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Advising Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students in Alternative College Admission Programs

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This phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experiences of undergraduates admitted to a four-year college or university via an alternative admissions program, as well as how and why students make it into an alternative admit pathway and what individual characteristics, backgrounds, and university support structures may contribute to a successful college experience for students in this population. Major findings included: (1) participation contributed to feelings of academic and personal growth; (2) feelings of stigma or doubts in their academic abilities emerged early in their participation of the program; (3) positive connections with advisors, faculty, and peers led to feelings of success, maturity, and confidence.

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KEY WORDS: Alternative admissions, conditional admissions, summer bridge, college admissions, racially diverse students, historically excluded populations

Introduction

On average, African American and Latinx students enter colleges and universities with lower scores on college entrance exams than their White and Asian counterparts.

> "In 2005 alone, black high school seniors who took the SAT scored an average of 100 points lower than white students in both the math and verbal sections, and Hispanic students scored on average about 70 points lower than whites in both sections" (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007, p. 20).

Nearly a decade later, that gap has not improved. African American high school seniors who took the SAT in 2018 scored 177 points lower (on average) than White students, and 277 points lower than Asian students. Of all ethnicities reported, African Americans had the lowest average composite score, again highlighting an alarming gap in performance compared to their White and Asian counterparts. (College Board, 2018). Although many colleges and universities cite the usefulness of "holistic" admissions practices that attempt to understand the full student, these disparities in academic performance can influence admissions decisions in even the most open and selective institutions, as many institutions still heavily emphasize high school GPA and college entrance exam scores.

Holistic admissions practices involve assessing an applicant beyond college entrance exam scores and grade point averages using what Hossler et al. (2019) call "nonacademic factors." In their mixed-method exploratory study on "nonacademic factors" (NAFs) in holistic admissions practices, the researchers explored three questions: (1) what NAFs are most frequently used in admissions decisions; (2) what the importance of NAFs was in relation to "student and high school contextual factors" (Hossler et al., 2019, p. 836); and (3) how does institutional selectivity influence their use of NAFs? The data collected from 10 interview sites and survey data from 241 admissions professionals illustrated that institutions were more likely to utilize "performance factors" in admissions decisions (Hossler et al., 2019, p. 850). The researchers defined "performance factors" as a student's perceived level of engagement. This included a student's perceived:

> domain proficiency (ability to manipulate specialized knowledge), general proficiency (ability to manipulate and link information across knowledge domains), effort/motivation/engagement (demonstrates willingness to devote extra time to complete a task), discipline/professionalism (degree to which someone avoids negative behaviors), teamwork, leadership (evidence of supervising a task), and management/organization (setting

> goals and implementing in non-face-to-face settings). (Hossler et al., 2019, p. 846)

In an effort to recruit and retain students from a variety of backgrounds utilizing holistic admissions practices, colleges and universities have, and continue to, develop programs that provide academic and personal support to students as they navigate the transition from high school to college. For students whose academic credentials indicate that they may need greater academic support, these programs provide students with an opportunity to recalibrate their habits from high school to start their post-secondary education successfully. High school GPA and college entrance exam scores are often cited as the number one predictor of predicted college success (Noble & Sawyer, 2004; Sawyer, 2013; Zwick, 2019); however, absent from the body of literature on college success markers is a discussion on what predicts college success when regular admission is denied and alternative pathways to college are presented.

Research Question

This phenomenological study examined the current literature surrounding Summer Bridge and alternative admission programs and included research that explores program execution, statistical impact on persistence and graduation rates, and the differences that exist in program design between varying institutional types. Alternative/conditional admission programs are generally defined as a provisional admissions status given to a student who falls slightly outside of regular and advertised admissions criteria. Full admission status is granted based on meeting certain conditions or stipulations outlined by a university or program. Findings from the existing literature related to alternative admission programs were used to inform the larger research question: "What are the experiences of students who gained college admission through a conditional admissions program?"

