's Theory of Student Engagement, Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, and Tinto's Theory of Student Departure have been studied extensively, particularly as they relate to the freshman year and educationally underprepared students.

Kuh's research focuses on how much time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, and how an institution achieves high levels of student participation in activities that lead to student success. Kuh, Schuh, Whit, and Associates (1991) state that there are a range of positive outcomes for students who are "actively engaged in various aspects of college" (p. 5). The *National Survey of Student Engagement* (2008) found that academically underprepared students reported significantly lower levels of engagement and academic success during the first year, but higher levels of personal and social development. Also, although underprepared students were less engaged, they were significantly more likely to utilize campus resources such as technology and tutoring centers to improve their general academic skills (NSSE, 2008).

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) found that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities has a small but statistically significant effect on first-year grades. In their study, student engagement accounted for 13% of variance in first-year grades (prior academic success accounted for 29%). The authors also reported that persistence to the second year was significantly impacted by engagement for all students, and that African American students were, at low levels of engagement, less likely to return for the sophomore year, but more likely than their White counterparts to persist when they engaged in educationally purposeful activities at high levels.

Astin (1999) found that academic involvement correlates with satisfaction in almost all aspects of college life, and that the single input related most closely related to overall satisfaction was student-faculty interaction. Students who reported more frequent interactions with faculty were significantly more satisfied with all aspects of college, including friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and institutional experience (Astin, 1999). Additionally, Pascarella (1980) found a significant positive correlation between increased student-faculty informal contact and students' intellectual and personal development, positive attitudes about college, academic achievement as measured by grade point average, persistence and graduation, and educational aspirations.

Unfortunately, first year students, today facing more financial concerns than ever, are much more likely than their predecessors to work full-time while attending college (Astin, 1998). Record number of freshmen reported they would "get a job to help pay for college expenses" (Astin, 1998, p. 129). Astin (1998) said this was particularly troubling,

as students who work off campus, especially those who work full-time, are significantly less likely to persist.

After studying 50 years of research in teaching, learning, and interaction in higher education, Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. These principles are: encouraging student–faculty contact, encouraging cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, giving prompt feedback to students, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, and Pascarella (2006) more recently found that these seven principles have a significant positive impact on cognitive development, learning orientations, and learning aspirations during students’ first year of college. Furthermore, the authors found that these principles for good practice have a compensatory effect for new students who enter the college environment less prepared or with lower than average cognitive development and orientations to learning. In other words, for those who come to higher education from a less prepared and from a less rigorous K-12 background, these principles can be the most helpful (Cruce et al., 2006).

Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure is based on the work of social anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, who posited that the movement of people from one community to another is made up of three distinct stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) extended this theory to the course students take becoming integrated in and connected to the college community. The first stage, separation, is defined as the disassociation from one’s previous communities, and is thought to contribute to student departure in the first and second semester (Elkins, Braxton, &



James, 2000). “An understanding of the influence of separation on first-year student departure would contribute not only to the understanding of college student departure in general, but to also to the development of programs and policies designed to reduce first-year student departure” (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000, p. 252). Separation, from both academic and social systems, varies in accordance with gender, race, academic aptitude, academic achievements, family socioeconomic background, and parent educational level, and Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) found that support from family and prior communities has the most impact on students’ decision to persist or depart. Because minority students and students from low-socioeconomic (SES) status often have family members are less likely to understand and support the goals of higher education (Elkin, Braxton, & James, 2000; Kezar, 2000; Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2007), they may be less likely to achieve separation, and more likely to depart early.

#### Obstacles to Underrepresented Students’ Admission and Success

In addition to the challenges all students face during the first year of college, there are unique obstacles African American, Latino, and Native American students, as well as students from low-SES status, must overcome to gain admission and achieve success. Major barriers include these students’ inadequate educational opportunities in K-12 institutions, and family members and friends who do not encourage or fully understand the goals of post-secondary education, as well as institutions of higher education that are simultaneously facing restrictions on their financial resources and pressure to maintain high academic standards. Several theories of ethnic identity development also provide insight into the challenges of diverse college student populations.

Since its inception and in the past almost 50 years particularly, access to higher education has expanded significantly and rapidly. In recent history, the G.I. Bill, Civil Rights Acts, and Higher Education Acts have been catalysts for new populations of students to attend college (Freeland, 2007; York & Tross, 1994). Today, these students, including minority students, students from low-SES backgrounds, and first generation college students, are often considered educationally underprepared because they are less likely to be prepared for the academic rigors of college. Walpole et al. (2007) point out that in the K-12 systems they attend, these students are more likely to be taught by under-qualified teachers, have teachers and administrators with lower expectations, attend primary and secondary schools that are resource poor and do not have access to rigorous coursework, and be tracked away from high achieving groups. These students are further hindered because their high schools do not provide adequate resources on topics such as college preparation, requirements, and admission standards and procedures, and as a result they have insufficient information and inappropriate expectations about college (Kezar, 2000; Walpole et al., 2007).

Along with K-12 school structures, experiences, and expectations, family and home life also contribute to minority and low-SES students' lack of preparedness for college and the college environment. Walpole (1997) found that low-SES parents' expectations and definitions of success result in their students' lower aspirations than their high-SES counterparts. For example, to high-SES parents, success for their child might mean a bachelor's degree, an advanced degree, or attendance at a prestigious university; while to low-SES parents, their child's success could be a high school

diploma, a full-time job, or enrollment at a vocational school or two-year college (Walpole, 1997).

Ethnic identity theory further elucidates differences in the way Latino and African American students may approach college. For example, first year Latino students are more likely to rely on their extended family, which could include padrinos (godparents) and compadres (close family friends), than institutions and their resources for assistance and guidance. Additionally, attendance and engagement at college may alienate Latino students from their families, unless family members discuss and establish expectations of the college experience (Torres, 2004). Research also shows that Latino and low-SES parents may feel uncomfortable with schools and school personnel, and African American parents may distrust schools (Walpole et al., 2007). African American and underrepresented students often have family members who do not understand the goals of college (Kezar, 2000), and Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) found that first generation college students receive less encouragement from their family and friends for college attendance than other groups.

Dwindling financial resources for higher education is among the top contributing factors leading to students dropping out during and after the first year (York & Tross, 1994). In Astin's (1998) most recent installment of *The Changing American College Student*, a record number of students reported experiencing "major concern" about paying for college, selecting an institution because of "low tuition" or "financial aid offers," and, as mentioned above, feeling the need to work part- or full-time to pay for college. These developments may be, at least partially, a result of "the increasing inability of federal financial aid to keep pace with the rising cost of college" (Astin, 1998, p. 130). Indeed,

although the real cost of college is growing, the percentage of students who receive aid from the principal federal need-based sources—Pell Grants and Stafford Loans—is in decline. Students are relying increasingly on parents, summer work savings, other savings, and part-time and full-time work while in school. In a study by Santa Rita and Bacote (1997), 77% of students in a summer bridge program reported working at an on or off campus job during their freshman year. Furthermore, because federal aid is unable to meet the needs of many students, students are increasingly choosing a college based on the institutional aid it is able to offer, rather than the strength or relevance of its academic programs (Astin, 1998).

