Ideas in Practice: Toward a Participatory Approach to Program Assessment

By Patrick L. Bruch and Thomas Reynolds

ABSTRACT: ***Drawing on critical multicultural education scholarship, this article discusses an alternative assessment of academic support programs. It highlights the importance and value of supplementing traditional assessments with direct student participation. Through a discussion of data from a summer bridge program at a large research university, the article examines how a participatory approach can illuminate strengths in a program as well as enduring challenges that might block student success.***

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For the past several decades, universities and colleges have created a wide range of programs intended to support the success and retention of students who arrive on campus underprepared to meet the academic, social, and cultural challenges of higher education (Blake, 1998; Hashway, 1990; Kluepfel & Roberts, 1994; Laguardia, 1998; Levin & Levin, 1991; McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). As part of this legacy, many institutions have experimented with summer bridge programs (Ackerman, 1991a; Ackerman, 1991b; Garcia, 1991; Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher, 2005). Despite the contributions that such programs have made over the decades, shrinking budgets and public unwillingness to support remediation have created a climate in which, today, the survival of programs depends on concrete verification of tangible outcomes that justify investments (Damashek, 1999). Consequently, as Stiggins (2005) has pointed out, "the interest and investment in summative assessment has far outstripped that accorded to formative assessment" (p. 326).

Summative assessments focus on documenting outcomes whereas formative assessments focus on the experiences and perceptions that shape outcomes and ongoing application of findings. Reflecting the emphasis on summative approaches to program assessment, Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, and Albano (2008) recently catalogued a broad spectrum of positive outcomes that have been verified as consequences of bridge programs:

> Studies have reported many positive effects as a result of bridge program participation, including earning higher grades, staying in school longer, and having higher college completion rates than comparable nonparticipants (Evans, 1999; Garcia, 1991; Obler et al., 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, participants in bridge programs have an increased sense of control, increased confidence, and increased self-esteem, important factors related to meeting the social and academic challenges of the first year (Ackermann, 1991a; Fitts, 1989). Students who participate in bridge programs also have closer contact with other students and faculty during their first year and complete more core courses than nonprogram students (Ackerman, 1991a; Buck, 1985; Garcia, 1991; McLure & Child, 1998; Suhr, 1980). Moreover, students develop leadership ability, have more extensive involvement in the campus community (Buck), and are more likely to use tutoring and counseling during the academic year than are their nonbridge peers (Fitts). (p. 14)

Verifying the academic, social, and affective contributions that academic support programs make to student success, the program assessments summarized here make a compelling case for institutional investments in programs to serve traditionally underprepared students. Developmental retention programs will continue to compete for limited resources based on the evidence that current assessment research provides to institutional decision makers.

But the purpose of assessment is not simply to defend programs as they already exist nor to simply reinforce the framework of assumptions reflected in program design. Rather than merely measure program success, assessment should enable programs to incrementally change over time. Focusing on classroom contexts, scholars of assessment have advocated strongly for the importance of balancing summative assessments that document instructional outcomes with formative assessments that can help teachers better understand and improve outcomes (Andrade & Cizek, 2010; Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971; Boylan, 2007; Cizek, 2009; Stiggins 2004). Within this literature, assessment represents a crucial tool to facilitate the development of educators' efforts and the transformation of assumptions, especially as cultural contexts and student demographics change over time (Gallagher 2007; Shepard, 2000).

Assessment of programs, like assessment of individual classrooms, needs to balance a summative outcomes focus with formative research. In the absence of this balance, the summative verification that currently dominates program assessment may overlook potential improvements and may reinforce assumptions that undermine efforts to support student success (Gallagher, 2007; Hughes, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In this article we offer ideas for practitioners to use as they design and implement assessments that can gather information useful to the improvement of programs by moving beyond quantifiable outcomes. First, we briefly examine how critical multicultural education theory can provide foundation for a more participatory approach to assessment of academic support programs. Second, we share results from our own pilot of a participatory approach to assessment in a summer bridge program at a large public research university. Using our findings as an example, we highlight how involving students in assessment can enable insight into, and development of, academic support programs.

