

**CAUCE Research Fund Final Project Report
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Project Title: Knitting the Cultural Divide: The Academic and Socio-Emotional Benefits of Access Supports for Under-Represented Student Populations at Ryerson University: A Spanning the Gaps Project

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences and attributes of an under-studied segment of the student population. A total of 27 students took part in this study: Twenty-one mature learners currently enrolled in their first semester in Spanning the Gaps' (STG) Bridges program participated in a mixed-method design, and 6 graduates of the Bridges program took part in a focus group. The mean age of current Bridges learners was 28.3. Most students were born in Canada, reported English as their first spoken language (85.7%), and self-identified in various ways. Forty-five percent reported that their parents had not graduated post-secondary education, though a substantial portion had some PSE experience. Seventy percent reported having prior experience in a post-secondary environment (i.e. prior to enrolment in the Bridges program), but did not complete their post-secondary education at that time. Participants reported on perceived support from STG, current stressors (both PSE stress and non-academic), social fit/belonging with STG (and with Ryerson). In addition, participants reported descriptors of their experiences so far in the program. When describing their experience with the program and program staff, learners used terms that fell into various sub-categories: Help and encouragement, support, acceptance and respect, safety and comfort. Descriptors related to the self loaded into categories of worth, empowerment, and motivation. These findings were mirrored in the focus group with graduates of the program (mean age = 39.8), who also described the development of confidence, self-advocacy, and self-worth as a student through the unique combination of encouragement, feelings of safety and acceptance provided by staff in the Bridges program. Findings from the quantitative portion (i.e. self-reported questionnaires) of the study highlight the relevance of social belonging and support with one's program in order to buffer stressors and foster adaptive academic skills.

Introduction & Brief Literature Review

In recent years, the Canadian government has identified access to post-secondary education (PSE) for under-represented groups as an important goal. In line with these values, Ryerson University's academic plan 2014-2019 prioritizes equity and access in post-secondary education as part of its commitment to community and inclusion. Spanning the Gaps (STG) is an access to post-secondary education program housed within The Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University. Spanning the Gaps was established in 2007, out of a core belief surrounding the transformational nature of education. Its mission is as follows: "Education can break the cycle of inter-generational poverty and social exclusion, and ... higher education transforms lives and contributes to social cohesion, social stability and a civic society" (Retrieved from <http://ce-online.ryerson.ca/ce/default.aspx?id=3257>). The goal of Spanning the Gaps is to increase post-secondary participation, in particular for individuals who have been marginalized from the educational system.

Spanning the Gaps offers various programs, including 'Bridges to Ryerson', which is a transitional program for mature learners who have gaps in their education, or who do not meet formal requirements for entry into post-secondary education. Spanning the Gaps offers access to various supports (academic, non-academic, financial) as they begin a 'second chance' at pursuing their academic and personal goals. It is a unique program compared to other transitional year programs because of its extended outreach and supports offered to students, well past the "Bridges to Ryerson" stage. Spanning the Gaps students who have graduated from the 'Bridges' program, and are pursuing undergraduate studies have access to supports throughout their entire academic careers. It is a strength of the program that STG's mature learners often describe.

'Bridges' students have been studied before: the first cohort of students were part of a landmark study for Spanning the Gaps that investigated students' personal and educational experiences (Malik, Guan, Vetere, & Abramovitch, 2011). Although the characteristics of marginalized students are varied, Malik et al. found that the majority of 'Bridges' students were older than 25, were first-generation immigrants who spoke their native languages at home, and had previously attempted some form of PSE. Additionally, many 'Bridges' students worked full-time in low-paying jobs and cared for dependents at home (Malik et al.) Using an interview methodology, Malik et al. found that 'Bridges' students had educational and family histories that involved instability and low levels of family and academic support. 'Bridges' students described current goals of "upward mobility" and a "second chance" at realizing their potential, alongside the network of supports offered by the program (Malik et al., 2011, p.22).

Objectives

Miner (2011) and Orders and Duquette (2010) point out that the existing literature on access programs in Canada is focused on describing barriers to PSE, with a relative scarcity of other crucial forms of data. Specifically, information surrounding how to lessen the impact of barriers as well as tracking student outcomes in Canadian access programs is needed.

