

Positive College Perception: The Impact of a Curriculum-Based Summer Camp's Transition

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Abstract

Due to financial strain, a local school district in the Central Great Plains abandoned a curriculum-based summer camp and the local university adopted it, providing opportunities for growth and educational expansion. Additionally, a research component was added to the camp to understand better the impact of the primarily experiential learning activities on parental and student perception. This study of the first year of a curriculum-based summer camp for students in first through sixth grades aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition in terms of students' perceptions of college, educational experiences within the camp, and potential pitfalls of the transition from the public school system. An open-ended questionnaire was completed by 95 parents and 72 student participants, which included pre- and post-camp evaluations. Qualitative responses reported in this manuscript, were analyzed for common themes. Though concerned about participant safety, parents had an overall positive response to the transition of the camp and placed value on early college exposure for students. Student responses indicated positive reactions to participation in experiential learning activities. The data support that the transition to a local university was successful in that students and parents perceived the camps positively. Additionally, unique aspects of the college campus were leveraged to enhance experiential learning opportunities, which the data suggest were appreciated by students.

Introduction

Evidence suggests the phenomenon known as the summer slide accounts for "80% of the difference in achievement for students between low and high socioeconomic families over their elementary schooling" (Vale et al., 2012, p. 1). Curriculum-based summer camps have been shown to reduce or erase the slide (Garst & Ozier, 2015; Borman et al., 2009; Shideler, Scanduto, & Wivell, 2020). Despite this evidence, funding for curriculum-based summer programs is often limited due to the high per-pupil cost associated with impactful programs (Reed, Cook, & Aloe, 2020). For example, the local school district of a micropolitan rural hub (population ~ 35,000) in the Central Great Plains has offered a curriculum-based summer camp annually for twenty

years for approximately 450 first through sixth-grade students. Due to financial issues, the school district abandoned the camp after 2018, leaving the city and surrounding area with no curriculum-based summer activities. As a result of the potential negative impacts of this absence on the community, the local university adopted the camp in 2019. This manuscript details the transition from the local school district to the university, including the key elements of (a) making the camp more accessible to lower-socioeconomic students, (b) increasing the rigor of curriculum by linking activities to outcomes while maintaining an experiential learning foundation, and (c) infusing the camp with exposure to university resources. The qualitative findings from pre-camp and post-camp parental surveys are reported, demonstrating the impact of the changes on the perceptions of camper families.

Review of Literature and Camp Transition Description

Impact of Summer Programming

Meta-analysis of thirteen different studies found that summer learning loss was the equivalent of one month of grade-level learning or one-tenth loss of a standard deviation on spring test scores (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996). Other studies have found that lower-income students incurred more learning loss than their middle-income peers (McCombs et al., 2011). Summer camps have been shown to have positive impacts on participants (Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2009). In a comprehensive study of 2,300 parents' perceptions of the camp experience on their children's development, there were significant gains from pre-camp to post-camp across ten different youth development constructs, including independence, positive identity, and peer relationships (Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007). Findings from camp attendees have also shown growth in leadership, self-confidence, and college readiness (Yilmaz, Ren, Custer, & Coleman, 2009; Pollock, McCoy, Carberry, Hundigopal, & You, 2004; Whittington & Garst, 2018). Summer programming is also very effective in reducing the summer slide gap for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds

(Green et al., 2011). In short, summer programming is an effective tool to keep youth engaged and increase self-confidence and academic achievement. Yet districts are often faced with budgetary limits that reduce their ability to offer these important programs.

Description of the Camp and Transition

The summer programming offered by the public school district for over twenty years employed select district teachers and had a goal of engaging district students in thematic camps with educational value. The week-long camps were offered in both the morning (9:00-11:30 am) and the afternoon (12:30-3:00pm) throughout June. They were divided by age (1st-2nd graders, 3rd-4th graders, and 5th-6th graders) and themed based on the district teachers' class proposals. Class themes ranged from arts and humanities to science, math, and physical activities. These structural aspects remained consistent through the transition to the university, with a significant change occurring in class offering selection and identifying curricular expectations.