Critical Multicultural Education Resources for an Expanded Approach to Assessment

A key shortcoming of summative assessment is that it takes as given, and thus tacitly endorses, the framework of assumptions underlying program design. Critical multicultural education theory can inform a richer approach to assessment research because it draws attention to the importance of questioning and transforming the assumptions that underlie educational practices (Dolby, 2012; May & Sleeter, 2010; Newfield & Gordon, 1996; Nieto, 2009). This theory begins with a recognition that the taken-for-granted assumptions—the valued knowledge, practices of inquiry, and communication styles in higher education—frequently elevate the experiences and sensibilities of traditionally dominant social groups to "the position of neutral and universal standards used to judge everyone" (Cochran, 2003, p. 58). As a result, conventionalized practices of teaching and learning institutionalize the privilege of dominant groups (Banks, 1997; Bruch, Jehangir, Jacobs & Ghere, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Sleeter, 1996). To the degree that they remain implicit and unquestioned, such practices obstruct access by discouraging many students from seeing academic work as a sphere of activity that they can identify with, express their talents in, and dedicate themselves to as a means of fulfilling their potentials as contributors to public life (Herideen, 1998; Guerrero, 1996; Martinez Alemán, 2001; Newfield & Gordon, 1996). A curriculum reflecting unexamined assumptions can undermine the efforts and success of traditionally underrepresented students. However, critical multiculturalism emphasizes explicit recognition of the partiality of all knowledge and posits learning as an active, participatory practice of being involved in questioning and transforming knowledge (Banks, 2009; Fox, 1999; Reynolds & Bruch, 2002).

In a sense, then, critical multicultural education scholarship positions learning as assessment and improvement of knowledge. Here, the role of students is not simply to adopt, unreflectively, the practices and perspectives of academic disciplines. Instead, students are understood as learning to participate in continuously redefining and improving practices and perspectives. Knowledge is conceived here as dynamic and open to, even dependent upon, the contributions of all those willing to become informed participants. Exemplifying the curricular consequences of such a theoretical foundation, Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, and Morrell (2002) have recently described a summer bridge curriculum for low-income African-American and Latino students that "posed student learning as a form of apprenticeship within the research community of educational sociology" involving students in defining and conducting original research in small groups with the guidance of research team advisors (p. 115). As Oakes et al. (2002) explain, in contrast to a curriculum designed to prepare students for a future opportunity to do real academic work, the critical summer seminar frames learning within active participation: doing the work necessary to join debates over how best to understand and respond to real problems that the students cared about. Similar to the participatory developmental writing approach described by Reynolds and Bruch (2002), this curriculum prioritizes critical engagement and critique with knowledge—asking who benefits in what ways from dominant ways of seeing a topic—as an important part of learning the material. In this theory, learning isn't dedicated to simply knowing what others think about a topic but developing and sharing with others one's own, informed, understanding.

Conventionalized practices of teaching and learning institutionalize the privilege of dominant groups.

Critical multicultural theory offers several important insights for program assessment. First, the emphasis on the unavoidable partiality of knowledge signals the need for intentional efforts to include perspectives that may not be well represented in institutions. Here, since bridge programs are intended to make it easier for diverse students to gain access to higher education, it is especially important to seek out information regarding ways in which the program reflects "insider" knowledge and might unintentionally obstruct access for those outside privileged groups. In addition, the critical emphasis on participation recognizes that the "fresh eyes" of persons not fully initiated into the "common sense" behind practices can sharpen understanding of what institutions do, how they do it, with what consequences, and for whom. In this way a participatory approach offers all students a definition of postsecondary education framed as a real and immediate chance to become involved in shaping the content and context of their own education. Just as multicultural education theory can help expand assessment, an important next step in the application and development of multicultural education theory is to involve students in making knowledge about the very programs in which they are working. In sum, student experiences and insights into support programs can contribute importantly to the development of programs and theories, yet at present these experiences and insights are left largely untapped.

Method

As a response to the need for a more balanced approach to program assessment that can capitalize on students' insights and experiences, we decided to incorporate critical multicultural education theory's emphasis on participation into a formative assessment of a summer bridge program.