#### Pre-freshman Summer Bridge Programs

In the 1960s, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson often spoke to the evolving role of higher education and its important place in the quest for social improvement (York & Tross, 1994). Consequently, in the last 40 years, several programmatic efforts focusing on the recruitment, success, and retention of minority and, more recently low-SES, students have been implemented on college campuses nationwide (Kezar, 2000; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Walpole et al., 2007; York & Tross, 1994). Incorporating findings on first year success and barriers to the admission and preparedness of underrepresented populations, pre-freshman bridge programs are becoming an increasingly popular effort to increase the preparedness, success, and retention of at-risk students. Summer bridge programs generally span five or six weeks during the summer prior to students' first year, and provide structured academic and transitional assistance to 30 to 100 students. In order to serve the most beneficial number of students, while maintaining high academic standards, universities may admit underprepared students conditionally; students will be

officially admitted for the fall semester upon the successful completion of their bridge program (Walpole et al., 2007). Although the main foci of summer bridge programs vary depending on individual universities, their missions, and goals, generally the aim is to ready participants for the academic rigors of higher education and to facilitate students adjusting to the college environment so they are able to persist (Kezar, 2000).

Accordingly, the content of these programs vary. Common themes are remedial courses in English, math, reading, and writing; tutoring sessions; structured opportunities to develop study skills; group peer counseling; introduction to financial aid; and programs and workshops to acclimate students to campus life and multiculturalism (Kezar, 2000; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Walpole et al., 2007). However, some bridge programs may be focused to specific disciplines, for example, science, engineering, and math (Ami, 2001; Pantano, 1994); or specific groups, for example, Latinos or women (Pantano, 1994; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997). Such factors shape the content of bridge programs as well.

For 20 years, very limited evaluation and assessment of pre-freshman bridge programs was conducted, despite the fact that nationally, universities were spending billions of dollars annually on these programs (York & Tross, 1994). More recently, significant research has been conducted and published regarding the outcomes of these programs. Although some findings have been inconsistent or inconclusive, others show meaningful correlation between educationally underprepared students' participation in bridge programs and their academic achievement, positive transition, involvement, persistence, and timely graduation.

Santa Rita and Bacote (1997) conducted a longitudinal study evaluating the effects of the Bronx Community College (BCC) College Discovery Pre-freshman Summer Program (CDPSP), a bridge program designed to increase the academic achievement, retention, and graduation of admitted at-risk students. CDPSP spanned six weeks and included intensive study in English, reading, and mathematics, as well as well as counseling, career, and orientation components. Findings were mixed regarding how well CDPSP prepared students for the academic rigors of college. Most (68%) of CDPSP students reported that they were able to keep up in most of their classes, but 53% stated that their fall classes were more difficult than expected, and 69% indicated that the fall term was more difficult academically than CDPSP had been (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997). As might be predicted following this statement, while CDPSP students' average GPA during the program was 2.6, it fell during the fall term to 2.3 and rebounded slightly to 2.4 during the spring. The mean cumulative GPA for CDPSP students during their first year was 2.5 (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997). Eighty percent of CDPSP students agreed that they considered themselves members of the BCC community, while only 3% disagreed. Responses to open-ended questions also reflected a positive transition for CDPSP students: "It was a tough adjustment, but I really don't think I could have done it without CDPSP. CDPSP really prepared me for it!" one student wrote (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997). Persistence rates were also higher among CDPSP students: while 83% of BCC freshmen returned the second year, 93% of CDPSP participants persisted (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997).

Ami (2001) conducted a study at the University of New Mexico, measuring an aspect of academic growth for science, engineering, and math students enrolled in a four-

week summer bridge program. Pre- and post- math placement tests were administered immediately before and after the rigorous month-long program, which was comprised of lectures, team-work and problem-solving exercises, structured study sessions, and the use of a textbook specifically designed for the program (Ami, 2001). Results of the two tests showed that 64.3% of students improved their scores (by an average of 15.3%), and 43% of students scored high enough to improve their placement in mathematics courses. Mean, median, and mode scores all also increased. While upon entering the program students ACT and SAT Mathematics scores were the strongest predictors of their placement test scores, at the end of the program, students' test scores were best predicted by the final grade they earned in the summer bridge program (Ami, 2001). Although the researcher acknowledged it was unclear which variable was most impactful toward the students' improvement, he concluded it was evident the summer bridge program was successful (Ami, 2001).

Myers and Drevlow (1982) found that a pre-freshman bridge program for minority and low-income students resulted in higher retention rates for participating individuals. At the University of California, San Diego, the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services sponsored a summer bridge program for Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Student Affirmative Action (SAA) freshmen to bridge the gap between high school and college (Myers & Drevlow, 1982). The authors described the program as having an "intensive academic focus, one which emphasizes promotion of a sense of belonging in the university, and its peer counselor follow-up during the academic year" (Myers & Drevlow, 1982, p. 3). The authors compared the retention rates of EOP and SAA students who participated in the program and EOP and

SAA students who did not, and found that program participants were retained at drastically higher rates than both eligible non-participants and their entire class. For the class Myers and Drevlow (1982) studied, bridge students' retention rate through graduation was 61%; compared to the comparison group's 25%; and non-EOP/SAA students' 42% .

Pantano (1994) was able to assess the Minority and Women in Science Summer Institute at Santa Fe Community College through exit interviews with students because of the relatively small size (18 students) of the program. An impactful and, in the author's view, insightful, comment was "it seemed that some students participated more fully in the program than others" (Pantano, 1994, p. 9). In fact, informal evaluation showed that students who succeeded in the program tended to be the same students who formed close bonds with other students in the program, participated actively, and took advantage of the special and extra sessions offered, while conversely, "students who just came and went on their own were the students who did poorly in their courses" (Pantano, 1994, p. 9). Formal evaluation found that academically, 62.5% of students earned the grade A, B, or C; the remainder earned the grade D or F, withdrew, or elected to audit the class.

#### Rowan University's Pre-College Institute

At Rowan University, the Pre-College Institute (PCI) is a five week program which incorporates classes to remediate basic skills, structured study time and access to tutors, programs to familiarize students with the college campus and its various offices and resources, as well as afternoon and evening activities to facilitate students developing interpersonal skills, exploring multiculturalism, and growing in leadership. Both male and female students, representing all races and ethnicities, and who intend to focus their



studies in all disciplines, attend PCI. Rowan's bridge program is comparatively very large: between 120 and 150 students participate each summer, the majority of whom are conditionally accepted to Rowan University for the fall semester. The Equal Opportunity Fund (2009) website says that the major benefits of PCI are that it provides access to higher education through the opportunity to demonstrate college readiness, assistance in making the adjustment to college life, comprehensive orientation to campus life, including academic policies and student rights and responsibilities, familiarity with campus and the local community, campus survival skills, free tutorial services, an opportunity to meet and interact with faculty, staff and administrators, four year grants for eligible first generation college students, participation in various academic, social and culturally enriching activities, an opportunity to complete basic skills remediation courses before the Fall semester, and a support network which often develops into life-long friendships.

Walpole et al. (2007) studied the longitudinal expectations and outcomes of PCI participants and a demographically similar control group over two years at Rowan University. The authors found that PCI students' engagement increased over two years, and students reported meaningful academic and social involvement, as well as familiarity and comfort with the campus offices and resources at consistently higher levels than students in the control group. However, despite PCI students' high levels of academic and social activity and 85% rate of living on campus, PCI students reported little to no co-curricular involvement, a factor critical to college students' development, retention, and satisfaction (Walpole et al., 2007).