Previously, a school district staff member vetted class proposals, determined class offerings, and acted as the camp director. Teachers provided her with a brief description of what activities would be implemented during the week. As part of the transition to the university, classes were selected by a committee based on educational camp goals. Class proposals required prospective teachers to list learning outcomes and an example of how educational aspects would be attained through hands-on activities. The new selection process put a strong emphasis on teaching and learning. After the committee selected classes and the camp schedule was set, teachers had six weeks to submit a detailed curriculum that linked intended outcomes and learning activities. The Camp Director and Assistant Director reviewed each curriculum to ensure the proposed activities worked toward both the stated intended outcomes and the overall intended outcomes of the camp (e.g. increase self-efficacy in learning). In addition, classes were examined to ensure the planned activities promoted an experiential learning atmosphere, with the learning being hands-on, active, and reflective.

Two major participation obstacles were identified and addressed during the transition. First, the cost of each camp session was viewed as a hindrance (between \$60-85 per week per session) for low-income families, which is consistent with literature on low-income student engagement in experiential learning opportunities (Coker & Porter, 2015). The camp's costs were normalized and capped at \$60 per week per session for non-free-and-reduced-lunch-eligible participants. Furthermore, a second rate of \$40 per week per session was established for free-and-reduced-lunch-eligible participants to address this issue. While the university taking over the camp had sufficient resources to run the camps and would be able to do so solvently, where the local school district was not, reducing fees for every student and further reducing them for lower-income students

meant an influx of funds was needed. To achieve this goal, the team sought external funding and was able to secure roughly 25% of the costs of the camps through four small state and local grants.

The aspects of family scheduling needs became the second obstacle. In its previous iteration, the camp ran from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The committee felt that this excluded many lower to middle income students who might live in two-income households since the camps could not provide all-day care. Therefore, the camp was extended to 7:45 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.. Hosted by the university library, the hour from 7:45 to 8:45 a.m. was dubbed "Library Hour" and made free to all free-and-reduced-lunch participants. The additional art or Spanish classes from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. provided an all-day care option for families.

Method

In addition to describing part of the transition process, this manuscript reports on parents' perceptions on the inaugural year of the camp on the university campus. The collection of qualitative data was approved by the host home Institutional Review Board and included a pre-camp survey for parents to identify their perceptions of the camp and its transition to the university campus, as well as to understand their motivations and goals for registering their children for the camp. Parents/guardians were given a camp registration packet, which included a consent form for their participation in the research component of the camp. Participation in the research was voluntary and not a requirement to participate in the camp.

Eligible participants had to have completed a consent form and have an enrolled child in the summer camp. A total of 191 parents had a 1st-6th grader participate in the summer camp, and 95 chose to participate in the study yielding a response rate of 49.7%.

Assessments

Participants completed a short survey including questions addressing demographics, household information, educational achievement, and their perception of the camp's transition from a school district to a university campus. The survey consisted of twenty questions, including Likert-type items and open-ended responses, and could be completed in less than five minutes. Qualitative data from the open-ended questions are reported below. Quantitative data collected were not significant due to the nature of the demographic and program-evaluation nature of the questions.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed following the principles outlined in Merriam (2009). Researchers conducted open coding, with ideas being analyzed and sorted to identify emergent, overarching themes. Themes were noted by frequency count, then combined, narrowed, and adjusted to

determine the final themes to best represent the data. Triangulating analysts contributed to the trustworthiness of this study, as multiple researchers were involved in the data analysis (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002, p.560). In addition, member checking techniques were utilized to ensure theme reliability among the research team. The common themes expressed by the majority of the participants were generated to represent results.

Results

Three specific themes emerged from parent responses: (a) the change of environment was exciting, (b) early college exposure was beneficial, and (c) continuation of the program was viewed as valuable for the community.

The Change of Environment was Exciting: Parents (n = 21) reported excitement for the environmental change. One parent stated, "My kids are excited to be in a new environment. They are excited to meet their teachers and begin their classes." Furthermore, a parent said, "I'm excited for them to see campus." Another parent mentioned, "My son and I are excited for his learning opportunities." A few parents reported they were pleased the university had taken over the camp, stating the change would create a different dynamic for an already-existing successful program. The excitement expressed by these parents demonstrates both the importance of the program and the impact the university can have to improve the program. The reported excitement is in contrast to other indicators that demonstrate potential pitfalls of moving the camp, in which attendance dropped 45% from the year prior. Anecdotally, this drop seems to be due to the transition and trepidation about potential safety issues with having young children on a college campus.¹ Some participating parents voiced the later concern. For example, one parent stated, "Worried about the size of campus and keeping the kids together and organized. Don't lose my kids." Despite these concerns, the data suggest the overall view of the move to campus was positive. One parent stated, "Involving the university in [the camp] was a positive, collaborative effort to continue the program. We love these workshops!" Overall, the transition generated excitement among parents, which demonstrates the importance of continuing summer programming.