Understanding why the retention of racially and ethnically diverse students remains a challenge and requires one to be familiar with current research and data. However, these statistics alone are not sufficient to address the challenges completely. Advisors need to look beyond data to the people to which the statistics refer. For higher education practitioners to understand why underrepresented students have trouble transitioning into college and how summer programs and alternative admissions pathways bridge the gap, they need to recognize the behaviors, backgrounds, and beliefs of the students who arrive on college campuses each year. The stories of success and challenge amongst students of color and underrepresented students in pursuit of a college degree must be heard by the people who have the power to change institutions.

Method

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate students who gained admission to a four-year college or university via an alternative admissions program. Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) with eight students who were former participants in an alternative admission program. Two participants identified as male and the other six identified as female. Of the eight participants, seven identified as African American/Black, and one identified as Asian, of South Asian descent and Muslim faith.

The main research question explored in this study was: "What are the experiences of students who gained college admission through a conditional admissions program?" Sub-research questions that guided the study included:

- What factors led these students to be admitted in an alternative/provisional admissions program, both academically and personally?
- What attitudes do alternatively-admitted students have about how they were referred to a different admission process?
- What path led students to choose to be in an alternative admissions program as opposed to going elsewhere?
- What attitudes do alternatively-admitted students have about their experience in the support program and college overall?
- How do they feel it compares to their peers who were not alternatively admitted?
- What experiences, services, or people contribute to a student feeling they are/are not successful in college?
- In what ways has being in this program impacted these students personally?
- In what ways has being in this program impacted their college experience?

Program Description

The program is comprised of one director, two associate directors, two program coordinators, seven academic advisors, and three clerical technicians, all of whom are full-time. There are also part-time staff members who assist with program operations. Part-time academic year staff consists of two graduate student interns, seven to twelve undergraduate tutors, and peer mentors depending on the semester. During the fall and winter semesters, students receive academic advising, based on an intrusive advising model, on a biweekly basis, and they must complete an eight-hour weekly study requirement.

Intrusive advising is described as the

> "deliberate structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate a student to seek help-intrusive advising utilizes the systematic skills of prescriptive advising while helping to solve the major problem of developmental advising which is a student's reluctance to self-refer" (Earl, 1988, p. 28).

More recently, researchers and practitioners have described this advising practice as "proactive advising" (Varney, 2013). Individual tutoring and course-specific study groups which are provided by the program help students meet their study hour requirements. In addition to advising and completing study hours, students must also attend career related workshops and seminars throughout each of their three semesters in the program. In the fall semester of their first year, students enroll in a two-credit learning strategies course designed to help them develop effective study habits.

Summer Bridge staff consists of seven part-time peer advisors and one graduate student coordinator, all of whom live in the residence hall, to provide oversight during the eight-week program. During the eight-week Summer Bridge program, students take non-credit bearing courses in basic writing, mathematics, undergraduate research, and a three credit-bearing communications course.

Participant Selection

Using purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), eligible participants were identified from a list provided by the alternative admissions program administrator. The alternative admissions program accepts approximately 100–150 students each year. Factoring in attrition, I expected at least 50–75 students to remain enrolled in the university at least part-time. It was from this group that I sought participation at the time of data collection based on Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation "that researchers interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). The ideal number of participants was eight to ten students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. To be eligible for this study, students must have transitioned out of the alternative admission program into the general university system, be in their third or fourth year at the institution, and be enrolled at least part-time to be able to adequately reflect on their overall participation in the program. In 2016, 112 students were admitted through the alternative admissions program. At the time of recruitment in January of 2020, there were 30 students who were enrolled at least part-time. This represents a 27% retention rate for the 2016 cohort.

