

**Setting Students Up for Life Long Success through
Innovative Summer Bridge Programs and First Year Seminars**

Velázquez-Torres, Nancy ¹

¹ John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York (CUNY)
ntorres@jjay.cuny.edu

Abstract

The transition from high school to college can be a frightening and challenging experience for many students. This process can be even worse for first-generation, immigrants, English language learners and other disadvantaged groups. To ease the transition and reduce attrition, higher education institutions have developed a variety of summer bridge programs and first-year seminar models. Although both interventions have been widely promoted, not many studies have focused on the impact of a combined summer bridge program and a first-year seminar on the same group of students. This paper will describe John Jay College's Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) innovative summer bridge program and first year seminar course and how they have increased first year student retention and success.

Introduction

According to research, some of the major barriers to college success for at risk populations are lack of self-confidence, inappropriate expectations or knowledge about college environment, lack of connection to the college community or external community, lack of early validation

within the college environment, family members who do not understand the goals of college and not involving faculty in summer bridge and the transition process (Kezar, 2000).

For decades summer bridge programs and first year seminar courses have been designed by many higher education institutions to assist incoming college students' transition to college, mitigate the sense of fear of the unknown, increase persistence and address some of the other barriers to college success (Sabian, 2014). Recognizing that college completion remains a challenge, it is, therefore, imperative for these programs to be evaluated to determine their effectiveness in contributing to the success of at-risk student subgroups (Swanson, Vaughan, & Wilkinson, 2017; Douglas and Attewell, 2014).

Summer Bridge Programs

Colleges and universities have used summer bridge programs as a type of college transition intervention offered to students the summer before their freshman year. These programs resulted from the need to support students who were academically unprepared to attend college (Sablan, 2014). Research supports the positive impact Summer Bridge Programs have on underrepresented students. These programs have increased access and provide different groups of students equal footing (Kezar, 2000).

According to a study conducted by Douglas and Attewell (2014), which analyzed data tracking approximately 25,000 students, students who attend summer bridge programs at community colleges and less selective 4-year colleges are 10 percentage points more likely to finish college within 6 years. The positive effect appeared to be higher for Hispanic and Black students, women, and less academically prepared students.

A study conducted with a group of 55 entering first year students considered at-risk or academically underprepared who participated in a 5-week summer bridge program indicated that students' academic skills and academic self-efficacy were positively affected (Strayhorn, 2011). Moreover, confidence about college expectations and the sense of belonging of students who participate in summer bridge programs are higher than non-participants, and, as a result, students' re-enrollment is also higher (Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley & Perry, 2012).

According to McCurrie (2009), summer bridge programs can play an important role in improving the learning experiences of at-risk students and building their confidence by challenging them with a college experience that prepares them for real college-level work.

First Year Seminars

First year seminars have been developed and implemented by colleges and universities to address the attrition problem of first year college students. Research conducted measuring the effect of first year seminars on student retention and success reveals students who participated in these courses were found to continue their enrollment to the following terms at a higher rate, complete more of the first academic year, earn higher cumulative grade point averages, and have higher ratios of earned credit hours in relation to the number of credit hours attempted (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). Students who take these courses are also more likely to become active members and leaders of student organizations (Jaijairam, 2016).

Research also supports the positive impact of first year seminars on at risk students. Data collected from 266 first-generation students in an FYS using a quasi-experimental design show the first-year seminar had a significant positive effect on achievement (an overall GPA

difference of 0.71 points) and persistence (an overall 17% difference (Vaughan, Parra, Lalonde, 2014)

Results from a study on the impact of a first-year seminar on student persistence showed that persistence rates for students who took the seminar was higher than for those who didn't, and the effect was even more significant for higher-risk students. Students considered high-risk demonstrated double the improvement in persistence (Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford & Plumb, 2016). Moreover, a study on the impact of a three-credit first-year seminar on male college students provides compelling evidence on contributing to students' higher grade-point average and persistence (Swanson, Vaughan, & Wilkinson, 2017).