Demographics and Setting

Students in two sections of Bridge to Academic Excellence, a 6-week summer bridge program that targets low-income, academically underprepared, ethnically and culturally diverse students, comprised the intentional sample. The 39 students–recent high school graduates selected to balance male and female—were 2% Caucasian, 36% Asian/Pacific Islander, 40% African American, 16% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% American Indian. These demographics differ radically from the institution as a whole in which students were 77% Caucasian, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% African American, 2% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% American Indian.

The program aims to enable students' access to a large, urban, land-grant research university in the upper Midwest, enrolls students in a writing class and a "content" class (either Civic Leadership or Digital Storytelling), provides room and board, and mandates student participation in extensive programming designed to help students build community and become more comfortable with the academic, cultural, and social life of the campus. In general terms, drawing from critical multicultural theory, the curriculum approaches learning as an opportunity to become more actively involved in shaping knowledge. Its goal is to extend the critical

participatory orientation to knowledge making from the classroom, where students were making knowledge about social issues like White privilege and patriarchy, to the bridge program itself and the larger institution.

Procedure

Students were directly involved in the process of assessing and interpreting the program as part of their classroom experience. In order to accomplish this, we discussed with students the idea that, just as all knowledge reflects the cultures of those who make it, the program design reflects the larger institution's current understanding of what developmental students need, what their success would look like, and how it can help them. We invited students' critical participation in questioning and strengthening the program through three writing exercises, incorporated into the course work of the writing class. The writing assignments asked students to reflect on the assumptions built into the program as they had experienced it and to offer ideas about how the program could better understand students and serve their needs. Students were provided 45 minutes of class time three times during the last 2 weeks of the program to write anonymously in response to one prompt per occasion (see Appendix). The student writing generated in response to these prompts became the study data.

The team of coinvestigators performed qualitative analyses of the data. Analytical methods were aligned with those described by Straus and Corbin (1998) and Gee (1999). The first reading included identification of key words, recurrent phrases or ideas, and attitudes that resonated across the comments. The goal here was to identify shared perspectives and concepts expressed by respondents in different ways. As a second phase, coinvestigators worked to identify similarities and differences in respondent comments. Preliminary findings were validated by an outside reader.

Findings and Discussion

The student responses demonstrate the value of a participatory approach to assessment as both a learning activity for students and a developmental assessment for programs. Through their responses, the students demonstrated a strong interest in contributing to the conversation regarding program design. Our analysis of the data identified three important contributions that make a participatory approach to assessment a useful supplement to verification-type data. First, a participatory approach to assessment provides information that goes beyond identifying what the program's positive outcomes are (i.e., increased retention, enhanced self-efficacy, etc.) to identify how, from students' perspectives, the program enables or supports good outcomes. Second, a participatory approach can identify countervailing currents or forces within the program that represent areas for improvement or further development. And third, a participatory approach is valuable because it can itself contribute to the access goals of academic support programs by involving marginalized members even as it seeks to investigate the ways these programs are or could be fulfilling these goals. The following subsections present each of these outcomes, sharing representative student commentary (reproduced verbatim) that relates to each and discussing the significance of each as information that supplements verification data.

Participatory Assessment Can Clarify Strengths Within Program Design

One significant theme from study data had to do with student perceptions of good experiences with the bridge program. In response to prompts (see Appendix) students wrote extensively about specific things they gained from their involvement in the program. In addition to information about what they gained, themes emerged concerning how specific program design features contributed to the program's success. The student comments embody an important component that participatory assessment can add to program research. Helping investigators understand, in concrete terms, the activities and design features that students perceive as most important about the program identified aspects of program design to be safeguarded and enriched. The three most significant of these design features were the curriculum design, the residential structure, and the network of relationships that students developed.

Students demonstrated a strong interest in contributing to the conversation regarding program design.