This study was aligned with four goals that relate to access and being a mature learner: 1) to include and engage under-represented students in a program of research that generally investigates what it is like to be an exceptional student within a mainstream post-secondary environment; 2) to examine the importance of self-construals and social fit within the larger university context, which has recently been recognized as one that endorses highly individualist values (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012); 3) to investigate the accrued benefits of participation in the 'Bridges' program over the course of a full academic year; and 4) to translate key learnings into 'points to consider' when supporting mature learners enrolled in Canadian access programs. This report focuses on the first two goals.

Research Questions and Rationale

The rationale for the study's questions is derived from 1) the need to raise awareness of access program supports and to contribute to the research gap that currently exists (i.e. with respect to academic outcomes), and 2) the relevance of larger norms to self, thinking, and motivation.

One of the first points of interest was to examine the characteristics of this particular cohort of Bridges students: demographically, who are they? Are there specific academic and personal attributes that characterize this cohort? What are the major stressors/concerns in Bridges students' lives? How do students perceive supports from the program?

The second major grouping of questions related to social fit/belonging, as they related to stress, support, and academic habits. . What are 'Bridges' students' perceptions of the overarching messages of i) Ryerson university as an institution and ii) Spanning the Gaps as a home program, with respect to values of interdependence and independence? Do social fit and perceived STG support predict more adaptive academic behaviour and higher well-being?

The latter questions, in particular, are formed based on the relevance of cultural norms to self-construals. Cultural psychologists Markus and Kitayama (1991) delineated two types of self-construals that derive from fundamentally different cultural world-views: Independent self-construals are predominant in Western, individualistic contexts, and are characterized by the individual self as the unit of agency; in contrast, interdependent self-construals are more common in non-Western, collectivist contexts. The interdependent self is highly connected to the social unit (family or beyond), and adjusts to meet one's social role within the larger group,

in order to achieve the group's goals. Previous cross-cultural research supports the idea that interdependent and independent self-construals are characterized by different views of self in relation to others (see Triandis, 1989, for a review).

Stephens et al.'s (2012) Cultural Mismatch Theory makes two claims: 1) that universities tend to promote independent values relative to interdependent ones, and 2) often, first-generation PSE students bring values (i.e. of interdependence) that are non-normative in mainstream PSE environments, which in turn create an additional barrier to success. Stephens et al. surveyed top administrators at 75 universities across the United States, and found that post-secondary institutions of different types do, in fact, endorse independent values over interdependent values. For example, administrators selected items such as "learn to express oneself", "learn to be a leader", and "learn to solve one's own problems" over items such as "learn to ask others for help", "learn to be a team player", and "learn to adjust to others' expectations". Thus, the ideal student formulates his/her own opinions, is self-sufficient with respect to motivation, and carves a personal pathway based on self-desires. This finding is problematic because highly independent values are generally found in individualistic nations (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada) relative to collectivist nations, from which many visible minorities originate. Furthermore, values of independence tend to be fostered in middle to upper-class socio-economic groups (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Kohn & Carroll, 1960).

The latter points are critical to the framework of the current study, because a majority of 'Bridges' students come from lower-income backgrounds and are of visible minority and immigrant status (Malik et al. 2011). Given the impact of cultural context on the development of various aspects of self, it is important to investigate the interface of self-construals with perceptions of the dominant, independent norms that pervade university settings. In fact, Stephens et al. have already found that a 'cultural mismatch' links with poorer academic performance, increases in the stress-hormone cortisol, and stronger self-reported negative emotions during an academic task in first-generation students (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). This evidence suggests that a lack of fit is detrimental to learner success; conversely, social fit within one's PSE might be an important predictor of various markers of success.

Overview of General Procedures and Methodology

In order to address the proposed research questions, a correlational, mixed-method design was employed. Quantitative aspects of the study involved questionnaire completion; qualitative aspects involved analysis of admissions essays, a lexical analysis, and focus groups.

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Ethics approval for the study's methods was obtained through Ryerson University's Research Ethics Board in the late summer of 2016. The study recruitment took place during the Fall of 2016. Analysis and dissemination took place during the Winter of 2017.

The first part of the study involved Bridges graduates and qualitative methods only. Two focus groups were conducted in the Fall of 2016, with individuals who had graduated from the 'Bridges' program within Spanning the Gaps at any point since the program's inception. The goal of this portion of the study was to establish the relevance of core questionnaires (those related to norms at Ryerson University) to Bridges students. Participants were asked for their opinions about what they felt were the most relevant aspects of a Bridges student's experience with Spanning the Gaps and post-secondary education in general.