The John Jay College First Year SEEK Model

The SEEK Program, recently named The Percy Sutton SEEK Program in honor of one of its founders, is the Equal Opportunity Program for students in the City University of New York system. SEEK Programs provide academic support, counseling and financial aid to thousands of New York City underprivileged students.

John Jay College admits approximately 1,650 first year students every year. Approximately 235 or 14% of these students are admitted into the SEEK Program. As illustrated on the following figures, students admitted into the program are academically less prepared than those admitted as non-SEEK students. Although SEEK students at admission are academically weaker than non-SEEK students according to SAT (figure 1) and high school GPA (figure 2), these students excel and strive at a significant rate.

Figure 1: Average SAT scores

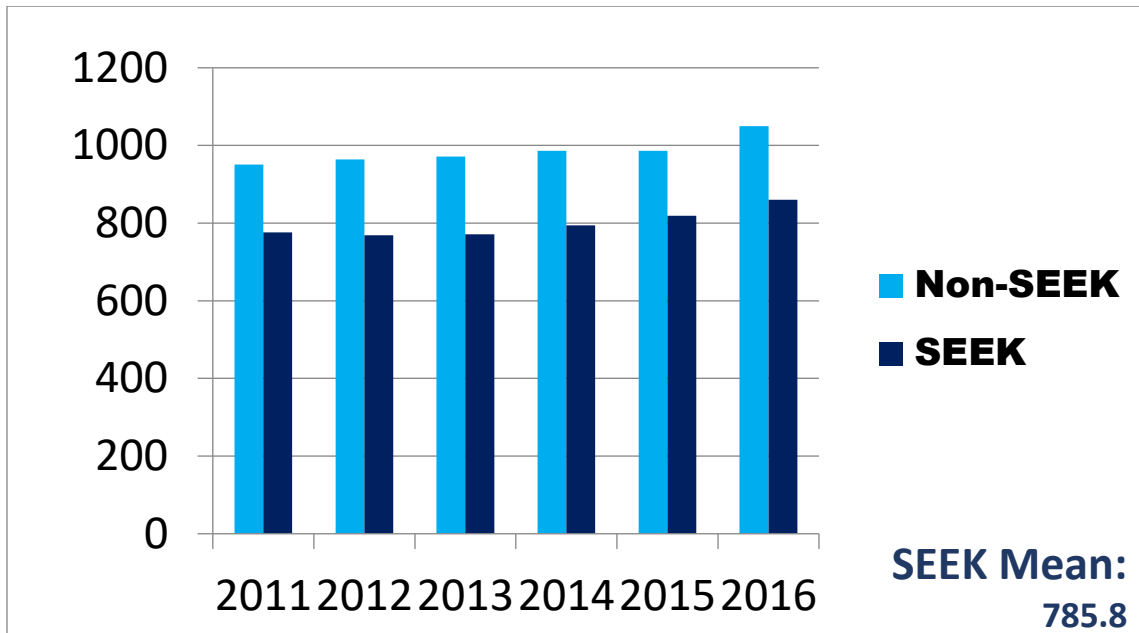
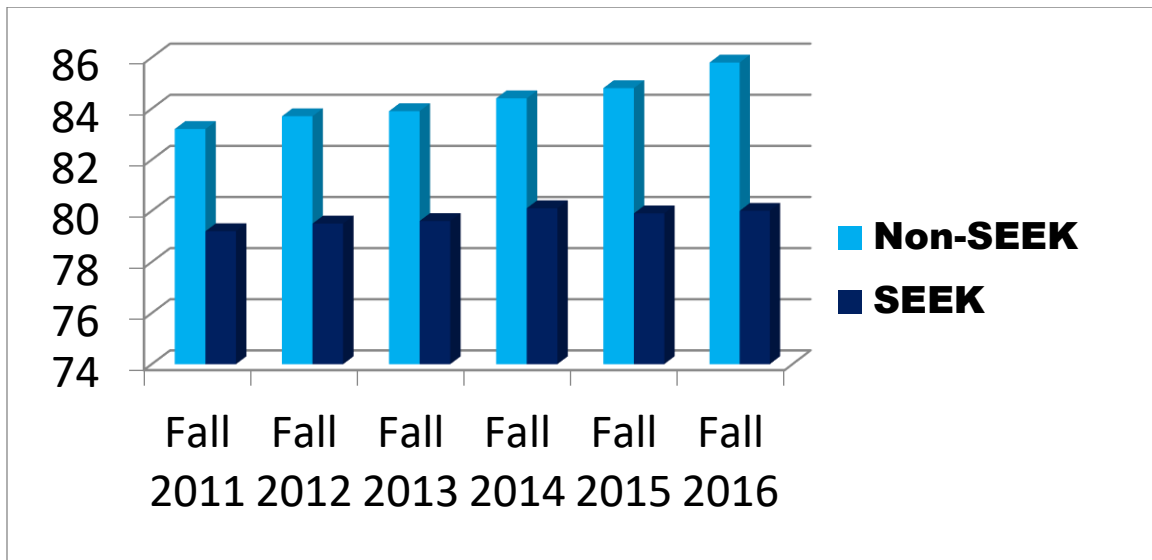