Strength one: curriculum design. One important positive outcome that almost every respondent discussed in some way was confidence. Many students used the word "confidence" to describe what they got from their involvement, whereas others referred to an increased sense of familiarity, comfort, or preparedness. On the level of simple verification, it is good to know that the program is working as evidenced by comments like "with the classes I've taken and the independence I've acquire, I know I can succeed in college now." But in addition to simply identifying confidence as a significant outcome, the data highlighted specific program design elements—specifically its support for students' success in completing challenging coursework and adjusting to dormitory life—as important features in realizing this outcome. Characteristic of comments in this category, one student wrote,

> Giving incoming students the opportunity of taking college classes and live in the dorms is an important feature of the bridge program. . . . doing this familiarizes people with the campus so that they'll feel comfortable in the fall. This is significant to the program's success because it's what the university wants, confident, hardworking students.

Another student provides insight into how curriculum can contribute to confidence-building by clarifying the expectations of university classes:

> This program is important to me because it really prepares us for the academic school year. To be able to live on campus and get to know the campus is a major plus. [The writing] class is important too because it gives us a credit worth of writing to take with us in the fall. It also prepares us of how an English class in the fall will be organized. What the teachers expect of us and how to get work done in a timely manner. It's important to know how a college class operates and I like that we know what teachers expect of us.

Fleshing out this theme of gaining confidence by obtaining a clearer sense of how college classes differ from previous classroom experiences, another student wrote,

> This program is important . . . because it aids the incoming freshmen in transitioning from high school to college. Without this program, I would be more overwhelmed than anyone could imagine. I did not think that college was going to be this different from high school. At the beginning of this program, I was completely stressed out with the workload of the classes. I did not realize that there would be so much of it. Now that I have experience, I believe that I am ready for the fall semester. . . . I realize what it means to be optimistic now.

Other students also identified coursework as an important part of developing confidence. One wrote "I am now able to write essays that I feel confident in. I am now aware of what a good essay consists of, and it has prepared me for the fall." Another stated "I . . . feel this program is important because we were not spoon fed everything; we worked hard on our assignments meeting deadlines. It's like all the pieces were given to us;

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we just had to figure out where they went to create this big picture." One student summed up the effect of successfully completing real, challenging academic work, writing, "As a student I am fully confident that I can walk into class knowing what to do and what to expect." Throughout this strand of comments, students validated the effectiveness of program curriculum in offering them challenges that they perceive to be worthwhile. In addition to the skill-building that results from the students' work in these classes, the sense of comfort with university-level coursework and expectations helps students know that they can succeed.

Strength two: residential design. In addition to the challenge of coursework, students consistently identified overcoming the challenge of adjusting to greater daily independence as a significant contributor to their sense of confidence. For any student, and especially those who are first generation, low income, and/or students of color, adjusting to the campus life of an incoming undergraduate can be a significant challenge. As a result almost all participants commented on how the dormitory experience contributed to feeling prepared for the fall semester:

> This program is important to me because I got a chance to venture away from home for the first time without my parents. I had to become more responsible. I am very lazy. I had to get use to doing things for myself. I could usually find someone to pick up my slack. Therefore, this program is important to me because I have learned to be more independent than what I thought I was when I was living with my parents.

Another student also expressed the development of independence, highlighting "freedom and responsibility" as important features:

> The features of the program that are most significant to its success are that students are kept in the dorms and [the] earning of credits. Staying in the dorms is key for a college life experience. You have all the freedom and responsibility. And while you are learning the way around campus and taking a few classes, you earn credits.

In each of these comments the students highlighted the significance of the residential aspect of the bridge program design that they experienced. Through their comments on the curriculum and residential aspect of the program, students have drawn attention to what we would call the "demanding realness" of the experience. One student made this explicit in a comment on the program:

> What makes bridge a huge success is that we are given real tasks and are able to manage our own time with our homework, sleeping, eating, and recreational activities. I think that the whole point of bridge is that we should create good habits before school starts, because they rather not see us fail.

