

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Gordon, R., Hood, D., Stewart, P., & Williams, D. (2021). EOF Advantage: Examining the Effects of a Summer Bridge Program as Part of a Comprehensive Strategy to Support First Generation Black Male Students. *Journal of Access, Retention, and Inclusion in Higher Education*, 4(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/jarihe/vol4/iss1/4>

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**EOF Advantage: Examining the Effects of a Summer Bridge Program as Part of a Comprehensive Strategy to Support First Generation Black Male Students**

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the participants' perception of how a program that provided college access and support to low-income students shaped their college experience and their belief in their ability to persist until graduation. The support provided by the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program at Montclair State University, begins with mandatory participation in a Summer Bridge Program called the EOF Summer Academy. Analysis of 5 semi-structured focus group interviews with Black, male First-Generation college students highlighted three themes: 1) the importance of the Summer Academy in ensuring academic preparedness and formation of peer support networks, 2) the establishment of fictive kin relationships which provided the type of family support that assisted participants prior to their college acceptance, 3) the importance of mentoring relationships as a protective factor to increase retention. This work has implications for the development of comprehensive support services for Black male first generation college students.

Black males, many of whom are first generation college students, have faced myriad challenges related to educational attainment. Some of those challenges occur prior to college and may include issues related to their social, physical, or educational environments (Bryan, 2017; Strayhorn 2012). Some, which may include a variety of microaggressions and systemic issues (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Nadal et al., 2014), become evident during the college experience. Still other challenges occur during the transition between their precollege and college experiences (Grace-Odeleye, & Santiago, 2019; Slade et al., 2015). As colleges and universities become increasingly interested in exploring and providing resources to increase retention rates among this vulnerable population, more attention is being focused on that transition. This qualitative study explored the participants' perception of how a program that provided college

access and support to low-income students shaped their college experience and their belief in their ability to persist until graduation.

### Literature Review

With a graduation rate of 36%, Black males are the group least likely to complete a college/university degree (NCES, 2016; Owens et al., 2010). Issues that influence those graduation rates begin early in the educational process with societal discrimination which influences access to high quality K-12 curricula and resources that would prepare them for college. Black males are often perceived as troublemakers and subject to more suspensions and expulsions than any other race or gender group during their K-12 educational experience. (Howard et al., 2012). Bryan (2017) reported on teacher observations where a Black male student was publicly reprimanded for an action similar to that of a White male student who received no such reprimand. These instances can lead to doubt related to one's ability to achieve academically and about one's place in any educational space (Bryan; 2017; Scott et al., 2013). Academic success in high school is a predictor for academic preparedness and success in college (Bir & Myrick, 2015) and the lack of sense of belonging has also been documented as a determinant to success in college related to Black males (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Strayhorn 2012).

Those Black male students who overcome K-12 educational challenges are often the first in their families to enter college. First generation college students (FGS) are defined as students who are the first in their family to attend college (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017; Bui & Rush, 2016). FGS are often students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Lundeborg et al., 2007). They tend to leave colleges and universities prior to degree attainment at much higher rates than their non FGS counterparts (Brooms, 2018). FGS typically lack the academic preparedness which can lead to lower self-esteem in college and other stressors (Gibbons, 2018; Owens et al., 2010). Black males who are FGS experience a multitude of issues related to systemic racism and low expectations. Black males in college face microaggressions which lead to lower levels of educational engagement and limit an individual's sense of belonging (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Nadal et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2011; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). These students also grapple with the need to navigate a new environment with limited financial resources and limited guidance specific to their needs.

Existing research explores the influence of family relationships on the retention/academic success of Black male students. Contrary to stereotypes, recent research on Black families and education has found that relationship to be positive in several ways (Goings et al., 2015). For Black male students, the importance of family and community ties and interaction has been highlighted. Certain aspects of those ties have and can be linked to the existing family systems connected to or rooted in their cultural upbringing (Hunter et al., 2019) and African heritage (McLoyd et al., 2005). As noted in McLoyd et al. (2005) contemporary manifestation of this strong sense of community is illuminated in strong kinship and a collective notion of similar experiences. This definition of kinship does not require a blood or marital tie (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) but those who are accepted as members are accorded the rights and

responsibilities of family members (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993). Although maintaining family relations can be viewed as a source of strain in Western societies, some research suggests that familial relationships may also act as a protective factor for individuals struggling with the adjustment to higher education (Capannola & Johnson, 2020). Extended kin oftentimes provide connections and resources resulting in positive experiences for adolescents in African American communities (Burton and Jarret, 2000). There is some evidence that family ties may provide some source of resilience for FGS (Guiffrida, 2005; Palmer, et al.,2011; Simmons, 2010). In applying this concept in studying Black males, it is important to understand how key personnel or networks may serve as a protective, kin-like element for FGS. As such, by understanding the cultural background of FGS, universities can implement programs that mimic these cultural norms to increase persistence and academic success.