Figure 2: Average High School GPA



SEEK Summer Academy

Mandatory Information Sessions: Student participation in a summer bridge program prior to their first year is one of the requirements for students admitted into the program. As soon as eligible students are identified, they are invited to attend a mandatory information session. Parents are also encouraged to attend. To incite more interaction among students, small groups are formed and facilitators, including peer mentors, facilitate the small group sessions. All facilitators are previously trained on group facilitation. Parents' sessions are held concurrently with the students' sessions. Since sixty-four percent of SEEK students at John Jay College are Hispanic, parents' sessions are bilingual: English and Spanish.

During the information sessions, students are welcomed to the college, the department, the program and the summer academy. Small groups led by faculty, counselors, supplemental instructors and peer mentors introduce students to SEEK, its history and mission. Students introduce themselves and share their feelings about the transition process. The facilitators address student concerns while describing the services available to them and emphasizing the seeking for help and support culture of the program. All sessions have consistently received high evaluations (figure 3).

Figure 3: Mandatory Information Sessions Assessment

| |
|---|
| I feel more prepared for college after being a part of the SEEK summer info-session. 92% |
| After attending today's session, I feel more knowledgeable about the history of SEEK and that I am a part of a legacy. 98% |
| I feel connected to the John Jay College SEEK Department and staff. 87% |
| I feel more confident that I will be a successful college student after participating in today's SEEK session. 94% |
| I feel more comfortable seeking out for help and support after attending today's session. 87% |

Summer Bridge Program Use of High Impact Practices: Recognizing that students coming from high school are looking for a different experience once they transition to college and the fact that giving up part of their summer is not always appealing to recent high school graduates, the SEEK summer program integrates high-impact best practices.

During the intensive four-week program, students meet from Monday-Thursday. Math and English composition classes are held in the morning and mandatory academic support, provided by supplemental instructors who attend the morning classes and co-curricular and extracurricular activities led by the peer mentors, take place in the afternoon. The use of peer mentoring and supplemental instruction is augmented with the integration of technology enhanced active learning.

ALEKS Math Software: Many first-year college students struggle with math. Moreover, for some students math can be a roadblock in attaining a degree. During the summer bridge program, McGraw Hill’s Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces (ALEKS) program is fully integrated into the math curriculum. ALEKS is a web-based, artificially intelligent assessment and learning system. It uses adaptive questioning to quickly and accurately determine exactly what a student knows and doesn't know in a course. ALEKS then instructs students on the topics they are most ready to learn. As a student works through a course, ALEKS periodically reassesses the student to ensure that topics learned are also retained (figure 4). ALEKS courses are very complete in their topic coverage and ALEKS avoids multiple-choice questions.