The second part of the study involved current 'Bridges' students and a mixed methodology: 'Bridges' students completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires, provided open-ended reports, and permitted the researcher access to their final Fall grades and admissions essays that were written the spring prior to entry into the program. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires regarding self-construals, motives for attending post-secondary education, perceptions of university norms, social fit, academic self-efficacy and procrastination, self-confidence, university and generalized stress, self-actualization, program support use, and juggling social roles. It should be noted that this report does not report qualitative findings from admissions essays (though presented at the CAUCE conference in May 2017).

Recruitment

Study recruitment involved the following: 1) a Verbal announcement, 2) Follow up email, 3) posting of flyers.

Focus group recruitment involved an email recruitment notice/flyer, sent by a Spanning the Gaps case coordinator, to a list of potential focus group participants. Interested participants contacted the principal investigator directly for further information on participation. The first focus group comprised of six graduates of the Bridges program. Recruitment of the second focus group was less successful in terms of numbers (N = 3); this report focuses on discussions from the first focus group. The focus group was moderated by the principal investigator and co-moderated by a Chang School researcher².

For the portion of the study involving current Bridges students, the program director made a verbal announcement during a scheduled class meeting. Students were told that the study was entirely voluntary and confidential, and that if they chose to not participate in the study, it would in no way affect their standing or participation in the "Bridges" program. Students were

² Dijana Praskac co-moderated both focus groups alongside the principal investigator.

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told that they would be receiving an email in the upcoming days to ask for their participation in the research study. The email recruitment notice asked potential participants to contact me (the principal investigator) directly if they were interested in taking part.

Due to low numbers in the first month of recruitment, a revised recruitment strategy was employed, with approval from Ryerson's REB. Paper copies of the revised recruitment flyer were posted in the Bridges students' lounge area (in the VIC building on Ryerson's campus); additionally, an electronic copy of the revised recruitment flyer was posted on students' e-learning system (D2L). The revised recruitment strategy involved 1) offering an open timeslot *after* a scheduled class on a specifically selected day, and 2) providing food and refreshments for students. In total, the sample size was 24; data from 3 participants were removed from data analysis for various reasons (concerns over how the questionnaire was completed, and one student was not in the first semester of the program).

Overview of Findings and Discussion

Demographics

Table 1 presents demographic information for the Focus Group and Bridges Participants.

Table 1

	Focus Group # 1 Participants (n= 6)	Bridges Participants (n =21)
Age (mean)	39.8	28.3
Self-identified gender	50% female, 50% male	57% female, 43% male
English as first spoken language	66.7%	85.7%
Born in Canada	83.3%	85.7%
Prior PSE experience	83.3%	70%
Parental PSE graduation	50%	55%

In terms of cultural self-identification, participants responded in an open-ended fashion, and self-identified in various ways. "Caucasian-Canadian", "Black", "Afro-Canadian", "South Asian", "mixed race", "Mexican", "Japanese", "Russian Mountain Jewish", "Latino", and "White" are examples of the diverse ways in which participants self-identified.

Roles

Of the current Bridges cohort, most reported that they experienced some degree of competition amongst roles in their lives (90.5%): in fact, most said that 'being a student' was the role that competed the most with other roles that they occupied, such as 'mother' or

'employee'(76.2%). A majority of those who participated said that they were currently working (71.4%), either full or part-time. So it is not surprising that, as a group, 'being a student' often needed to be balanced against being a person in the working world. Moreover, most of the current Bridges cohort (85%) said that they found it stressful to be in a university environment (to varying degrees; mean score = 2.67/5.0). Bridges graduates ostensibly related to these feelings, as similar feelings of competing life roles, and 'not quite feeling like a student' were brought forth in the first focus group.

Perceptions of University and Program

Current Bridges students perceived Ryerson (at large) as being largely focused on independent values. Social fit with Ryerson was related to less academic stress ($r = -.37$, trend level) and generalized distress ($r = -.40$, $p = .07$). Social Fit with STG, on the other hand, was related to less procrastination on written assignments ($r = -.60$, $p < .01$) and studying for tests ($r = -.41$, $p < .07$). These findings suggest that better match between self values and Ryerson's values of independence relate to lower feelings of stress, supporting previous findings pertaining to cultural mismatch (Stephens et al., 2012).

Independent motives for attending post-secondary education were uncorrelated with procrastination or GPA; however, *interdependent* motives for attending university were related to higher study/test procrastination ($r = .47$, $p < .05$). The data suggested that higher interdependent motives were related to lower fall GPA ($r = -.41$, trend), but there may be intervening factors that affect this relationship. Indeed, interdependent motives for attending PSE were associated with more non-academic stressors ($r = .58$, $p < .01$) and lower self-confidence ($r = -.53$, $p = .01$).