To begin the study, I first emailed the eligible 2016 cohort students requesting their participation. I sent three separate recruitment emails over a two-week period. The ideal sample would have consisted of only seniors, as they were the furthest removed from the program, closest to graduating, and may have had more in-depth experiences to draw from in describing their experience and evolution as a student. After three emails, I was only able to secure six participants from the 2016 cohort. Of those six participants, five followed through with arriving for a scheduled interview. Unable to reach my eight to ten participant goal from the 2016 cohort, I reached out to the 2017 cohort. The number of students admitted through the alternative admissions program in 2017 was 137. At the time of recruitment in January 2020, there were 53 students who were enrolled at least part-time. This represents a 39% retention rate for the 2017 cohort, albeit this retention rate is after three years, not four as was the case with the 2016 cohort. Of those 53 students from the 2017 cohort, I was able to schedule and conduct interviews with four of the students only after one round of emails. Recruitment for participation spanned over four weeks to arrive at the eight participants.

Table 1. Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Cohort	Race/Ethnicity	Sex
Ashley	2016	Black/African American	Female
Denise	2016	Black/African American	Female
Mya	2016	Black/African American	Female
Raheem	2016	Black/African American	Male
Sam	2016	Asian	Female
Michael	2017	Black/African American	Male
Michelle	2017	Black/African American	Female
Stella	2017	Black/African American	Female

Data Collection

In-person interviews were conducted on campus in a reserved conference room. Interviews were audio-recorded and ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour. Data were collected through a 12-question interview protocol to help participants recall specific experiences in and out of the program which could help to answer the main research question. Participants were invited to a second interview and given an opportunity to provide additional information; however, no student took advantage of this option.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral. The spiral model is representative of the cycling back and forth through interrelated steps of collection to achieve clarity and accuracy in analysis. After collecting the data, the spiral begins with managing and organizing the data. All interviews were transcribed by hand and stored using NVivo, a qualitative data management system. The second activity in the data analysis spiral is reading and memoing emergent ideas. After transcription, I reread each interview session to gain an overall sense of each participant's journey. I then took notes to summarize key points to arrive at early emergent ideas that could be turned into codes. After rereading the transcriptions, I moved into classifying memos from each interview into codes.

The codes from each interview helped to identify common themes across all interviews. I derived codes from direct statements from participant interviews and, when possible, from words participants used to maintain authenticity. Each code was given specific definitions that participants' direct statements supported. Any relevant notes collected during interviews were also included to support codes and definitions. Codes and themes were developed by hand, rather than software coding tools, to recognize any patterns or shared perspectives amongst participants.

At the conclusion of the coding process, I reviewed all the codes generated over each interview and categorized them into sub-themes to arrive at my final major themes of students' experiences in alternative admission programs. Themes arose out of codes that had shared meaning and significance to both me as a researcher and to the participants.

Findings

Table 1 provides a summary and demographics for the eight participants. All participants were traditional-aged college students when they began their first year of college, meaning that at the time of their participation in the study, they ranged in age from 20 to 23 years; all were in-state students.

Increased Confidence in Academic Potential and Abilities

All but one of the participants cited low college entrance exam score as the primary reason for their referral to the alternative admissions program. In exploring their feelings about their high school performance, it was clear that participants felt that either their ACT or SAT score inaccurately represented their potential for success. Despite feeling that their score did not adequately reflect their ability to succeed, many participants recalled questioning and reevaluating their "worthiness" for admission.

Because participants came from racially underrepresented backgrounds, it is important to examine the literature that discusses persistence rates for these groups. These feelings of self-doubt early on in a student's academic journey, based on perceived abilities from ACT or SAT scores, may place too heavy a burden on students

to perform when research shows that high school GPA or first semester GPA (Dennis et al., 2005; Gershenfeld et al, 2015; Mattson, 2007; Strayhorn, 2011) are better predictors of success in college. Shifts in admissions practices to being more holistic or even test optional are also emergent in the literature as more institutions consider how the SAT or ACT may not be equitable in its assessment of "college readiness" (FairTest, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Considering that college entrance exams are widely adopted as an admissions tool to increase efficiency and implement a sense of standardization (Hoxby, 2009; Riccards, 2010; Zwick, 2019), it may be time for institutions to assess whether efficiency outweighs equitable access to higher education. Institutional missions vary across the nation, so it is worth examining if a one-size approach to measuring "college readiness" meets the needs of today's student body.

