

The Impact of Mentoring on EOP's Residential Bridge Program

CSUN Bridge Program

<http://www.csun.edu/eop/htdocs/bridge.html>

At CSUN in recent years, the most important arena for implementing the FMP's new approach to mentoring has been the EOP Bridge Residential Program. The Bridge Program has served as a testing ground for organizing principles of "mentoring on the run," creating a "community of mentors," and promoting a "culture of mentoring" on our campus. The Residential Bridge Program serves CSUN's most at-risk student population: special admit, underprepared low-income freshmen, most of whom are the first generation in their families to attend college. Mentoring for this group of students is especially crucial for their academic achievement and personal advancement. Over the past six years, EOP Director José Luis Vargas has introduced a series of changes in the Bridge Program to increase students' rates of retention and persistence to graduation. Taken together, these changes represent a critical paradigm shift in the approach taken by one unit in the university's Academic Affairs division to work with underprepared freshmen. Central to this paradigm shift is the concept of mentoring; in other words, mentoring has become the central organizing strategy within the Bridge Residential Program.

The Bridge Program is a component of EOP; all Bridge students are admitted to CSUN through EOP, and in the case of the Bridge Residential Program, students are required to participate in order to enter the university in the fall. Through Bridge, students receive not only academic instruction (i.e., two classes during a six-week summer session) but also academic advisement, tutoring, and life management advisement. The program's academic component is designed to assist underprepared freshmen gain basic developmental skills in reading, writing, and study techniques as well as an increased pride in their ethnic identity and an understanding of the diversity of their fellow students. Faculty for Bridge are selected by EOP from the university's three Ethnic Studies departments: Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Pan African Studies. During the past 18 years, the Bridge Program has assisted nearly 3,500 students, many of whom went on to pursue either graduate studies or a professional career path.

Starting in 1996, EOP Director José Luis Vargas began to introduce a series of changes in the Bridge Residential Program that represent a crucial paradigm shift in CSUN's approach toward working with underprepared freshmen. Building on the existing strengths of the program, notably the naturally-occurring mentoring activities that Bridge faculty and support staff forge with students in the course of the summer program, he transformed all aspects of Bridge including the student admissions process, staff and faculty training, classroom pedagogy, and student advisement. The following points represent the main elements of the Bridge paradigm shift:

- *The redefinition of the Bridge student population as "high potential" rather than "high risk.* This redefinition is not simply a wording change but has influenced the way that

faculty and support staff view students and the way that students in the program view themselves. Rather than seeing Bridge as a “remedial” program for students at risk of failing in the university, all participants (faculty, administrators, Bridge support staff, and the students themselves) now define Bridge as a challenge and an opportunity that enable highly motivated but underprepared students master basic academic skills to succeed in the University.

- *The creation of a Bridge summer commuter program as a companion to the existing residential program.* The commuter program, launched in 1998, now serves 150-160 entering freshmen and is designed to provide six units of college credit and a transition into university life. The commuter program addresses the needs of underprepared freshmen who based on EPT and ELM scores are at a slightly higher skills level than their Bridge residential counterparts. Creation of the commuter program has enabled EOP to more than double the number of entering freshmen served by its transitional summer program.
- *The creation of learning communities and student cohorts during the summer programs and the continuation of these cohorts during the students' first three semesters in the university.* During the summer residential and commuter programs, Bridge faculty and support staff assist students in forming learning communities and cohorts and encourage students to maintain these cohorts as part of their strategy for academic success in their critical first three semesters at CSUN.
- *The reorganization of Bridge and EOP admissions procedures to emphasize a holistic and deliberative approach.* Currently, all Bridge students and all EOP students undergo a rigorous admissions process which includes not only completing written forms but also taking part in group and/or individual interviews conducted by EOP staff. Bridge students, in particular, have the understanding that their selection to participate in the summer program is based on demonstrating their motivation and “high potential” to become successful college students. This new admissions procedure has yielded impressive results; in contrast to earlier years, Bridge faculty now remark that on the first day of instruction students are ready for work and motivated to raise their basic skills in reading, writing, and other areas of academic deficiencies.
- *The training of Bridge support staff for the residential program — specifically, tutors, resident advisors, and student assistants — as peer mentors.* Traditionally for the Bridge Residential Program, EOP has hired upper-division students as support staff as tutors, resident advisors, and office assistants. Each of these categories of student workers has specific responsibilities in the Bridge Program; however, their common responsibility is to help entering students understand how to succeed in the university. Starting from the summer of 1998, Bridge training began to emphasize this common responsibility and to promote the importance of teamwork among staff. Thus, the work of all student workers in the program is now conceptualized in terms of peer mentoring, and each tutor, resident advisor and student assistant is trained in recognizing each interaction with a Bridge student as an opportunity for mentoring.
- *The emphasis on the common function of mentoring in order to overcome the traditional separation among Bridge personnel with responsibilities for different*