An alarming finding of this study was that even with credits PCI students earned for basic skills courses taken over the summer, they had earned significantly fewer credits than the control group after two years. Furthermore, over the course of two years, students' aspirations for graduate studies fell slightly, and while originally only 15% of PCI students anticipated it would take five years to graduate, by the final survey, this figure increased to 49%. Even so, program participants did persist at higher rates than control group students, and they maintained GPAs ranging from 2.17 to 2.54 in the first four semesters (Walpole et al., 2007).

#### Summary of the Literature Review

Foundational higher education research, student and ethnic identity theory, American history, and various socioeconomic factors interact to explain the unique perspective from which minority and low-income students approach higher education. Several programmatic efforts have been implemented to help address the challenges to admission and success specific to these educationally underprepared students. Summer bridge programs are popular efforts that generally aim to ready to at-risk students for the academic rigors of college, aid their transition, encourage involvement during the academic year, and help students develop the tools to persist and graduate.

Formal evaluation of summer bridge programs is a relatively new phenomenon; even still, findings are often inconsistent or inconclusive, and scholars have called for further research on these programs (Walpole et al., 2007). In view of this, as well as the absence of research on bridge program participants' perceptions of the quality and value of their experience, this study explored educationally underprepared students' reflections on their participation in Rowan University's PCI, as well as their perceptions regarding

success inside and outside the classroom, and their overall satisfaction with both the program and their first year experience.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### Context of the Study

Rowan University is a mid-sized public institution of higher education. The school was founded in 1923 to train elementary school teachers, and has since developed into a comprehensive institution with a strong regional reputation. This selective regional university is located in Glassboro, New Jersey, between Philadelphia and Atlantic City, and enrolls over 11,000 full time and part time students from the Mid-Atlantic States and 30 foreign countries. The average Rowan student placed in the top 21% of his or her high school graduating class and scored 1155 on his SAT entrance exam. Minority enrollment accounts for 20.2% of the student body, and approximately 6,100 students received some form of financial assistance, totaling \$86 million in the Fall 2009 semester. Rowan University offers 87 undergraduate majors that are divided between seven academic colleges. Rowan University also offers 55 different graduate programs. Ninety-six percent of Rowan graduates were employed or attended graduate school within one year of graduation. There are 130 clubs and organizations at Rowan University, as well as 30 intramural sports, 17 club sports, and eight men's and 10 women's NCAA Division III varsity sports (Rowan University, 2009).

This university was chosen for its convenience and availability of an established summer bridge program for educationally underprepared students. The first Pre-College Institute was held during the summer of 1968; it was one of many programs

recommended by the Select Committee on Civil Disorder in New Jersey to address the basic conditions that caused the unrest leading up to a series of riots in Newark during the previous summer. Today, although participation in PCI is not limited to minority students, more than one third of all African American and Latino students at Rowan University are admitted through this program. Furthermore, one eighth of all first-time freshmen at Rowan University enroll through this program (Educational Opportunity Fund, 2009).

#### Population and Sample Selection

This study focused on first-year undergraduate students at Rowan University during the 2009/2010 academic year who came to the university by way of the Educational Opportunity Fund's Pre-College Institute. Five students who collectively represent the diversity of their PCI cohort were selected to participate in a three part interview and complete a short demographic survey. Interview participants were recruited from their mandatory evening structured study hall.

#### Instrumentation

The study had two components. Both parts were administered to the five purposefully selected members of the 2009 PCI cohort. The first component was a short demographic survey, and the second was a series of interviews. The instrument used for the survey was modified after Jones (2008). The modified survey (Appendix A) consists of nine items and gathers demographic and background information such as age, gender, and race as well as grade point average, on- and off- campus involvement, educational aspirations, and parents' educational attainment.

The second part of the study gathered qualitative data through a series of interviews (Appendix B). The instrument used for the interview schedule was modified after Bailey (2008) and also drew on the survey instrument used by Walpole et al., (2007). Both the survey and interview schedule were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Rowan University (Appendix C). Furthermore, all instrumentation was developed with the guidance of a doctoral-level scholar in the higher education field. A pilot test was executed with two PCI participants from the summer of 2008, and they reported no issues with or difficulty understanding the demographic survey or interview.

The interview is divided into three sections: Classroom Experience, Out-of-Classroom Experience, and Overall Impressions and Reflections. These phases were designed to explore the impact the program had on various aspects of the students' experiences. The content of the interview schedule is rooted in Astin's (1998, 1999) theories on academic and co-curricular involvement, and Tinto's (1988) Theory of Student Departure. Each section contains nine interview questions. The interview (Appendix B) was designed to collect information in an open-ended fashion and to avoid short answers. If a student did not feel comfortable discussing a certain topic, he or she was free to pass on answering the question. Furthermore, all participants were notified that their responses would be used solely for data collection in this study, and that their names would be changed to ensure their confidentiality.

#### Data Collection

Data collection took place over a three month period. During the months of January, February, and March in 2010, I administered a demographic survey to and conducted interviews with five purposefully selected students. Each participant was

notified in advance as to when and where the interviews would take place and how long they would last. The three month time period gave me an opportunity to observe any changes of behavior or attitudes among the participants, and to note these changes in the analysis of the data.

The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one basis in a quiet section of Jazzman's Café in the Rowan University Chamberlain Student Center, in order to create an atmosphere of collegiality and comfort. I treated each participant to a beverage and or snack at each interview meeting, if they were interested. With the participants' permission, each session was videotaped and then transcribed for further analysis. Each session lasted an average of 45 minutes. During the month of April, I met with each of the participants to follow up. At that time, we discussed any changes in their attitudes about or impressions of their experience in PCI, as well as their ongoing experience at Rowan University.

#### Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and interpreted using content analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Sisco, 1981). Key words and phrases were coded and arranged in themes in order to reveal patterns of the selected students' perceptions and reflections, as well as their current involvement, academic achievement, and satisfaction with Rowan University, and their plans for the future.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

This study's findings were formed through a series of 15 total interviews with five purposefully selected first-year students who participated in Rowan University's 2009 Pre-College Institute. Each student was interviewed three times, once in January, once in February, and once in March, and then contacted between three to four weeks following the final interview to discuss his/her comments, or to amend anything he/she had previously stated. Interviews were completed to identify participants' perceptions and reflections regarding the PCI program and Rowan University, as well as their involvement, academic achievement, satisfaction, and plans for the future.

#### Profile of the Sample

This study's target audience was a representative sample of students who participated in PCI during the summer of 2009. Each of the five participants were currently enrolled at Rowan University during the 2009-2010 academic year, and all were full-time matriculated students. The students were 18 or 19 years of age, and only one had declared a major.

Participant A is an 18-year-old female who identified her ethnicity as "Black (African American.)" Her first semester grade point average (GPA) was 3.2 on a 4.0 scale. She did not hold any on- or off- campus jobs or leadership positions, but she is a member of Rowan University's Student Council for Exceptional Children, and a mentee in the Dr. Harley E. Flack Mentoring Program. Participant A indicated that her parents,



guidance counselor, and Language Arts teacher contributed most to her desire to go to college. Both of her parents highest level of education was high school, and Participant A plans to earn a Master's Degree.