Participants also discussed how the alternative admissions program helped them understand what college was like and how to be academically successful. This finding aligns with White and Ali-Khan's (2013) study that found that students who possessed "academic discourse" (p. 24) were more likely to succeed. Academic discourse refers to a student's ability to understand and apply the unwritten rules of how students talk about their academics and course content. The participants in this study understood and met college level expectations, due to the holistic support of the alternative admissions program structure and its advisors. Holistic support encompasses the advisor's ability to provide support to students beyond just academic needs and course recommendations. This includes the advisor's understanding of the student's background, goals, responsibilities outside of the classroom, and possession of a general awareness of what might enhance or impede a student's progress toward degree completion. The literature suggests that Summer Bridge programs make a measurable impact on retention rates, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Slade et al., 2015). Not surprisingly, those who participated in Summer Bridge felt that their adjustment was even smoother because of the eight weeks of practice prior to their first official semester of college. Despite their expense and the required resources needed to run effectively, the Summer Bridge participants seemed to adjust more easily than non-participants, especially with regards to making connections with faculty, advisors, and peers.

Connections with Advisors and Faculty

All participant interviews mentioned meaningful connections with alternative admissions advisors and university professors as having an impact on whether they felt supported and encouraged to persist. Advising relationships were highlighted as the most meaningful connections participants had with the staff of the alternative admissions program. Program advisors were assigned a caseload of students based on major or program of study and met with each student on a biweekly basis. Meetings with advisors covered a range of topics from creating plan of study, course registration, addressing financial aid issues, referral to university services and academic support, and regular conversations about personal goals. Because of the biweekly advising meetings, participants were able to build rapport and trust with their academic advisors and learned to seek them out in times of uncertainty or celebration. Participants also shared that the most positive interactions with faculty were when faculty were passionate, caring, and approachable. This finding aligns directly with Roksa and Whitley's (2017) study of first year students which illustrated that, regardless of race, "when faculty were more invested in student learning and development, students had higher GPAs" (p. 342). The Mathletes program, which is a program that offers comprehensive and individualized academic support for entry-level math courses, was cited often as having some of the most caring and dedicated faculty that participants had encountered in their college experience.

Schlossberg's transition theory (Goodman et al., 2006) applies to this study's finding that positive connections with advisors and faculty can lead to a more successful transition to college, in that the transition to college can be stressful and challenging for students who are academically underprepared. Faculty and advisors served as good counsel for students as they worked through anticipated and unanticipated events, and non-events. Anticipated events experienced by participants included experiencing challenges in difficult classes and learning how to manage their time. Unanticipated events experienced by participants included offering advice and resources when they were faced with unexpected challenges personally or within their family. Faculty and

advisors were there to help them make the best decisions based on their goals, requirements, and abilities. Non-events are defined as events that are expected to happen, but do not. Most participants did not describe scenarios that would fall under the non-event experience; however, some participants shared that they were concerned about the consequences if they were not successful in the Summer Bridge program.

Admit Status and Program Participation Stigma

Many participants described feelings of confusion and stigma regarding their referral to alternative admissions; however, those feelings typically faded early in their Summer Bridge experience or in their first semester of college. Feelings of stigma and confusion are consistent with the experiences of students who were conditionally admitted at other colleges and universities. In their qualitative study, Lundell et al. (2006) found that students who participated in the University of Minnesota's General College also described feelings of "stigma and disappointment" (p. 78) early in their experience. Similar to the alternative admissions participants, those feelings typically faded and were replaced with more positive opinions over time. Participants in that study also had similar feelings to alternative admissions participants in that they felt they had been "given a second chance and opportunity to succeed" (Lundell et al., 2006, p. 78). Although the feelings of stigma faded for the participants of this study, feelings of being labeled, unprepared, "at-risk," or (as participants in this study said) "dumb," may have impacted the students who dropped out of college before completing their degree. The results of the Zilvinskis et al. (2020) study on conditionally admitted students provides some credence as to how labeling students may impact the behavior and success of students in this population.