functions of the program: academics, advisement, and residential life. Traditionally within universities, there are barriers between personnel handling different functions, such as faculty teaching classes, student affairs officers handling advisement, tutors helping students with coursework, and resident advisors working with students in dorms. At times, these barriers can result in sharp conflicts. Training of personnel in Bridge now emphasizes the common function of mentoring as a way to overcome these traditional institutional barriers. By emphasizing mentoring, Bridge administrators have not only been able to minimize conflicts but also have demonstrated how forming a “community of mentors” and promoting a “culture of mentoring” can work in practice to raise student achievement.

- *The creation of integrated and linked curriculum.* Currently, residential and commuter Bridge students take two summer classes: an 097 Developmental Reading class and University 100 (the Freshmen Seminar) for residential students, and an 097 Developmental Reading class or 098 Developmental Writing class and University 100 for commuter students. Both sets of classes are taught by the same instructor, and each faculty member is encouraged to link and integrate subject matter rather than teaching materials as two separate courses. By having faculty link and integrate subject matter from different classes, EOP administrators are encouraging faculty to serve as role models for Bridge students who must similarly find ways to link subject matter from different classes they take at the university.
- *An emphasis on a pedagogical approach for underprepared freshmen that is rigorous and challenging as well as developmental and holistic while also addressing ethics and issues of diversity.* Bridge faculty are encouraged to take a rigorous developmental teaching approach that promotes basic skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking while at the same time assisting students to understand their choices and responsibilities as young adults and to appreciate diversity in the university and in the broader society.
- *The evolution of the Bridge Program from simply a summer program into a longer-term “three-semester” program.* Starting from the summer of 2001, EOP reorganized “Summer” Residential Bridge into a “three-semester” Bridge — a summer six-week program followed by two semesters of academic work in GE classes provided by the University’s three Ethnic Studies departments. For at least one class in the fall and spring semesters following their summer classes, students will remain together as a cohort with their same instructor. This arrangement enables faculty to implement a developmental teaching approach spread across “three semesters” (the summer program plus fall and spring semesters).
- *Creation of a “Bridge Student Contract” for students’ first three semesters at CSUN.* Students who are admitted into the Bridge Residential Program for the summer are required to sign a “Bridge Student Contract.” This contract stipulates academic requirements for the program, students’ willingness to follow rules and procedures for the residential summer program, and mandatory student participation in advisement, tutoring and other EOP services. In addition, the contract requires students to remain undeclared majors for their first three semesters to enable them to complete remedial courses and make headway on GE requirements and to not join a club or organization during that time period.

- *Systematic follow-up with and ongoing assessment of Bridge students for at least one academic year following the summer program.* In conjunction with the longer-term academic approach for Bridge instruction described above, EOP staff beginning in the 2001/2002 academic year systematically monitored students’ progress for the critical two semesters following the summer program. EOP staff also provided support services for students, including tutoring, academic advisement, and other forms of peer mentoring.

The 2001-2002 academic year marked the first year of implementation of the “three-semester” model for Residential Bridge with clusters of students staying together as learning cohorts with the same instructor for two “linked” classes in the summer, followed by one class each in fall and spring semesters. During the fall and spring semesters, EOP Central Administration provided support services to students, such as tutoring and peer academic advisement. These support services were defined as essential not only for ensuring students’ academic success but also for continuing to surround students with a “community of mentors” and a “culture of mentoring.”