There is evidence that certain practices and interventions can combat the high rates of attrition among black, male FGS. Wang (2012) noted in a study of campus adaptation for FGS, that mentorship impacted their approach to being a college student, their academic success, and how they navigated the challenges faced. However, programmatic initiatives such as Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs which enhance academic preparedness and overall support of Black males at colleges and Universities (Brooms, 2019; Clark & Brooms; 2019; Barker & Avery, 2012) are more widely utilized to support Black males. These programs are typically implemented at Predominantly White Institutions and have proven to raise retention and graduation rates for Black males (Barker & Avery, 2012. Brooms (2019) conducted a study on 63 Black males and discovered significant evidence of the importance of Black male students building communities among themselves which increased their sense of belonging and reduced students' feelings of isolation. However, very little literature focuses on how these supportive programs influence participants holistically, not just from an academic rigor standpoint.

Higher Education Institutions have begun to take a proactive approach to the issues of attrition among their vulnerable populations, including Black male FGS. For some, this comes in the form of Summer Bridge Programs (SBP). SBPs are designed to ease the transition from high school to college and are particularly useful for students from underrepresented populations and/or FGS as both groups are prone to high rates of attrition (Grace-Odeleye, & Santiago, 2019; Slade et al., 2015). Many of these programs focus on the development of academic skills to prepare students for college rigor (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Strayhorn 2011). Literature continues to highlight the lack of academic preparedness of college students specifically Black and Brown students from low-income communities (Brooms, 2019; Strayhorn, 2011). In addition, these programs provide support for students through mentoring, counseling, peer support/relationships, as well as professional relationships which garner trust from participants (Kallison & Stader, 2012).

### **Study**

This qualitative study explores the participants' perception of the ways in which the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program which begins with the EOF Summer Academy

shaped their college experience and their belief in their ability to persist until graduation. The questions which will guide this study are:

1. What is the impact of the EOF program on your college experience?
2. What support did the EOF Program provide you?

### **Study Context**

This study examines a SBP, the EOF Summer Academy, that operates as part of the Educational Opportunity Fund Program at Montclair State University (MSU). The EOF Program is a state-funded program in New Jersey which provides college access and support to low-income students (Turner, 2020). Founded in 1968, the program currently operates at 42 colleges and universities in New Jersey and has been successfully in supporting low-income students from underrepresented populations through state grants, summer bridge programs, and academic and social supports (Turner, 2020; State of New Jersey, 2013). Each program is unique to its institution and aligns with the goals and mission of that institution, while maintaining its foundation in supportive services for its student population. The EOF state program is one of the state's oldest programs supporting low-income students (State of New Jersey, 2013), but little research explores its effects on the students in the programs and more specifically Black males in the program.

The study was conducted at a Public Institution in northern New Jersey with a population of 16,000 undergraduate students (Campus Facts, 2019). "As of fall 2020, the population of students attending the university included: 43% White, 30% Hispanic, 13% African American/Black, and 7% Asian, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and 3% two or more races, and 3% unknown". However, students of color collectively are the majority population. The University has been designated as a Minority Serving and Hispanic Serving Institution and 44% of its student population is Pell eligible (Campus Facts, 2020).

The EOF Summer Academy is an integral part of the overall EOF program as it begins the students' transition to college level academic expectations and campus life, while introducing them to the varied resources of the EOF program at MSU. The Summer Academy is a five-week residential program where incoming EOF freshmen live on campus and take 2 college level courses (Montclair EOF, 2021). The program is geared toward preparing students for the academic rigor of college while building community among the scholars through community service projects, weekly motivational assemblies, campus partner presentations, group and individual counseling, structured study hall and tutoring services, and a graduation ceremony (Montclair EOF, 2021). Throughout their undergraduate experience, they are still required to meet with their EOF counselors and adhere to the programmatic initiatives of the EOF program (Montclair EOF, 2021). The EOF program also provides career enrichment, leadership and development, financial literacy, co-curricular opportunities, and academic enrichment throughout the students' undergraduate career (Montclair EOF, 2021).

## Methodology

### Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative Methodology was selected for this study since the aim was to understand the lived experiences of the participants (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data was collected using 5 focus groups with a total of 24 participants. The focus groups averaged 35-45 minutes with 2 facilitators per focus group. The criteria for the participants were that they be FGS, defined as not having parents attended and/or finished college (Gibbons et al., 2019) and self-identify as Black males. All of the participants of the study were students involved in the EOF program. At the time of the study, all participants were full-time students at the University. Their class standing varied from freshman to senior and the age range was 18-26. The semi-structured interview protocol contained questions that focused on the participants' pre-college experiences and current experiences in college. The interviews and original transcriptions were completed through an application called *Otter* which transcribes and records simultaneously. The first author reviewed the *Otter* transcriptions while listening to audio of interviews to ensure the data was transcribed accurately. The data was analyzed by using triangulation through notetaking briefly during the interviews, relistening to the transcripts, re-reading the transcripts, and the constant comparative method comparing pieces of data against each other creating open coding which led to axial coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Findings

The three major themes which emerged from the data with respect to Black male FGS' experiences at a PWI and their engagement with the EOF program were: (1) Academic and social preparedness from the summer program (2) EOF as extended family; (3) Support and Mentorship. Each theme illuminated the importance of the Summer Academy as a bridge between pre-college life and the EOF program which provided the support necessary for retention and graduation.