Figure 4: ALEKS Progress Report

| Type of Data | Initial Knowledge Check | | Latest Knowledge Check | | Pie Progress at End of Report | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Mastered (%) | Mastered (number of topics) | Mastered (%) | Mastered (number of topics) | Progress (%) | Progress (number of topics) |
| Average for All Selected Classes | 17.5% | 26.7 | - | - | 31.7% | 47.1 |
| | | | | | | |
| Average for All Selected Classes | 16.2% | 35.0 | - | - | 46.5% | 100.4 |
| | | | | | | |
| Average for All Selected Classes | 19.2% | 42.0 | - | - | 36.9% | 80.8 |
| | | | | | | |
| Average for All Selected Classes | 17.7% | 37.2 | 33.5% | 70.4 | 40.4% | 84.8 |
| Average for All Selected Classes | 9.8% | 24.2 | 45.7% | 112.4 | 52.9% | 130.2 |

Thematic Weekly Electronic Modules: A theme is highlighted each week during the summer program and the peer mentors facilitate workshops with electronic modules prepared by faculty. The modules are on “College Survival,” “Financial Literacy,” and “Educational Technology.” At the end of the week, students are required to complete activities related to the week’s theme.

Introduction to e-Portfolios: Peer mentors introduce students to e-Portfolios during the summer program. The peer mentors share their e-Portfolios and guide students through the process of starting their own portfolios using the Digication platform. Students complete a weekly assignment related to the theme of the week. At the end students add a reflective piece about the theme and their experiences to their portfolio online. Students also use Digication to give feedback and assess the weekly modules and summer program. Data gathered from students’ input is used to make changes as needed. Furthermore, this introduction to e-Portfolio during the summer sets students for the successful use of technology during their first semester.

The Noel Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI): An online survey is also administered to get a better profile of the students and customize the services and support provided based on the students’ strengths and weaknesses as identified by the survey. Besides using the results of the CSI for retention management purposes, each counselor receives the results of their students’ CSI. The survey generates a list that helps counselors identify students with both marginal and pressing needs. Since the counselor is also the instructor of the students’ first year seminar, they can also address the students’ needs in the course.

First Year Seminar: Education and Justice

The SEEK Department is committed to elevating, cultivating and empowering students by way of academic support, financial aid, counseling and teaching, to produce life-long learners and advocates of positive social change. In addition to the mandatory summer academy previously described, all SEEK students are required to attend a first-year seminar. The seminar is taught by the students' counselor, and a supplemental instructor and a peer mentor are assigned to each course. This team works closely with students during their first semester and beyond.

SEEK's first year seminar course is not just a college readiness course, but a 3-credit bearing General Education course that meets the college's 100 level Justice Core. According to research, holistic first year seminars that teach study skills, but also discuss wellness issues, have a significantly higher positive effect on persistence (Porter & Swing, 2006). Besides having a positive impact on student persistence, first year seminars enhance students' life-long learning orientations and complex learning (Padgett, Keup and Pascarella, 2013).

The course *Education and Justice* examines the relationship of education to questions of justice as fairness in the U.S. It explores the historical, social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which young people receive their schooling and analyzes the nature, causes, and effects of educational inequality. In the process of studying these issues, students reflect on their own educational experiences and gain an understanding of the processes and expectations of college. Students examine the forces that shape SEEK students' successful transition from high school to college and how these forces affect their day to day lives and educational success, as well as the impact on their communities, neighborhoods and in the larger society. An underlying theme of the course is that self, social and global awareness emphasize community problem-solving and decision-making through critical thinking, allowing students to raise questions about the roots of

inequity and injustice. By the end of the course, students have explored this layered approach to awareness and justice and acquire new skills and strategies to respond to and influence change. The course activities and exercises not only better prepare students for the college experience, but also increase cultural awareness.

The integration of these evidence based high impact practices and targeted interventions have produced retention rates for first (figure 5) and second (figure 6) year students higher than non-SEEK students.