Participant B is an 18-year-old male who identified his ethnicity as "Native/African American." His first semester GPA was 2.9, and he did not hold any employment or leadership positions during the course of this study. Participant B is also a mentee in the Dr. Harley E. Flack Mentoring Program, and he is a member of the Rowan Musical Theater Company, and the performance troupe "Dance Extensions." He reported that his Science and Language Arts teachers contributed most to his desire to go to college, and that the highest level of education he plans to complete is his Bachelor's Degree. Both of Participant B's parents are high school graduates.

Participant C is an 18-year-old female who identified her ethnicity as "African American." Her first semester GPA was 3.6, and she held employment at Kohl's, a nearby department store, and as a Rowan University orientation leader. Additionally, she was also involved in the Student Council for Exceptional Children and the Dr. Harley E. Flack Mentoring Program. Participant C indicated that her parents contributed most to her desire to go to college. Her mother completed an Associate's Degree, and her father completed a Bachelor's Degree. Participant C plans to complete a Doctoral Degree.

Participant D is a 19-year-old male who identified his ethnicity as "Hispanic." His first semester GPA was 2.8. Participant D does not hold any on- or off- campus jobs, but he serves on the executive boards of the Rowan Democrat Club and the Political Science Organization. He reported that his parents contributed most to his desire to go to

college, and that he plans to earn a Doctoral Degree. Participant D's mother earned an Associate's Degree, and his father is a high school graduate.

Participant E is an 18-year-old female who describes her ethnicity as "White (Irish, Italian.)" Her first semester GPA was 3.15, and in February 2010 she declared Health and Exercise Science as her major course of study. She does not hold employment, but is a member of the National Wellness Institute, plays intramural soccer and women's club soccer. She reported that the factor that contributed most to her desire to go to college was wanting to "be a better role model for my little sister." Both her mother and father are high school graduates, and Participant E hopes to earn a Doctoral Degree.

#### Analysis of the Data

Research Question 1: What are the experiences that contribute to educationally underprepared students' success inside the PCI classroom?

Participants said that understanding how the college classrooms is different from the high school classroom, and how the teachers and their instruction techniques differed from instructors they were exposed to in high school, as well as the actual content of the courses were the most beneficial aspects of their classroom experience. One interviewee reported "I learned the basics of what it is going to be like and what I need to do well in the classroom in college. I learned what I needed to do, from what the teachers wanted, to learning how to use Blackboard (an online teaching tool) and check Rowan email, I knew I had a head up on regular admit students in the fall."

Participants' perceived beneficial classroom experiences are found in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

*Perceived Beneficial Experiences in the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Classroom structure	Consistency	9	1
	Intensity		
	Longer class periods		
	Technology		
Instructors	Expectations	4	2
	Teaching styles		
	Utilizing professors' office hours		
Course content	Composition skills	4	2
	Grammar/punctuation		
	Identifying academic interests		

Many of the same classroom aspects of the program that participants described as the most beneficial were the same ones they identified as the most challenging. For example, while all of the students identified the strict structure as a very beneficial component of their academic PCI experience, four of the five interviewees indicated that the rigid structure was also among the most challenging aspects of their experience. One participant said, “Well, it was pretty demanding. We were up early, breakfast was early, we had classes and structured study all day, and then programming into the evening. Everything was about school.”

Participants also reported feeling challenged by their course load. All of the participants said that the level of work and their instructors' expectations of them were significantly greater than what they were used to in high school, and one participant said,

“I definitely wasn't used to doing hours of homework every day and over the weekend. Doing a semester's worth of work in six weeks was just ridiculous to me at the

time. It was a rude awakening.” Another participant explained, “More was expected of me. In high school they will hold your hand more, but here it’s not the professor’s job to care. If you don’t pay attention or you don’t do the work, you do bad[ly].” A third participant added, “I was used to high school where there it was maybe one paper a month. Especially in our [basic composition course], we had a paper every week, and we were writing a new one when we were still revising the old one.”

Another interviewee struggled with working in groups to reach academic goals. She said, “People were there for all different reasons. Sometimes when you’re in groups it’s hard. I wanted to do well and be prepared for the fall, but some people didn’t care. So that was hard, because I can’t make them want to do well, and I can’t make them care that I want to succeed.”

Table 4.2 displays participants’ perceived beneficial classroom experiences.

Table 4.2

*Perceived Challenging Experiences in the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Classroom structure	Condensed timeframe	8	1
	Intensity		
	Longer class periods		
	Work-load		
Instructors	Expectations	6	2
	Teaching styles		
Peers	Group work	2	3
External	Distractions at home	2	3
	Feeling constantly tired		

When participants spoke about what they valued most from their classroom PCI experience, responses were very diverse. Two of the interviewees discussed topics they had already spoken on: they valued most the intensity and structure of the academic component of PCI. Both said that they have honed their time-management skills because of the rigidity and intensity of their PCI experience. “Now classes are a lot more relaxed, but I still do work like I am in that PCI mode,” said one participant.

Another interviewee said that she valued most the opportunity to express her creativity in an introductory theater class. She said: “I don’t think I could have handled another lecture class. I really liked doing something different, moving around, and actually being involved.” This participant also spoke about how much she valued the opportunity to be in college. “Even when I was tired and struggling, and feeling like I didn’t want to be in that classroom, I felt lucky to be there. Not everyone has that chance; not everybody can even take out a loan. I remembered to be thankful,” she said.

Table 4.3 displays participants’ perceived most valuable classroom learning.

Table 4.3

*Perceived Value Placed on Things Learned in the Classroom of Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Skills for academic success	Autonomy	6	1
	Composition		
	Responsibility		
	Time management		
Personal development	Exploring creativity	5	2
	Learning about self		
	Understanding different perspectives		
Other	Opportunity to attend college	1	3

Students also discussed the way that they made academic decisions during PCI. Generally participants acknowledged that due to the strict structure of the program, their ability to make some decisions was very limited. One interviewee discussed this dynamic: “We were up at 6:45 in the morning, every morning—it didn’t matter if you didn’t want breakfast, you had to go. The entire day was planned out for us, every day. Our only free time was at 9:45 at night, and it was lights out by 11:00.” Another participant elaborated: “We had three hours of structured study in the afternoon and a shorter [structured study session] in the evening. You were basically forced to study, you couldn’t even fall asleep, have your phone, anything,” he said while shaking his head and laughing. A third participant added: “It made me make good decisions, like, if I am already sitting here, I’m going to take my time and do good work, I am going to reread these papers and check for errors.” The participants all reported that their PCI experience impacted them to make better decisions during the regular semester. “Even though sometimes I want to be like, ‘It’s due Friday, I’ll do it Thursday night and go play soccer now,’ after having gone through all that structured study, I know I’ll feel better and do better if I just get it done ahead of time,” said another interviewee.

That student also spoke about the support she received from PCI faculty, and declaring a major. “Dr. Spencer was just awesome; she encouraged me to go right into Health and Exercise Science and do some higher level classes first semester. I would not have felt like I could make that decision so soon, and I know I would not want to take a 200-level course fall semester.... I’m really happy with that decision,” she said nodding her head and smiling during the last sentence.