As a group, Bridges participants reported strong feelings of being supported, and felt positively that an STG staff member would be there should they need, or want, support. Higher perceived support from STG staff was related to lower procrastination on attending meetings with case coordinators and instructors ($r = -.48$, $p < .05$). Interestingly, higher stress of being in a university environment was related to *lower* procrastination on attending meetings ($r = -.52$, $p < .05$). This finding is unusual, given that research on academic transitions typically find that stress and procrastination are positively correlated, rather than negatively correlated. However, interpretation of these latter two findings can be made in the context of some of the qualitative reports regarding the supportive program structure: strong perceived STG support is a buffer that intercedes PSE stress and academic habits. Thus, when stressed about PSE life, Bridges students tend to engage *more* with their supports in the program and engage in less self-handicapping – as evidenced by lower procrastination on meetings with STG faculty and staff. The findings suggest that meeting with STG case coordinators is an integral part of coping with stress surrounding PSE. Overall, these are important findings because they highlight the direct

benefits of having a support system throughout a major academic transition period. Furthermore, in the focus group, the value of a supportive, community-oriented program – such as STG—was continually brought forth in discussion.

Lexical Analysis

Bridges participants responded in an open-ended fashion to the following question:

“If you could list a few key words to describe your experience so far with the Bridges Program and Spanning the Gaps, what would they be?”

In total 101 terms were reported. All terms were coded by principal investigator and a trained research assistant. Agreement of 100% was obtained on most categories; disagreements were by discussion and third-party. Overall, two large categories emerged through the coding process: program descriptors and, unexpectedly, self-descriptors.

Table 2 lists the major categories reported, along with examples of content within each category.

Table 2

Program descriptors	Self-descriptors
Help and encouragement + Support (24%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “helpful”, “encouraging”, “encouragement” • “supported”, “supportive” 	Worth, Empowerment, Motivation (15%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “brave”, “empowered”, “driven”, “growing”, “motivated”, “courageous”, “bold” • “valuable”, “confident”, “smart/more intelligent”
Acceptance + Respect (13%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “accepting”, “welcoming”, “inviting”, “no judgment”, “respectful” 	Other <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Humbling”, “grateful” (2%)
Safety and comfort (6%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Family”, “safe”, “caring”, “compassionate” 	
Other <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly (6%) • Informative/Full of knowledge (5%) • Surprising, Exciting (4%) • “Different” (1%) • “Amazing” (1%) • Positive (5%) • Inspired/inspiring (5%) 	

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It appears that, as early as 2 months into STG programming, learners indicate the development of confidence, self-advocacy, and self-worth as a student. The reported program descriptors suggest that these feelings are fostered through the unique combination of encouragement, feelings of safety and acceptance provided by staff in the Bridges program. These ideas were mirrored in the focus group with Bridges graduates. Focus group discussions also identified STG supports as being essential to success as a student – both while in the Bridges program, but also beyond into undergraduate studies. Community-oriented supports appear to be a core part of what makes the Bridges Program helpful to students.

Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitation of this research relates to the sample. Although a very large sample size was never anticipated, the small sample size does cause some concerns. The final sample size of 21 in the mixed-method portion of the study makes it difficult to accept the (quantitative) findings as reliable. Caution should be used when making inferences based on the correlational analyses in particular. Furthermore, the overall response rate (out of the current cohort of enrolled students) was less than 50%, which limits generalizability, both to the population of interest (i.e. Bridges students) as well as to the larger population of mature learners in a Canadian setting.

A second limitation involves the method of data collection in the mixed-method portion of the study. With the exception of GPA, much data was based on self-reported questionnaires. Self-reports generally pose issues with accuracy of reporting; however, the larger issue remains that *all* of the quantitative data, on which the correlational analyses were performed, originated with the same respondent, using the same method of reporting (i.e. questionnaire). Thus, in spite of the small sample, significant correlations may have resulted/been inflated due to shared method variance.

Future research should attempt to overcome these limitations. By using alternative sampling and data collection methods, future work might ensure a larger, more representative sample. In addition, gathering reports from other informants and using other types of assessments would be helpful in reducing the likelihood of method variance.

Dissemination

Some of the above findings were presented at Ryerson's Access Symposium in February 2017, Ryerson University's Annual Learning and Teaching Conference (May 2017), and the CAUCE annual conference (May 2017).

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