Preliminary assessments by EOP staff of the paradigm shift in the Bridge Residential Program are very encouraging, especially on the measure of academic progress for freshmen requiring remediation. Specifically, Julie Williams, EOP admissions coordinator and assessment specialist, reported significant academic progress of students in recent years. Using the 1997 Bridge cohort as a baseline, she found the Bridge 1999 and Bridge 2001 cohorts showed increases in numbers of students completing remediation. The summer of 1997 marked the beginning of changes in the organization of the Residential Bridge Program. In 1997, EOP Director José Luis Vargas asked faculty and staff to begin seeing students as “high potential” as opposed to “high risk.” Also in 1997, Dr. Gordon Nakagawa helped to coordinate training workshops for Bridge staff and introduced the concept of mentoring into these workshops.

The table below compares completion rates in developmental reading-writing and math for students in the three cohorts after completion of the six-week Bridge Program and the following fall and spring semesters. In addition, the comparison is extended to examine completion rates for remediation for students after one additional summer session.

Remediation Completion Rates for Bridge Residential Students (after 6-week Summer Bridge and fall and spring semesters)				
Cohort	Reading- Writing	Math	Both	After One Additional Summer
1997 (121 students)	89 (74%)	29 (24%)	25 (21%)	25 (21%)
1999 (107 students)	99 (93%)	60 (56%)	60 (56%)	64 (60%)
2001 (102 students)	99 (97%)	61 (60%)	61 (60%)	76 (75%)

According to Julie Williams, the dramatic improvement in completion rates in 1999 can be attributed to both changes made in the Bridge Program (i.e., the paradigm shift) and associated changes related to Executive Order 665 (EO 665) on remediation. Due to implementation of EO 665, EOP staff constantly explained to students the impact of the new policy on their future as students. EOP Central Administration also created special tutorial services in math and developmental reading-writing to help the students to do well academically. These changes, though, were part of the larger paradigm shift occurring in the Bridge Program. For Residential Bridge, the summer of 1999 marked by beginning of having students in two “linked” classes during the six-week summer session taught by the same professor. EOP Central Administration also organized the 1999 Residential Bridge cohort into “learning communities” that stayed together for select classes during fall and spring semesters.

The Residential Bridge 2001 cohort was the first cohort to remain together as “learning communities” with their professors from the summer for one class each in the fall and spring semesters. In addition, the 2001 cohort was the first cohort to experience all aspects of the new Bridge paradigm: i.e., the holistic and deliberative admissions process, training in mentoring for faculty, staff and peer mentors; two “linked” classes during the summer session; and ongoing contact and advisement by EOP staff.

For the Bridge 2001 cohort, the data collected by Julie Williams show a dramatic increase in numbers of students completing remediation in the “three semester model” plus “one additional summer.” For this cohort, 76% of students had completed all remediation in this time period. According to Julie Williams, this completion rate is a reflection of the impact of the Bridge paradigm shift on students’ academic success. EOP will continue to assess data from the Bridge Program.

As described earlier, the paradigm shift for the Bridge Program represents an important change in EOP’s work with low-income, underprepared freshmen, most of whom are the first generation in their families to attend college. Underlying this paradigm shift is the infusion of mentoring in all aspects of the Bridge Program — from program definition to implementation, from staff training to program assessment, and from academic instruction to the provision of support services. For example, the concept of mentoring now is the central theme in the one-week training session provided to all Bridge staff prior to the beginning of the summer program. In addition, the concept of mentoring underlies the training of EOP staff participating in the Bridge admissions process, especially for their interviews of prospective Bridge students. Finally, the concept of mentoring has become infused in the daily interactions of faculty and support staff with students. In short, entering freshmen as a result of participating in the summer programs begin to see Bridge faculty, EOP staff, and peer advisors and tutors as not simply teachers and helpers but as “trusted allies, guides, and advocates” who facilitate the liberation of their minds and their empowerment as young adults. Thus, the paradigm shift initiated in the Bridge Program in recent years — and the central role of mentoring in this paradigm shift — can potentially serve as a valuable model for other units in the University that are grappling with the challenge of working with an increasingly diverse but underprepared freshman population.