#### Academic and Social Preparedness from the Summer Program

In reflecting on their experiences with the EOF program in general and the Summer Academy in particular, the participants spoke candidly about their lack of college preparedness. Many of the participants alluded to not being academically prepared for the rigor of college and to their feelings of isolation in settings that focused on academics. However, this University's SBP, *The EOF Summer Academy*, has among its goals, the addressing of such issues

Though most of the participants spoke of the importance of the program, Bruce, Brian, and Frank's words capture the essence of the EOF Summer Academy and how it influenced their ability to move forward in the college experience. They discussed the impact EOF had on their ability to believe they could push past their struggles in college. Bruce said:

If I didn't go through EOF in the summer I would've failed every class and dropped out. In the summer I took writing and speech. I wrote my first essay, and the professor was like I don't know what this is. EOF really woke me up and got me used to campus life. Without EOF I would've come to school without having any support.

Brian described the experience in greater detail with emphasis on how the Bridge program set the stage for the supports available in the overall EOF program:

EOF is a six-week summer program that motivates you, gives you counselors It's important because you have something to fall back on if you're falling behind. If I didn't have EOF I wouldn't know who to talk to if I was falling back I have a support system that's always there for me.

Frank, like Bruce, spoke in terms of waking up not just to the rigors of college but to the reality that they could succeed:

EOF woke me up too. Coming in I was going to quit the second week of the summer program, but I had a talk with the EOF counselors, they worked with me to keep me on track.

Each participant detailed the specifics of how EOF supported the beginning of their journey. Frank alluded to wanting to quit during the Summer Academy, Brian highlighted how he was falling behind but was able to lean on EOF, and Bruce was more descriptive in how he was not academically prepared for the rigor of college. They collectively spoke of EOF as being their backbone when they needed to believe in their abilities, and how they prepared them for what lay ahead.

### **EOF as Extended Family**

One theme that resonated among these participants was the idea of EOF as family. The participants focused on the importance of their EOF family and what that meant for them. A variety of family related roles and traditions were ascribed to EOF. They included: the use of family centered labels as a form of tradition and respect, seeking advice and comfort as one would from family members, using labels such as "big brothers/sisters", making the effort to hold students accountable while teaching them to be accountable for themselves (parental). A number of participants actually used the term family when asked about support systems. Ricky, for example said:

EOF is like extended family for me. The one thing I really appreciate is it's good to see people like me that wanted to graduate and make it. At my high school everyone that looked like me didn't do anything in their classes. I was in a lot of advance classes. I was the only black person. I never had classes with my friends. The EOF summer was the first time I had a lot of black people and Spanish people that wanted to work hard and that's what I appreciate about it.

Michael and Edward were even more detailed as they expressed the feeling of their EOF compatriots. Michael refers to the specific tradition of "speaking" which is, in the Black community an expectation for those identified as family:

One thing I like about EOF, they say EOF is family, at first, I didn't believe it but when the semester first started, I see it. Everyone in EOF *speaks* and the people I met are friends. EOF me getting through a lot of situations.

Edward related to a feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood among those in the program.

Being here where I connect with my advisors or people on campus it's different for me. I've never had anyone being a big brother or big sister so here it felt different, and I appreciate it. I feel like I have a family here where everything flows. I can talk about my personal stuff.

This sense of family was also apparent as the participants gathered for the focus groups, as it was not unusual to see the participants greet each other with handshakes that appeared to be created to signify alliance and respect for one another and verbal greetings that contained the word *brother*.

Several of the participants acknowledged that they were not officially part of the EOF program but that they had been *adopted* by the program. Some had been introduced to the program by EOF students and some had heard about it from other sources, but all came to feel as if they belonged. Scott said "I'm not EOF. I'm adopted EOF". Wayne was particularly eloquent in his description:

Since I was cordial with EOF they adopted me even though I'm not a part of EOF. That's one thing I wish I could take back. I wish I applied. The way they adopt students you are always in their office and they are helping you, but you are not an EOF student they will take you in and support you.

Regardless if it was referred to as *extended family*, *adopted family*, or just *family*, the participants clearly reacted to the staff and students in the EOF program as family.