Early College Exposure was Beneficial: A large group of parents (n = 14) reported they valued the early college exposure, as one parent stated, "It's an incredible opportunity to expose the children to learning opportunities and resources outside [the local public school district] while familiarizing them with the college setting. I expect the kids will enjoy the experience and have a newfound interest in all things [related to the university]." One parent stated, "It will be nice for him to be exposed to a college setting so that he will become more comfortable

in the future being on campus." While another parent commented, "It's a great facility. I like that the students (campers) get familiar with campus. Hope this is a positive experience and push[es] them to attend college." Lastly, a parent noted, "I think it's a great opportunity to expose children early to what [a] college campus looks like." Parents identified the contextual factors the team believed made the move a natural fit for the camp, specifically, the early college exposure is viewed as a potential gateway to a future with college for the students, and the expansive and highly innovative facilities allow the students to broaden their horizons.

Continuation of the Program was Viewed as Valuable: The transition to a university campus was a complex task; however, many parents were pleased with the continuation of the camp due to the direct and indirect benefits.

One parent stated:

I was thrilled when I found out [this camp] was going to continue. My boys have attended for years... and [it is] such an engaging, positive program. It was great to know the university was involved. It shows how they are investing in the community and local youth. Giving my son an opportunity to participate in something on the college campus is a great experience for him.

Another parent mentioned, "I am grateful the program will continue. Looking forward to the educational level of instructors my child will have." Another parent reported, "I'm just thankful you're having it all, location doesn't matter!" These responses demonstrate just how valued the program is in the community. From these responses, it can be inferred that the feeling of the program as a vital institution for the community that had been shared among the transition team is shared by participating parents.

Discussion

The transition of a children's summer camp from a school district to a university was perceived to be important and positive to camper parents and was equally beneficial to the university campus landscape. The inclusive collaboration within a micropolitan rural community resulted in students' multidisciplinary, experiential educational experience. For the university, the transition of the program provided significant insight to learning the important characteristics of future college students, as well as the educational confidence and collegiate vision for elementary-aged students. For the community, the continuation of the program ensured there were options to combat the summer slide and leveraged resources beyond the local school district's stressed budget. The transition to campus provided additional outlets for university employees to extend their educational reach and impact. Depending on the relationship between a campus and

¹ Camp was run virtually in 2020 with 750 participants and in-person in 2021 with 452 participants, demonstrating that the drop in attendance was temporary.

community, events, accomplishments, and even research successes can be lost because individuals may not see the links between university campuses and community members. Bringing the camp to a college site strengthened the connection between the campus and community. The conception of campus connections strengthened the relationship between the campus and community by allowing university faculty to showcase their expertise, which may only be present on a university campus. Parents support this notion as they reported the move was positive for both the health of the camp and the development of their children, helping, potentially, to prevent the educational summer slide through fun, structured classes.

In many cases, the first time children may be introduced to a university occurs in their secondary education. Earlier exposure can help build self-efficacy among elementary-aged students in their ability to succeed in higher education. This was prevalent among the parents of the current study as they valued the exposure their children obtained. Furthermore, children were in contact with current undergraduate students. This dynamic of exposure has the potential to be effective in building self-efficacy as undergraduate students can seem more relatable and serve as role models for success. Additionally, camps were designed to be fun and rewarding through experiential learning, and the fact that children were on a campus means these rewarding experiences potentially will be linked to what the concept of college means to them. This dynamic was appreciated by parents and supported within the literature as an effective means for building college self-efficacy (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018; Mariani et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The transition of a curriculum-based summer camp from a public school district to a local university was not without its challenges; however, the results of this research show the positive reactions to the change. The reported data in this manuscript demonstrates the importance of curriculum-based camps to parents. For future cohorts, given more lead-time, access to norm-referenced achievement test data from the academic year prior and the academic year following the camp will be requested to better understand the impacts on the summer slide. Having more lead-time for future camps will further reduce the cost for free-and-reduced-lunch-eligible students through more grant awards. In 2020, all camp activities (virtual) were offered for free, and the camp teamed up with the school district to send kits home to those students participating in the summer free-lunch program. In 2021, full scholarships were granted to 105 students who were low-income through the increase in grant funding. In short, when presented with a budget short-fall that may impact summer programming, school districts have options to leverage other community resources to ensure these programs do not disappear.

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