Another participant spoke about having to choose a partner for a project. “Before PCI I would probably just pick a friend or someone who I thought would be fun to work with. But I saw there were a lot of people who really didn’t do anything, so I had to pick [someone] who would actually help me,” she said.

Table 4.4 displays participants’ perspective on the most important academic-related decisions during PCI.

Table 4.4

*Perceived Important Academic Decisions During PCI Among Selected Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Use of time	Not rushing	5	1
	Revising work		
	Time management		
Direction	Choosing fall courses	2	2
	Declaring major		
Relationships	Selecting partner for final project	1	3

Research Question 2: What are the experiences that contribute to educationally underprepared students’ success outside of the PCI classroom?

All of the students interviewed indicated that they benefited a great deal from the people whom they met in PCI. One participant explained that because of the relatively long duration and intensity of the program, “it’s a weird type of bond—we really grew on each other. Everyone needs each other if we are going to make it.” Over the course of the three months of interviews, four of the five interviewees referred at one time or another to their “PCI brothers and sisters” or their “PCI family.” Another interviewee spoke about learning from fellow students who were different from her, “I just learned a

lot from being around different people. Some serious stuff, some dances. There’s a lot you can learn from people you wouldn’t normally talk to.” Said another, “Even though we were just from different parts of [New] Jersey, it was like meeting foreign people. People speak totally different[ly] and use different words for the same things.... But you find out you really have a lot in common.”

One interviewee reported that the workshops were among the most beneficial aspects of the PCI program. He said that the sessions on public speaking benefited him the most. “We really learned how to carry ourselves and communicate. I am proud of how many of my PCI brothers and sisters are running for [Student Government Association] offices now because they can do all that.”

Participants’ perceived beneficial out-of-classroom experiences are displayed in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

*Perceived Beneficial Experiences Outside the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Meeting new people	Faculty Administrators Peers	9	1
Relationships	Learning from others Learning about self Bonding Mentors Networking	8	2
Workshops	Public speaking	1	3



Although participants spoke about the learning and benefits that came with having a large, diverse, group of peers, they also reported high levels of interpersonal challenges with fellow students in the PCI program. One participant explained, “Everyone came from different places. Some were naturally more respectful. Others come from places where they have to prove themselves. There were definitely a lot of clashes.” Another interviewee shared about a time she had to confront a peer: “It was hard dealing with people being loud when you were trying to sleep. I got into a big fight with my suitemates and had to meet with a counselor. They have this whole family vibe about how you need to hold your brother or your sister accountable or everyone gets in trouble, but it was hard.”

One participant struggled with being in the minority for the first time. “It was crazy because I was one of [very few] white people, and other white people were acting very snobby and just keeping to themselves. I wanted to be around different people, but I was afraid everyone would think I was like those other white people because I’m white too.”

As they reflected on the most challenging aspects of their non-academic experience in PCI, interviewees also discussed familiar topics such as structure, intensity, and schedule. One participant described a ritual called “nine-forty-fives.” “Nine forty-five [in the evening] was our free time, but if a group or individual misbehaved, they would get cho-o-o-ores...” he drew out the word, paused, and said “times ten! You had to clean the lounge and I don’t mean sweeping, I mean heavy-duty scrubbing. Then instead of going to the Rec[reation Center], you go straight to your room.” Another student said, “It was horrible. I thought I could cry to get out of it but they still made me

do it. It was just horrible after a long day, and you know you were already having a bad day if you were acting out enough to get a ‘9:45.’ That was definitely challenging.”

Participants’ perceived challenging out-of-classroom experiences are found in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6

*Perceived Challenging Experiences Outside the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Interpersonal interactions	Assumptions	9	1
	Communication		
	Cultural differences		
	Impatience		
Nature of program	Intensity	4	2
	Schedule		
	Structure		

Participants were also asked if they had identified on-campus mentors. All of the students responded that they had, and that they identified those mentors during the PCI program. Additionally, all of these mentoring relationships, which began informally during the summer program, have been formalized through Rowan University’s Dr. Harley E. Flack Mentoring Program. Each of the students interviewed requested that they had enrolled in the program and requested the mentor they had connected with during PCI. “My tutor from the PCI is my mentor through the mentoring program, and we get along so great. We’re great friends. She still helps me with school stuff and I’m, like, her personal trainer,” a participant said with a laugh as she identified her role in her mentor’s life. Another participant said that his assigned counselor from PCI is his mentor, but that he doesn’t feel he needs him as much these days. “I kind of got myself

together, and since I'm kind of busy, we don't see each other as much anymore. But he is always looking out for me, shooting me emails, telling me about opportunities, you know? So, I mean, I know he cares about me... a lot."

Table 4.7 displays participants' identified on-campus mentors.

Table 4.7

*Identified On-Campus Mentors of Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Peers	Graduate Student	3	1
	Resident Assistant		
	Tutor		
Administrators	Assigned PCI Counselor	1	2
Faculty	Health and Exercise Science	1	2

When asked to speak about what they value most from the PCI experience, participants spoke a great deal about what they had learned about others and themselves. One interviewee spoke about how much she valued the time she spent with people from different geographic regions of New Jersey: "Someone might be different from you, but you shouldn't automatically think you are better than them. People with Camden really tried to hang out with people from Camden, and it was the same with people from up North, but they did a really good job breaking us up and putting us with new people so we could learn each other." Said another: "you learn to accept people for who they are. You also learn to adapt to different peoples' style. I know everyone's the same underneath, but I know how to act [and around whom] I can be chill and [around whom] I need to be more professional." A third interviewee said: "I thought it was the best thing

ever being around different people. It really made me mad to see the other white girls stay in their white girl bubble. It was the most important to learn about other cultures; I got more of an experience because I talked to everyone.”

Another participant shared the PCI 2009 motto: *Destination Graduation! Succeeding Through Determination: Education, Yes We Can!* “They made us recite this e-e-e-everywhere,” the interviewee said emphatically. “But it became engrained in us that we were going to keep going and keep pursuing this. This was our theme and it is our theme... it’s what we live by, and I am proud to say very few of my PCI brothers and sisters have dropped out, left, or transferred.”

Table 4.8 displays the most valuable things participants learned outside of the classroom during PCI.

Table 4.8

*Value Placed on Things Learned Outside the Classroom Among Selected PCI Students*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Understanding others	Culture	5	1
	Communication styles		
	Geographic diversity		
	Withholding judgment		
Interpersonal skills	Higher quality conversations	4	2
	More outgoing		
New forces within self	Motivation	2	3
	Determination		

Research Question 3: What are the experiences of selected PCI first-year students that contribute to the development of identity and self-concept?

Many of the experiences participants spoke about during this portion of the interview were in some way related to their PCI experience. Every participant spoke of evolving or growing in some way as a result of their time in PCI.

One of the first questions the researcher asked during this round of interviews was “Are you the same person you were before PCI?” One interviewee reflected that both her academic perspective and her interpersonal skills evolved a great deal as a result of her participation in PCI. “PCI made me feel so confident about classes. I walk into a classroom at the beginning of a semester and I am not afraid. I know I can do it.... I’m definitely a lot more likely to just go up to a person now and start a conversation. Before I would want to scope [him or her] out, but now I love meeting and talking to new people,” she said.