### **Support and Mentorship**

The participants spoke of the support and mentorship they received as members of the EOF program. They spoke of the EOF staff specifically and how they provided a holistic experience with respect to supportive mentorship. Support was provided in academic, social, and emotional contexts. The following participants stressed ways in which their mentor relationships included academic concerns but were not limited to those concerns.

Joseph began with a general statement about the support offered:

It's always good to come and talk to an EOF counselor because I have personal problems, nothing school related I just need someone to talk to sometimes. That helps sometimes when you come to EOF I can just talk to my counselor even though I'm not struggling academically, someone you can relate to.

Bruce provided a more explicit statement about that support:

Mr. Q is amazing, I go to him whenever I'm stuck in any educational issues, but I do go to him for support in life. I really look up to them, but I take what they do seriously. I want to be a positive image like them to someone.

Bruce not only detailed his mentor's willingness to move beyond the academic but also sees a *Mr. Q* role for himself in the life of another person.

Scott spoke of his mentors being and providing role models, as well as supporting positive interactions among peers:

The EOF Counselors are my mentors; I can go to them anytime they are always helpful. I have friends in Male Leadership Academy, which is an organization from the EOF

program designed to keep males on a good path. We have role models to help keep us on the right path.

Robert echoed Scott and Bruce's thoughts about EOF's mentoring activities as efforts to promote positive growth:

The EOF office is where I can go; I can go to Mr. Q's office or talk to Ms. X about my problems and get advice. This year my support helped me set goals for myself and try to become a better person.

These participants each provided examples of a vision of mentoring that stresses and supports academic success by also supporting personal growth.

### Discussion

#### Bridge Program Links

The purpose of a SBP and of programs such as EOF is to ease the social and/or academic transition of underprepared students to college and to support those students once that initial transition is complete. The EOF Summer Academy served as the SBP program for these participants, all of whom were attached to the EOF program at this university. These participants were clear in their articulation of the importance of the Summer Academy since it introduced them to skills needed to meet the academic requirements of a college curriculum and provided access to the peers and mentors who would form the core of their on-campus support network. Though they were asked no questions specific to the summer program, a significant number of the participants realized the value and importance of the summer program and many participants credited the structure of the program to their successful navigation of the college experience. They also highlighted the continued support they received from EOF and even when their needs were not academic. The participants detailed how EOF provided emotional, social, and moral support which was essential for their progression in college.

#### EOF as family

Previous research validated the influence of family support on the success of FGS (Goings et al., 2015). This support has been implicated in the development of resilience and those family connections provided the motivation and guidance that allowed students to gain entry to college when the public educational system did not do so. It is important to note that those of African descent have traditionally adopted definitions of family that include both nuclear and extended family members as active and essential members of the unit. The activities of those members might include instrumental as well as social support (Cross et al., 2018.) Those family systems often extend to incorporate individuals, referred to as fictive kin, who are not related by blood, marriage, or adoption but who assume the roles of family (Spruill, et al., 2014). The type of fictive kin system at work for these participants is one where the network is built entirely from non-blood related individuals (Chatters et al., 1994). The spontaneous description of EOF as *family* by these participants is indicative of such extension. This *family* connection was particularly important as it provided access to the support of peers (siblings) who had similar experiences and challenges both before and during the transition to and progression through college. Those peers also served as a support group and safe space after the Summer program as

the participants moved into the general population of predominantly White university students. These peer relationships were supported by the EOF program as were intergenerational supportive relationships between the EOF students and EOF staff.

### **Mentorship**

Previous research highlighted the importance of mentorship relationships for Black males in college (Johnson et al., 2020; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Williams, 2017). These mentorship relationships have been instrumental in academic achievement and are connected to higher retention rates for Black males (Dahlvig, 2010; Brittian, Sy, & Stokes, 2009). Mentorship has proven to be a valuable commodity in supporting the Black males in the study. Being Black male FGS, mentorship has provided the tools to encourage this population to achieve in a multitude of ways in college. Furthermore, mentorship serves as a mediating protective factor among Black males (Bennet, 2020). For these participants an important feature of this mentorship was the willingness and ability of the mentors to move beyond academics. Based upon the responses of these participants it was apparent that this type of mentorship not only increased the chances of retention for these students but allowed them to think and see themselves occupying such a role for others in the future.

### **Implications**

This work has implications for the development of both SBPs and for programs that provide services subsequent to those programs. For these participants, a stand-alone bridge program would have been insufficient to support retention, graduation, or success after college. There is a need for consistent, coherent, and growth producing programs that span the college career of these Black male students. Those programs must also address the lives and life experiences of these students which would imply a need to hire staff who can relate to the students. The way in which these Black male students identified with EOF as a fictive kinship group, which is appropriate given their racial/cultural identity, would seem to indicate a need to be mindful of cultural issues in the development of support structure for these students.

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