Discussion

Findings from this study highlight three recommendations advisors can use when working with students who were admitted through an alternative admissions program. First, advisors who work with students in conditional admissions programs can help to mitigate feelings of stigma and confusion in their early meetings with students. Making affirming statements about a student's strengths and their ability to succeed is crucial to boosting a student's confidence. Helping students identify personal goals and how they may have achieved those in the past can reinforce the message that the student has as history of being successful and that such successes can be repeated in college. Lastly, asking how the student likes to be encouraged and motivated can also be useful when addressing the stigma associated with participating in an alternative admissions program. Students will undoubtably face challenges in their academic journey, so advisors can prepare for those moments by learning early in the advising relationship how to coach students out of negative thoughts. Because of the relationships and rapport students build with their advisors, advisors in alternative admission programs can be valuable sources of holistic support and encouragement when students have feelings of stigma or doubts about their academic abilities (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Winograd & Rust, 2014; Young-Jones et al., 2013).

Second, advisors should analyze the experiences of students who are in their final semester of participation in the program—if the program is not a four-year experience. Students may receive a tremendous amount of support in their first year of college; however, that support may taper off too abruptly resulting in a sharp decline in grades or utilization of positive academic behaviors. It is important for advisors to assess how each of their students can successfully transition from receiving support services. Designing a personalized plan for each advisee can result in students being better prepared to be self-directed learners when external program requirements are removed.

Third, advisors can play a crucial role in students' social connectedness on campus. In addition to examining how students can develop stronger self-regulatory behaviors as they relate to academics, advisors for alternative admissions programs can examine how much guidance and support they provide in helping students become connected to campus through involvement in student organizations and learning communities. Although strong academic performance is absolutely necessary in college, sense of belonging is a key factor in retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Spending time in advising sessions on the importance of getting involved with student organizations and learning communities may contribute to a higher retention rate for program participants.

Limitations & Future Research

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to allow students who were admitted to college through an alternative admissions program to tell their story in their own words. Based on the research design of this study, limitations do exist. This study only selected participants who were currently enrolled and making progress towards a degree. By selecting participants who stayed enrolled in college, this study was able to explore what parts of the alternative admissions program may have contributed to a student's overall success and ability to progress through their academic program. Despite arriving at a rich understanding of the experiences of students who persisted, to have a more complete picture of the experiences of students who gained conditional admission to a college or university, the students who did not complete the program or dropped out of college after completing the program would also need to be researched.

This study also only focused on two cohorts of students in an alternative admissions program at one university. Other institutions across the country have versions of alternative or conditional admissions program that vary greatly in terms of program qualifications, structure, funding, and size. Additionally, the alternative admissions program modifies program requirements, structure, and services based upon assessment data and feedback from advisors and students. Because the participants were no longer in the program at the time of the study, their experiences capture what the program was like in a particular year. It is possible that the experiences of future cohorts of students would substantially differ from the participants in this study. Thus, future studies may want to assess how changes to alternative admission program requirements, advising, or resources may impact student retention and overall success.

Based on the limited scope of participants who were eligible for this study and the research design, there are opportunities for further study to broaden the discussion on the experiences of students who were admitted to college via an alternative admissions program. Studies that seek to explore the experiences of students who did not meet the requirements of an alternative admissions program, dropped out of college, or transferred to another institution would contribute to a deeper understanding of students who do not complete their college journey and how advisors may influence or contribute to certain outcomes. Longitudinal studies may also aid in understanding how quality advising relationships in alternative admissions programs impact long-term success beyond graduation. Replication of this study would also assist in understanding whether the experiences of students who were admitted to a university via an alternative admissions program have similar underlying experiences that contribute to success.