Participants also indicated that they were more reflective and thoughtful about making decisions after their PCI experience. “PCI helped a lot of us mature. We didn’t expect what we got from the program. I want to say I’m more responsible and I make wiser decisions. I definitely think about decisions a little more. Like, now I think about the consequences, or if I really have time to do what I want to do. I analyze better.”

Another participant spoke about how PCI and the opportunity to go to college motivated him at the end of high school:

Senior year I did not think I was going to college. In my house it was only my mom and me, and no one before me had done it. I was always in detention and [In-School Suspension] because all I cared about was being the center of attention. A counselor from Rowan came to talk about the PCI program and what it had to offer. I spoke to him afterward, and he was from [my hometown]

too.... So I got his [contact information] and started emailing him non-stop, got myself together, stayed out of detention. I was going to college. I got the letters of recommendation I needed, talked to the right people, got an interview, got in... I ran home and did the FAFSA and I ain't never looked back.... I'm the youngest in my family and I'm the first to go to college, and I'm real proud.

Table 4.9 displays students' insight into the ways they have grown and evolved since before they came through PCI.

Table 4.9

*Selected Students' Response to the Question "Are You the Same Person You Were Before PCI?"*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Direction	Academic	6	1
	Career		
	Investment in college experience		
	Personal goals		
Relationships with others	Desire to learn about others	4	2
	More outgoing		
	Understand people better		
Self growth and development	Dealing with disappointment	4	2
	Goal-orientation		
	Maturity		
	Understanding limits		

Finally, participants discussed the role PCI played in preparing them to be successful first year students. Every student discussed a change in the way they viewed and approached others, particularly those who are different from them. "Because of what I went through in PCI, I could talk to anyone. If you put anyone in front of me, I would feel comfortable and I could start a conversation with [him or her]," said one participant.

Another said: “Before I would make quick judgments about people. PCI taught me a lot about what people really are all about, and how that’s not something you can just see.... Now I don’t assume anything about people, I wait to get to know them.” A third interviewee talked about the networking potential he now has. “Because I can pick up a conversation with anyone and feel comfortable, I have just been making all kinds of connections on campus. I know I have met some people who can help me out down the road, because of the people I have become friends with and because I’m not afraid to just talk to anyone,” he said.

Participants also discussed growing as leaders. “PCI, especially my mentor, made me see that I am a leader and I have a passion for being a leader. In high school I was kind of a leader but I didn’t really know it or maybe think about it. But at PCI we went to workshops and a leadership conference. It helped me realize I don’t want to just go with the flow or be a follower,” said one interviewee.

Another participant spoke about the structure of the program impacting his development. “The schedule was really important in terms of becoming a successful first year student. It helped a lot, and it showed me that with enough structure and consistency you really can change your habits,” he explained. He also went on to say: “It made me think, why am I going to college? Is this something I really want to do? Before you waste all those years and become something and realize you didn’t even want to do that at all.”

The final participant spoke about her journey and growth in the program:

At first I resisted, I wasn’t into it. I just wanted to do my six weeks and get into

college and get some of it paid for. I didn't care about getting to know these people. Like I said, there was resistance to showing other people who I was, or being judged, and I'm pretty sure everyone else felt the same way. But, through the program, we were able to test it out and say, OK, I'm going to be me and see how they live it. And I gelled with people. I felt more myself than I ever had, by the end. The program changed me a lot.

Table 4.10 displays students perceptions about the role PCI played in shaping their identity.

Table 4.10

*Perceived Role PCI Played in Identity Shaping Among Selected PCI Students.*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Relationships with others	Confident	10	1
	Interested in others		
	Learning from others		
	More Accepting		
	Outgoing		
Focusing Goals	Academic	6	2
	Career		
	Excellence (general)		
	Leadership		
Personal developments	Better academic habits	4	3
	Better personal/social habits		
	Enjoying challenge		
	Managing disappointment		

The students in this study shared some of their closing thoughts on the PCI experience. One participant spoke about feeling comfortable on campus. "When you get here for the fall, you don't even understand how much you know, how many people you



already know.... Other people don't know where their classes are at, but you know the whole campus.”

Another participant said that he took a great deal away from the program, and grew in many different ways, but that the academic preparation the program gave him was what was most important to him. “The PCI program definitely did the best in the academic part. This was the best component. The professors knew we were a special group of students. They kept it real and they kept us going.”

A third participant said that while most of the students in PCI were well-intentioned and interested in being successful, there were some admitted students who were disengaged and sometimes brought down the rest of the group.

I guess there is only so much they can do with who they let in, but I think they could have done a better job with getting people who really want to be there. There was a group people, not too many, but still a group, and they benefited from the program, I guess, but the program didn't benefit from them—I didn't benefit from them. They held the program back a little, but it's not like they ruined everything.... Some of these people left, some stayed, and even now they are in school but it's not for the right reasons. I understand there is only so much that can be done in terms of spotting these people, but without them the program could have been better, and there are people who could have been in those places that would have benefited from it and benefited the program a lot more.

Another participant had a message for the following year's potential PCI cohort: “To anyone who doesn't know what PCI is, or who may want to do it, *just go for it,*” he

said placing emphasis on each of those four words. “It’s hard, but at the end all the things you get out of it are worth it. I had a leg up on every freshman in here.” He went on to say: “I went into my classes in the fall, and I already had what they were looking for, and I don’t know where else you can get that. The program is set up to be hard, but it gives you the tools to be a successful college student.”

The final participant echoed this sentiment and took it a step further: “PCI should be something for all freshmen. You have so much fun, you meet so many people, you learn so much,” she said. “We always thought, ‘this is so rough,’ sitting on the floors in [her assigned residence hall], and ‘I want to be asleep.’ But I think all freshmen should do it because you do get so much out of it. Even if orientation could be longer for all students, like a week or two weeks, that would be so much better for all our students.”

## CHAPTER V

### Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Summary of the Study

This study explored the impact of a summer bridge program on educationally underprepared students entering the first year of higher education. It was conducted at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey, during the spring semester of 2010. The participants in this study were current first-year students who were members of the summer 2009 cohort of the Pre-College Institute.

Five members of the cohort were purposefully selected and recruited from their mandatory evening “structured study” study hall to participate in this study. The research instrument was two-pronged. First, a participant survey collected general demographic information, as well as information about participants’ GPA, on- and off-campus involvement, educational aspirations, and parents’ highest level of education completed.

Secondly, participants took part in an interview. The interview was administered over a three month period so that I could observe any changes in the participants’ demeanor and insights. The sessions were held in a quiet area of Jazzman’s Café, a coffee shop in the Rowan University Chamberlain Student Center. With permission, the sessions were tape recorded. The interview was divided into three sections, exploring participants’ in and out of classroom experiences as well as their overall impressions and reflections about their PCI experience. Each section was comprised of nine questions.

These phases were designed to explore the impact the program had on various aspects of the students' experiences.

Interviews were transcribed and interpreted using content analysis. Key words and phrases were coded and rearranged with similar themes to reveal patterns of the selected students' perceptions and reflections (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Sisco, 1981).

#### Discussion of the Findings

This study found that PCI participants perceive many and broad-ranging positive outcomes related to their experience in PCI. Many of these findings are consistent with findings of seminal researchers in higher education, first-year student success, and underprepared and at-risk student success, while others seem to conflict with these findings of Astin's (1998; 1999), Kuh et al.'s (2008), and Tinto's (1988).