Strength three: relationships. A connected but distinct strand of student comments related to the theme of confidence has to do with program features that the students believe supported them in meeting the challenges of living on their own and succeeding in the demanding college curriculum. Here, students identified relationships as the key program design feature. Specifically, almost all of the students commented that the friendships and supportive peer relationships they developed were essential. But many of the students also commented on the relationships they developed with faculty and peer mentors as additionally important. A representative comment in this theme explicitly connected confidence to relationships saying, "I can say personally that I don't think that I would have been as strong and confident this first year in college without being here and connecting with not only my teachers but my fellow classmates."

Students have drawn attention to . . . the "demanding realness" of the experience.

One important aspect of the relationships that students valued had to do with the fact that the program enrolled predominantly students of color. Though there were students from many ethnic/racial groups in the program, the two classes surveyed were 90% students of color. None of the students had to feel like they were the only Hmong, African-American, or Latino student in the classroom. All could feel a sense of welcome and experience "belonging" in the classroom, campus, and higher education in general. One student phrased diversity as a benefit to both the university and the student:

> This program is important to the University because it gives the University a very diversity student school. This way it can bring a lot of diversity student into the college and creates a whole new program that can conduct to the community. It's not only important to the University but it gives the student a chance to know what is around the campus and not get lost during the first year of college. Also, you can meet a lot of people here and not being afraid of making friends in college.

We are struck by the recognition in this comment of a win-win relationship regarding diversity. The student recognizes that the University has an investment in diversity which is partially related to its relationship with the communities it should serve as a state institution. In addition, the student highlights the contribution the program makes to students by giving them "a chance to know what is around the campus and not get lost during the first year of college." Though "a chance to know what is around campus" could apply to knowing where buildings are, we read this as an oblique reference to the program supporting students of color by helping them know, from experience, that they are not alone "around the campus" and don't need to feel completely lost in a sea of people that aren't like them. In the final line of the comment, "a lot of people" can be read as referring to not just a large number of people but people from a lot of different social groups (i.e., African American, Hmong, Latino, Indian, White) who the student has learned about "not being afraid of making friends" with.

Many other students made comments that extended the idea of the program creating an environment of connection among students of color across specific groups (i.e., African American, Latina/o, Hmong) designations. Interestingly though, all of the students who commented on the program's demographics seemed to have difficulty finding the terminology to talk about people of color as anything other than new individuals to be added to the melting pot of the campus. Like the previous comment, another student framed diversity as a benefit to the University, saying,

> The program is really beneficial to the University because it brings students from all over. It's very diverse and it shows that the University cares for the incoming students. . . . I feel it makes the transition so much more smoother then having to be one of the students starting in the fall and in a sense just being thrown into it. I think an important thing is branching out and getting to know new people . . . . I feel that the most significant thing that makes bridge a success is the openness of everyone. The teachers actually seem to want to be there and help us get prepared. Also, the peer mentors, having mentors that are students and only like two years older than us makes it very enjoyable.

Here, again, the idea of being "thrown into it" carries special meaning to a first-generation student of color beginning school on a large, predominantly White, college campus. One student appreciated how "at the beginning of the program they made us get to know people within the program. It was nice to see how diverse it was."

The critical mass of students of color in the program is important because it provides a secure foundation to reach out and develop a support system that includes faculty and peer mentors. One

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student recognized that, in addition to friendships with specific people, these relationships set a pattern that will support success, saying,

> One of the significant key to success in this bridge program is that it allowed students to get close to the professor. This bridge program allowed students to feel comfortable when approaching their professor, therefore it would be a much easier job to the students during the fall semester. I think having the ability to approach staff or professor when you need help is one of the key to success and the bridge program had done a great job in ensuring that students get this skills.

In addition to providing insight into this specific bridge program, the data collected suggest the value of supplementing verification research with a participatory approach. Beyond verifying *that* the program helped students develop confidence, the students teach about how, from their perspective, the program achieves its outcomes. With this type of information about exactly how the program helped students to develop confidence, program faculty and administrators know where to place energy for development and what to try and sustain.

Participatory Assessment Can Clarify Weaknesses Within Program Design

In addition to highlighting the features of program design that students felt contributed most strongly to their success, a participatory approach to assessment also uncovers weaknesses, shortcomings, or tensions within the program that students perceive to be obstacles to their development. These data are especially valuable because they identify areas of program design that may need to be changed or better communicated. Our data identified three areas for further attention: rules, compulsory activities, and attention to diversity.