Figure 5: First Year Retention Rate

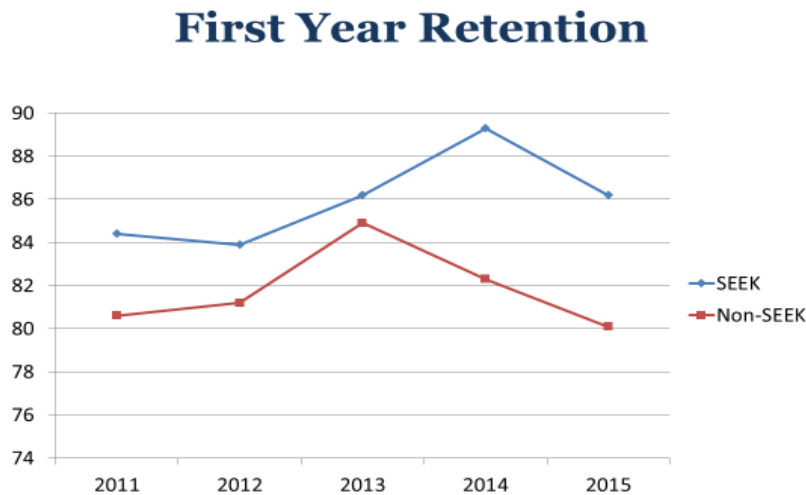
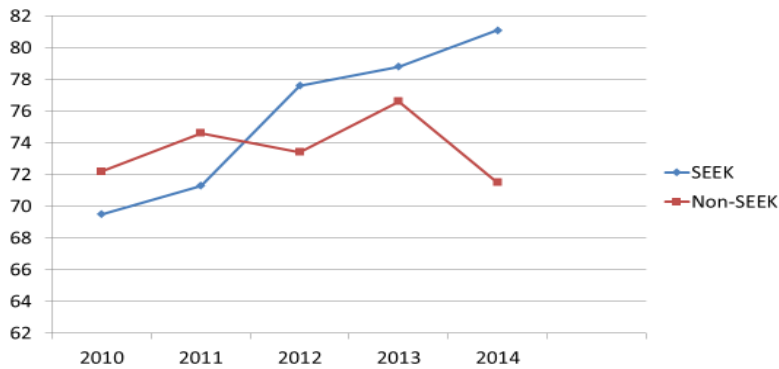


Figure 6: Second Year Retention Rate

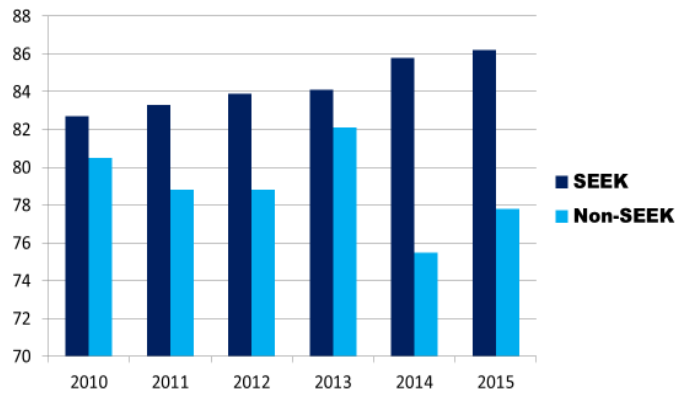
Second Year Retention



Since over 60 percent of SEEK students at John Jay College are Hispanic/Latino and the college is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), the program has been tracking the retention rates for the last 6 years of this student population. As illustrated in figure 7, SEEK Hispanic students are retained at a significantly higher rate than non-SEEK students.

Figure 7: Hispanic Students First Year Retention Rates

Hispanic Students First Year Retention



Conclusion

It is well documented that many first-year college students are ill equipped to handle the transition from high school to college. SEEK assists students with specifically defined educational and economic needs to achieve a quality college education and expand their social and career opportunities.

It's up to programs like SEEK to bridge those gaps in learning and to assist in increasing access to equal higher education for underprivileged students. To be able to increase persistence and the level of college success of at-risk students, comprehensive programs with a holistic approach like the ones developed at John Jay College are imperative. The benefits and positive impact of a mandatory summer bridge program and a first-year seminar that teach skills, build community/support, integrate academic support and counseling, use technology enhanced active learning and peer leadership support are unquestionable.

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