Firstly, this study found that participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with their overall college experience. This confirms Astin's (1999) findings that academic involvement correlates with satisfaction in almost all aspects of college life, and that the single input related most closely related to overall satisfaction was student-faculty interaction. In this study, students had very close and frequent interactions with faculty, both during PCI and during the academic year, and were between moderately and actively involved in academic and co-curricular organizations. As previous research found, the participants in this study were highly satisfied with their experience, particularly relationships, courses, and institutional experience (Astin, 1999).

Astin (1998) also found that based on financial and economic conditions, all students are becoming more likely to choose a college or university based on the aid it

can offer, as opposed to the strength or relevance of its academic programs. This coincided with findings from this study. Students were primarily interested in going to college, and while many of the participants have found a great fit in Rowan University, they eventually came to Rowan University because of the scholarships and admission that the PCI program uniquely offered them.

Participants in this study experienced a great deal of growth in terms of personal development and social interaction. Most of the participants reported that in high school and before PCI, they would be quick to judge others and hesitant to approach or begin a conversation with a stranger or someone who seemed unlike them in some way. They also said that they rarely had meaningful interactions with new people and often didn't know how to speak to people who were of a different race or ethnicity or from a different geographical region. After PCI, participants reported that they were much more likely to initiate conversation with strangers, to withhold judgment, to build friendships and other meaningful relationships with more ease, and to learn from peers who are different from them. This seems to support findings of the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (2008) that while underprepared students have lower levels of academic achievement than their peers, they experience greater personal and social growth during the first year. Kuh et al. (2008) also found that educationally underprepared first-year students are more likely than their peers to utilize campus technology and tutoring resources. Four of the five participants in this study made reference to using academic technology, tutors, or the campus tutoring resources. Although this study did not have a control group for comparison, the participants' tremendous growth in personal and social development and

frequent utilization of campus technology at high levels supports the findings of NSSE (2008) and Kuh et al. (2008).

Tinto (1988) found that parents, family members, and communities of minority and low-SES students are less likely to support and grasp the purpose of college. The findings of this study were not consistent with that finding. While interviewees reported that many of their parents, family members, and friends did not attend college themselves, these parties were the most encouraging as the participants pursued their plans to attend college, and that they contributed significantly to the participants' desire to go to college. While friends and family may not have fully understood higher education and its purpose, participants reported that they were extremely supportive, encouraging, and proud. Perhaps there has been a culture shift in these groups in the past two decades. Although this conflicts with Tinto's (1988) findings, it is consistent with research conducted by Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000), who found that support from a student's family and community most impacts his or her decision to persist or depart.

In 1987, Chickering and Gamson published seven principles for good practice in higher education. In 2006, Cruce et al. found that these seven principles have a compensatory effect for students coming to into higher education with the least educational capital. Major goals of pre-freshman bridge programs such as PCI are to ready underprepared students for the academic rigors of higher education and to facilitate students adjusting to the college environment so they are able to persist (Kezar, 2000); in a sense the aim is to compensate for a less rigorous K-12 experience. PCI focused very heavily on five of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for best practice.

Participants indicated that a heavy emphasis was placed on student-faculty interaction, cooperation among students, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. Based on the many and widely-ranging positive outcomes participants reported, the findings of this study support Cruce et al.'s (2006) finding that Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for best practice have a compensatory effect for students for underprepared students.

The findings of this study also confirmed and conflicted with findings of other studies conducted with similar programs. While participants in this study reported that classes were challenging and rigorous, some reported feeling well-prepared for college, while others found that their fall semester courses were even more rigorous, and reported feeling underprepared. This is consistent with a study conducted by Santa Rita and Bacote (1997), who found that students who participated in a similar program were split regarding whether or not they could keep up in their fall and spring classes. Santa Rita and Bacote (1997) also found that their students believed that they were a part of the campus community, which is consistent with the findings of this study.

This study found that the intensity and strict structure of the program, as well as the high quality faculty and frequent student-faculty interactions were the most salient factors for the students' academic success. This may shed light on the findings of a study conducted by Ami (2001), who found that while there was marked academic improvement for students in a pre-freshman bridge program, it was unclear which aspects of the program most impacted this progress.

Participants in this study reported high levels of motivation, determination, and drive to persist and succeed. This supports the findings of several similar studies that students in a pre-freshman bridge program persist at higher levels than their control group peers (Myers & Drevlow, 1982; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Walpole et al., 2007). Conversely, students reported that there were different levels of motivation among members of their PCI cohort, and most of the participants in this study perceived that some, but not many, of their peers did not want to be in the program or were not fully invested. This is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Pantano (1994), which found that some students participated more fully in the program than others. That study also informally concluded that students whose levels of investment and engagement were higher experienced higher levels of academic success (Pantano, 1994). Observations of participants in this study support that finding as well.

This study also found that students who participated in PCI were moderately to actively involved in campus clubs, intramurals, and academic organizations, and that these experiences were meaningful for them and enhanced their overall college experience. This is consistent with Walpole et al.'s (2007) finding that previous PCI cohorts had meaningful academic and social involvement, but it conflicts with that study's findings that PCI students had little to no co-curricular involvement.

A final finding was the importance and value that students placed on mentors. Mentors that participants identified during their summer pre-freshman bridge program continued to be instrumental in their academic and overall experience over the course of the academic year. Students reported extremely strong relationships with their mentors,



and indicated that their guidance and support was one of the most important facets of their PCI and freshman experience.

## Conclusions

The data from this study confirm the various and diverse positive impacts of a pre-freshman summer bridge program. Academically, the structure, intensity, and time with faculty were the components of the program that students perceived to be most important, and participants confirmed that PCI gave them the tools to be a successful first year student. This validates and sheds new light on research conducted by Ami (2001). Outside of the classroom, students developed their social skills and networks, and experienced personal growth. Furthermore, students began to open themselves to and learn from others as a result of the program. These findings confirm the results of NSSE (2008) that underprepared students may not achieve at as high levels academically, but experience greater personal and social growth in the first year.

Generally, students' mentors, whom they met and established a relationship with through PCI, are among the most important connections made at Rowan University for these students, and they contribute greatly to PCI students' academic success and persistence. No previous research that I located made mention of mentoring, but at Rowan University it appears to be one of the most salient factors for students' success, satisfaction, and persistence.

While most participants in PCI 2009 were committed and reasonably driven, students perceive that some students lacked the drive and desire to be successful and positively impact the program and their peers, which confirms the findings of Pantano (1994) that students approach pre-freshman bridge programs with different levels of

motivation. However, students' perceptions were that, in general, PCI participants are moderately to highly motivated, and often by their family and communities, which contradicts the findings of Tinto (1988). These students also seemed extremely likely to persist, which validates the research of Walpole et al. (2007), Myers and Drevlow (1982), and Santa Rita and Bacote (1997).

#### Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following suggestions are presented:

1. Universities should recruit, admit, and have support programs for educationally underprepared students.
2. Universities should implement pre-freshman bridge programs for these students, with a focus on academically rigorous coursework.
3. Pre-freshman bridge programs should follow a strict and consistent routine, and allot students minimal free time.
4. Campus programs should focus on creating opportunities for students to learn about and from each other's diverse backgrounds, lifestyles, and culture.
5. Opportunities should be created for all students to complete on-campus, for credit, coursework during the summer preceding their first year.
6. Formal mentoring programs and services for first-year students should be implemented at colleges and universities.
7. Universities should increase opportunities for student-faculty interaction.