Weakness one: excessive rules. One consistent theme from the data had to do with the tension between freedom and rules in the program. Here, student comments focused on how the degree of supervision seemed to be in conflict with the goal of independence and responsibility. The students helped draw attention to how the delicate balance between freedom and regulation contributes significantly to the program's perceived "real"ness and thus, in turn, to its ability to truly help students. If students perceive the program to be unrealistic, there may be feelings of alienation. Highlighting this tension between supervision and realness, one student wrote,

> Coming into the bridge program, I thought I would be on my own, like the normal college student. I wasn't expecting someone to be on my back because I missed a study night or if I was texting in class. I thought I would be free to make my own decisions. Although those things were very helpful as much as we did not like that, I know that in the fall I will not have someone telling me when to come to class and study.

Here, the student indicates that through its regulatory supervision, the bridge program creates its students as something other than a "normal college student" who is "free to make my own decisions." Similar student sentiment follows:

> I think overall this program is still under construction. At times, I felt as if I was still in grade school, so I was baffled. I liked the fact that we were free to make our own nightly decisions i.e. no bed times. However, I feel like they should make the bridge program more geared to college, activities shouldn't be everyday, we should be able to choose just like we would do if we were in college.

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In this comment, the phrase "if we were in college" points again to the sense among the students that the rules governing the program create a situation in which, despite taking real classes for credit, working with real faculty, and living in the dormitories, they are not yet really "in college." In many of the student reflections, this sense of "not quite college" emerged as a countervailing sentiment that tinged confidence with doubt. Through comments like "This class really taught me how to structure a paper in a way that is *hopefully* going to be found acceptable on a college level" or "Because of this program I have more confidence in my ability to handle the upcoming school year, and now I *sort of* know what to expect" or "Although this class probably won't be as grueling as my writing class this coming school year," students communicated that it's important for the program to directly address and more fully explain the features that distinguish it from "real" college.

Weakness two: compulsory activities. In addition to rules, another distinguishing feature that students found difficult was the compulsory evening activities. Many students commented on the schedule of mandatory social activities as a point of tension. Some students brought up this theme through very direct comments such as "I would like less evening activities that I am not interested in attending" or "the program makes you do some useless things like watch a movie or go to the lake when you could be studying," or "this program doesn't give us freedom. It restricts us to schedules and obeying rules trying to bind us to obey." Other comments developed the theme beyond simple frustration, connecting mandatory group activities and the perceived realness of the experience:

> Some things could be less so is all the group activities. I feel that there are times that independence is not really there. Having to do all these random group things it seems to take away the aspect of when you're in college you are on your own.

Building on the notion that mandatory activities distinguish the bridge experience from "real" college, another student wrote,

> I imagine that when the fall comes I will not have to have set activities every night. I will have an array of choices of events and not that I should be able to attend. It will be my decision of whether or not I sink or swim.

Each of these comments raised the concern of how the program helps students succeed in the university. One student raised a very precise question that distills the challenge for the program: "This is supposed to be like what college is like then why still treat us like children?" The point, to us, is not that the bridge program should eliminate or even necessarily reduce the activities it provides for students. However, the framing of those activities needs to better address the tension between regulation and realness in a way that can enable, rather than undermine, students' sense of preparation.

Weakness three: insufficient attention to assumptions regarding cultural diversity. In addition to providing information through what the students said, data also communicated through the silences that, in some cases, echoed across the individual student comments. One striking silence across the data was the absolute lack of discussion regarding the fact that the program's "racial" demographics—a total of three White students in two classes—approximately reversed the demographics that many students would encounter in their fall classes in which African-American, Latino, American-Indian, and Hmong students will be a significant minority.

Though addressed obliquely in ways discussed previously, the lack of any explicit discussion of how students see themselves as students of color on a predominantly White campus is striking because racial dynamics will be an important part of students' experience in the fall; the program could

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help students develop ways of thinking about their academic work that help them see racial difference as a productive and contributing part of their experience. If part of what makes the program a success is that it provides a "real" experience that enables students to enter with a sense of confidence, this confidence is somewhat vulnerable to the degree that students know that, demographically, the experience is a chimera.