Based on the findings from this study, future research should also explore the impact of college entrance exams on perceived self-worth and confidence. Because participants of an alternative admissions program understand their referral could be based on low-test scores, an examination of how confidence and academic performance may be affected in a student's early college career could help deepen the understanding of stigma and confidence for students in this population.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate students who gained admission to a four-year university via an alternative admissions program. Overall, students who participated in the program had positive experiences and credited the program's structure with allowing them to build the foundation for persistence and success. The most meaningful themes that emerged across all participants include: (1) Increased Confidence in Academic Potential and Abilities; (2) Making Connections with Advisors and Faculty; and (3) Admit Status & Program Participation Stigma. Advisors who work with students admitted through alternative admissions programs have the opportunity to make a tremendous impact on the development of their advisees and must work to personalize their meetings to address the uniqueness of this population.

Although the findings and recommendations from this study illustrate a need to continue alternative admission programs, it remains necessary to assert that these types of programs provide only temporary fixes to a much larger issue: most institutions of higher education were designed to be exclusionary rather than inclusive. They were not designed to serve individuals from underrepresented, working-class, or first-generation backgrounds. As long as institutions continue to operate on foundations and principles that were designed centuries ago, they will continue to perpetuate exclusionary practices that marginalize

historically excluded populations and will increase their reliance on auxiliary type programs designed to attempt to rectify these deeply rooted systems. Rather than relying on temporary fixes, a complete overhaul of the educational system is necessary to build one in which all students are considered and positioned for success. Radical as it may seem, leaders cannot continue to ignore the reality that education is not equitable and is not currently designed to provide equal access and opportunities for all. For true equity and inclusion to be achieved, the current educational system must be dismantled to its core to allow for the creation of a new system that is inclusive for all.

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Appendix A

Interview protocol used to solicit student experiences in the alternative admit program.

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
   a. Where are you from? Where did you go to school? How would you describe yourself? Why did you decide to participate in this study?
2. I see you chose _____ as your pseudonym. Would you like to talk about why you selected that name?
3. Let us talk about you as a high school student. Can you tell me a little about what kind of student you were and your overall feelings about school back then?
   a. What was going on in your life during your four years of high school?
   b. What kind of grades did you make and why?
4. When did you start thinking about going to college? How did you know you wanted to go and who helped you in that process?
   a. What did you do to prepare to go to college?
   b. How did you decide on what schools to apply?
   c. How would you describe your family's involvement in your college plans?
      i. Would you say they were supportive? If so, how? If not, why?
5. Can you describe the emotions you were feeling as you applied and got decisions from schools?
   a. How did it feel to be accepted or denied to certain schools?
6. Talk me through your thoughts and feelings when you were referred to the alternative admissions program?
   a. Why did you decide to come to this university? How did you make that decision?
   b. Did you consider attending another institution? If so, why?
7. Tell me about your summer experience prior to starting college.
   a. If you were in the Summer Bridge program, tell me about that experience and how you feel it had an impact on you.
   b. If you were in the Fall Bridge program, what did you do to prepare for your first semester of college?
8. Describe your first year of college.
   a. In what ways did the program influence your experience?
   b. Did you experience any barriers, successes, or challenges? If so, did the program play any role in those experiences?
   c. Talk to me about any leadership experiences or campus activities you participated in. In what ways were those meaningful (or not) to you?
   d. Describe what your interactions with faculty looked like.
   e. What were your responsibilities and commitments back then? How did you manage your time? Were you effective in meeting all your obligations? Why or why not?
9. How would you describe your experience overall in the alternative admissions program? How did it help/hinder you in your transition to college?
   a. Did you tell people you were admitted through an alternative admissions program? Why or why not?
      i. If so, what were those conversations like?
   b. Were there any experiences, people, or services that you felt made a difference in your time here?
   c. How did you feel about being alternatively admitted while you were in the program?
10. How do you feel about the program now that you have transitioned out?
    a. Have you stayed involved or connected with the program since your transition? If so, in what ways? If not, why?
    b. In what ways have you changed as a student and/or person since your first year in college?
       i. How has your campus involvement, involvement in leadership roles, interactions with faculty and/or staff changed from then to now?
11. What do you want people to know about you and your college experience?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share?