8. Universities should create options for extended orientations for students interested in team-building and leadership experiences.
9. Rowan University's Educational Opportunity Fund Office should be extremely rigorous with screening and admission to the PCI program. Prospective students should be evaluated for sincere commitment to higher learning.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following suggestions are presented:

1. Interviews with larger numbers and focus groups should be held to increase the data sets.
2. Follow up interview sessions should be held to see if views have changed over time
3. A survey should be conducted to gather information from a greater number of students.
4. Research should be supplemented with surveys and interviews with students who did not participate in bridge programs.
5. Further studies should be conducted at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, community colleges, large and small scale, and public and private institutions.

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## APPENDIX A

### Demographic Survey for Interview Participants





8. What is the highest level of education your mother completed?
- a. No formal Education
  - b. Elementary School
  - c. Some Middle or High School
  - d. High School Graduate
  - e. Associate's Degree
  - f. Bachelor's Degree
  - g. Some Post Graduate
  - h. Master's Degree
  - i. Doctoral Degree
  - j. Other Advanced Degree \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is the highest level of education your father completed?
- a. No formal Education
  - b. Elementary School
  - c. Some Middle or High School
  - d. High School Graduate
  - e. Associate's Degree
  - f. Bachelor's Degree
  - g. Some Post Graduate
  - h. Master's Degree
  - i. Doctoral Degree
  - j. Other Advanced Degree \_\_\_\_\_
10. What level of education do you plan to complete?
- a. Bachelor's Degree
  - b. Some Post Graduate
  - c. Master's Degree
  - d. Doctoral Degree
  - e. Other Advanced Degree \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**  
**Interview Schedule**

## January Interview

**Introduction:** This interview is intended to solicit your ideas about your EOF Pre-College Institute (PCI) experience. It will be an open-ended interview, so that you have every opportunity offer your ideas on each aspect of the experiences we discuss. Feel free to talk about any experiences or ideas that come to mind as we discuss each area.

1. Were you looking forward to the PCI program?
2. Tell me about the most significant aspect of your PCI program.
3. As you think about your classroom PCI experience, what were the most beneficial aspects?
4. As you think about yourself in the PCI classroom, what was the most challenging experience?
5. Let's talk about instructors. What did they expect from you and what did you expect from them? (Follow up if necessary: Did you meet each other's expectations?)
6. Discuss your perspective on the value of things you learned during PCI in the classroom.
7. I am interested in your perspective on how to best make decisions. Can you describe an important academic decision you make during PCI and how you went about it?
8. Would you change your mind about any of your academic decisions during PCI?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share to help me understand your perspective on your academic experience in PCI?

**Closing:** Thank you for your time and willingness to share. As I said earlier, your identity will be kept confidential.

## February Interview

**Introduction:** Thank you for continuing with this study. Your continued participation makes it possible to learn more about the EOF Pre-College Institute (PCI) experience at Rowan University.

1. Are there any new developments in your world?
2. How was your PCI experience outside the classroom?
3. As you think about yourself outside the classroom, what were the most beneficial experiences you had during PCI?
4. As you think about yourself outside the classroom, what were the most challenging experiences you had during PCI?
5. Let's talk about mentors. Through PCI, did you identify a member of the Rowan campus community to whom you look to for guidance?
6. Discuss your perspective on the value of things you learned in PCI outside of the classroom.
7. I am interested in your perspective on how to best make decisions. Can you describe an important non-academic decision you made during PCI?
8. Would you change your mind about any of your non-academic decisions during PCI?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share to help me understand your perspective on your out of classroom experience in PCI?

**Closing:** Thank you for your time and willingness to share. As I said earlier, your identity will be kept confidential.

## March Interview

**Introduction:** Thank you for continuing with this study. Your continued participation makes it possible to learn more about the EOF Pre-College Institute (PCI) experience at Rowan University.

1. What are you looking forward to at Rowan University?
2. Are you the same person you were during PCI? Are you the same person you were before PCI?
3. What do you value most at Rowan, and why?
4. What role has PCI played in shaping your identity?
5. Do you make decisions the same way as you did before PCI?
6. What kinds of relationships have you formed at Rowan University, and how have they changed, if they have at all?
7. Did PCI give you the tools to become a successful first-year student?
8. Did you feel supported and challenged to explore who you are during PCI?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share to help me understand your perspective on your overall experience in PCI?

**Closing:** Thank you for your time and willingness to share. As I said earlier, your identity will be kept confidential.

**APPENDIX C**

**Institutional Review Board Approval Letter**



November 18, 2009

Mary C. Schell  
Rowan University  
Box 686, Student Center  
201 Mullica Hill Rd.  
Glassboro, NJ 08028

Dear Mary C. Schell:

In accordance with the University's IRB policies and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your project:

IRB application number: 2010-061

Project Title: Educationally Underprepared Students' Perception of Their Experience in a Summer Bridge Program

In accordance with federal law, this approval is effective for **one calendar year** from the date of this letter. If your research project extends beyond that date or if you need to make significant modifications to your study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please reference the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Please retain copies of consent forms for this research for three years after completion of the research.

If, during your research, you encounter any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, you must report this immediately to Dr. Harriet Hartman ([hartman@rowan.edu](mailto:hartman@rowan.edu) or call 856-256-4500, ext. 3787) or contact Dr. Gautam Pillay, Associate Provost for Research ([pillay@rowan.edu](mailto:pillay@rowan.edu) or call 856-256-5150).

If you have any administrative questions, please contact Karen Heiser ([heiser@rowan.edu](mailto:heiser@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5150).

Sincerely,

Harriet Hartman, Ph.D.  
Chair, Rowan University IRB

c: Burton Sisco, Educational Leadership, Education Hall

Office of Research  
Bole Hall Annex  
201 Mullica Hill Road  
Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701

856-256-5150  
856-256-4425 fax



**APPENDIX D**  
**Informed Consent Form**

Informed Consent Form

Rowan University  
Principle Investigator: Mary C. Schell,  
M.A. Higher Education Administration Candidate  
Department of Educational Leadership

By signing this form, I agree to participate in a study entitled “Educationally underprepared students’ perception of their experience in a pre-freshman summer bridge program,” which is being conducted by Mary C. Schell, an M.A. Higher Education Administration candidate at Rowan University.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of students at Rowan University’s Pre-College Institute through a series of interviews that will take place in three sessions. The data collected in the interviews will be thoroughly analyzed.

I understand that I am not obligated to participate in the interview sessions, however if I do, I am aware that I will be asked to divulge personal information about my history, current enrollment and activity involvement status, and future plans.

I understand that my responses and all of the data gathered will be confidential. I agree that any information obtained from this study may be used for publication or further research. Furthermore, I am aware that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study and I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty.

If I have any questions or problems concerning my participation in this study, I may contact Mary C. Schell by phone at (856) 256-6881, or by email at [schell38@students.rowan.edu](mailto:schell38@students.rowan.edu) or Dr. Burton Sisco by phone at (856) 256-3717 or email at [sisco@rowan.edu](mailto:sisco@rowan.edu).

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Named of Participant-Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