Here, data perform an important service by revealing rather than solely reinforcing the assumptions regarding success built into academic support programs. In place of any discussion of how they see themselves as students of color on a predominantly White campus, students unanimously gave voice to a color blind individualism of competition, hard work, and personally adapting oneself to the institution as it is. Students' repetition of phrases emphasizing, on one hand, personal responsibility, such as, "But it is only good if one wants it to be" or "it is up to a person to change by the impact they received from the bridge program" and, on the other hand, competitive individualism, through phrases like, "I just know that I have a minor advantage over others" or "getting a foot out ahead of other incoming classmates" or "I'm grateful for my chance to get a head start," together reflect the program's perceived emphasis on private, individualized, competitive, definitions of the good life.

What is notable is not so much the unanimous participation of program students in this discourse but the fact that their participation seems unconscious, unreflective, and commonsensical even as they are completing the program. Thus, their language for framing their involvement in higher education—as simply another free-floating individual here to compete with other individuals—gives expression to the fact that the bridge program is embodying the very public discourses of individual competition and privatized merit that have resulted in massive cutbacks to support for access of underrepresented students and frozen progress towards "reducing inequity in the educational system" over recent decades (Oakes et al., 2002; Newfield, 2008). This finding illuminates not just the assumptions built into the program but also the assumptions built into the writing prompts. By not directing attention explicitly to issues of diversity, the prompts themselves might be ineffective. They may assume that social group identity and difference is inconsequential; alternatively, they may assume that students will be comfortable commenting on diversity whether or not they are asked about it explicitly.

Appendix

Writing Prompt Samples

Prompt 1:

The program we are involved in this summer is intended to help support people as they begin careers in the University. Please take a few minutes to write about how the program seems to you to define "supporting people as they begin their careers in the University" and what you think of that definition (strengths/weaknesses, upsides/downsides)?

Please discuss ideas you have about how the program feels like it ***is*** fulfilling its goals and ways in which it feels like it ***is not*** fulfilling its goals. What would you like more of or less of from the program?

Prompt 2:

Please take a few minutes to write about the Bridge program as a whole in terms of the following prompts.

What does this program mean to you?

What does this program mean to the University?

What features of the program are most significant to its success or lack of success and why?

Prompt 3:

Universities often perform assessments to measure the effectiveness of support programs like summer bridge. As a participant in this program, you have unique perspective on strengths and weaknesses in the program that relate to your success and the program's success. How would you assess the program? What would you want people to think about as they try to make the program as strong and supportive as possible for future students?

Participatory Assessment Can Reinforce Participatory Curricula

So far, we have used our data to demonstrate two important contributions that a participatory approach to assessment can make to understandings of academic support programs. The first is that it can help illuminate how, in addition to what, the program is accomplishing. Second, a participatory approach can help investigators understand enduring challenges built into programs that can present obstacles to student success and that represent areas for potential improvement. In addition, involving students in assessment can reinforce the message of participatory curricula regarding the meaning and purpose of learning.

As previously discussed, curricula informed by critical multicultural education theory have embodied a strong commitment to student participation. By involving students as novice participants in the real work of universities, participatory curricula help students connect learning and skill development to their identities, interests, and experiences (Bruch, Jehangir, Jacobs, & Ghere, 2004; Oakes et al., 2002; Reynolds & Bruch, 2002). One good outcome of such curricula is an enhanced sense of purpose and personal commitment to schooling. Building on this, assessment can provide real contexts for students to experience active and meaningful involvement in the university itself. Here, through the opportunity to use their writing as assessors of the university rather than simply being those assessed, students are given a chance to be vested members of the academic community with legitimate insights and the ability to communicate them. Through the extensive and very serious comments that they provided in their writing, students demonstrated clearly that they experienced their involvement in assessment of the program as an extension of their classes which had encouraged them to work as knowledge makers.

Implications for Practice

Student data have significant implications for practitioners interested in assessment of academic support programs. Findings show the value of supplementing more traditional summative assessment techniques with an approach that makes formative program assessment a built-in, integral aspect of classes. Here, the incorporation of an explicit assessment role for students facilitates gathering insights into program achievements and tensions while also demonstrating to students that they are valued and vested participants in the institution. It is important to keep in mind that developmental students are already experiencing and thinking about the institutional structures that they are working in, whether those structures are bridge programs or other academic support

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programs. Assessment belongs within programs, not just for what program personnel can learn from it but for what students can learn from their involvement. Making participatory assessment a part of the program can provide important opportunities for students to share, process, and reflect on their perceptions as resources for their success. This approach to assessment might be coupled with quantitative measures to provide a more balanced perspective including "human" elements of education initiatives.

An important implication for practice has to do with the finding that students seemed to join rather than question the discourse of colorblind individual competition as a framework for thinking about their roles as students. From a critical multicultural theoretical perspective, part of all students' introduction to the university should involve defamiliarizing this popular assumption that participating in public institutions like universities necessarily involves shedding social group identifications and differences. Study data reveal a need to address explicitly with students the existence of competing ways of thinking about diversity and its roles in the university and beyond and to invite students to choose languages they use—rather than accept and reflect mainstream practices—more self-consciously and critically. This suggests changes in curriculum such as offering students opportunities in class to discuss and respond to readings that directly address and question the meanings of diversity in higher education. In addition, participatory assessment could directly ask students' to share views of how the program does or should support them in maintaining their group identities even as it tries to enable their access as individuals to the larger university community. Here, the goal is not to force a particular understanding of diversity issues on students but, instead, to help them situate their perspectives and value differing views.

Data also highlight the importance of communication and perceptions of respect as contributing factors to students' perceptions of programs. Students want to be taken seriously as learners and stakeholders; they welcome opportunities to contribute as real and meaningful participants in programs. As the intended beneficiaries of programming, they deserve to know why things are organized in particular ways and to be included in conversations regarding possible alternatives to current designs. Our data show that tensions and resentments can result when students feel themselves to be the passive recipients of programming. Just as good classroom teachers provide many opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss their learning and what might help them, academic support programs should include opportunities for students to provide feedback and help shape the program. Beyond writing prompts, simple surveys, classroom discussions, and face-to-face informal conversations can all provide important opportunities to learn from students and, also, to teach students that they can be active participants and not simply passive recipients.

Conclusion

For several decades, academic support programs have worked to enable the success of students from groups underrepresented in higher education. This work is essential not just because college is valuable for individuals but because of the contributions diverse students can make to university communities and the society as a whole. Effective academic support programs can enable new voices and perspectives to join the cultural conversations that create public perspectives and shape societies. But as larger economic uncertainties reduce public willingness to invest in academic support programs the current historical moment is a period of struggle for these programs. As shrinking budgets increase competition for scarce resources, higher education programs are pressured to emphasize concrete accomplishments via assessment and evaluation. In most cases, this assessment takes place outside of the curriculum and relies on quantitative measures such as credit hours earned, grade point average, retention, and degree completion. Such data is valuable but insufficient to really learn about students' perspectives regarding what and how the programs are accomplishing. Ironically, the very economic, cultural, and public policy forces that encourage verification approaches to program assessment also reinforce perspectives of the privileged groups who have traditionally defined education and educational supports. The need for program development built on assessments that extend beyond predetermined measures is thus intensified for underrepresented student cohorts.

Tensions and resentments can result when students feel themselves to be the passive recipients of programming.

As scholars of critical multicultural education have explained, education must involve students in questioning and redefining knowledge in order to avoid continuing to advantage those who are already dominant in society (Banks, 2009; Newfield & Gordon, 1996). Although summative assessments play an important role in verifying that institutions are getting results in return for investments in academic supports, they leave out important perspectives and contributions that students can make to the improvement of programs. A participatory approach provides a means to deepen and extend both program assessment and evaluation as well as opportunities for students in academic support programs to actively make knowledge.

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