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"You're young, intelligent, and beautiful": How Microaffirmations Inspire Summer Bridge Program Students to Persist

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Abstract

Research shows that Summer Bridge Programs (SBPs) are essential in supporting undergraduate students' first-year college transition experiences from underrepresented and historically marginalized backgrounds. A key component of SBPs is cultivating deeply supportive relationships participants establish with adults and peers on a college campus. The academic and social support participants receive from these relationships is beneficial and critical for navigating microaggressions they may experience on campus. However, how these affirming and deeply supportive relationships are formed within SBPs is an underexplored phenomenon in the literature. This qualitative study, focusing on the role of microaffirmations, describes and explores how a SBP cultivated an environment that enabled participants to develop supportive relationships to aid their first-year transition on a college campus. Findings indicate that racial microaffirmations in the form of personalized support from peer advisors and adults and cultivating confidence to engage academically and socially on campus were vital in assisting program participants with their first-year college transition. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: summer bridge programs, microaffirmations, college persistence, microaggressions

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With a unique transformative intent to address attrition and retention of underrepresented low-income and first-generation college students, Summer Bridge Programs (SBPs) stand out among transition programs (Kallison & Stader, 2012; Sablan, 2014). SBPs are tailored to enhance student study skills, provide access to academic resources on campus, and foster a socially and academically enriching environment. They are intentionally designed to ease the transition into college and boost retention and graduation rates (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; McCurrie, 2009; Sablan, 2014). Despite conflicting evidence, previous studies have shown that participation in SBPs has some impact on academic outcomes like GPA, retention rates, and the number of credits awarded (Cabrera et al., 2013; Slade et al., 2015; Smith & Clayton, 2021). The curriculum and social activities offered in SBPs are diverse, reflecting the program's unique objectives and outcomes. Most SBPs include activities that cover the academic and social aspects of college life (Kezar, 2000; McCurrie, 2009). The academic and social activities are designed to build academic self-efficacy and a sense of belonging. While programs vary in length, cost responsibility, and choice of participation, most programs provide tools and strategies that help underrepresented students navigate the collegiate environment (Slade et al., 2015).

SBPs are strategically designed to prepare students academically and socially for their first year of college by allowing them to enroll in enrichment and credit-bearing courses before their fall semester (Cabrera et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Turner et al., 2021). Usually, students participate in English and mathematics courses led by program-affiliated faculty as they satisfy general education requirements and are also important for student retention (Howard & Sharpe Jr., 2019; Slade et al., 2015; Wathington et al., 2011). However, some programs offer science courses like biology (Cooper et al., 2017; Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Howard & Sharpe Jr., 2019) that enhance students' academic self-efficacy. Grounded in theories of social and cultural capital, SBPs provide students with opportunities and resources to connect with advisors, faculty, staff, and other students across the campus community (Benson et al., 2023; Carter et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2021). This provides students of color, particularly underrepresented low-income and first-generation college students, with the opportunity to acclimate to campus and develop a sense of belonging (Baber, 2018; Benson et al., 2023; Cole et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019).

Historically, these programs were developed as college transition and support programming created to ease the matriculation process of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) students attending college at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Kendi, 2012). Summer bridge attendees began college with an eight-week summer program. Students are usually identified as ideal participants based on their BIPOC student status at their institution (e.g., racial identity, socioeconomic status, and parental educational background; Cabrera et al., 2013). The purpose of these programs is to

support retention and persistence and close a perceived gap in achievement between BIPOC students and their counterparts (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).

The academic and social support SBPs provide to incoming BIPOC students is vital to mitigating the harm and alienation microaggressions produce and any subsequent college transition challenges (Lee & Barnes, 2015). In addition to mitigating racial harm and supporting social and academic adjustment, SBPs provide a unique space for BIPOC student identities and lived experiences to be affirmed and validated by members of a campus community. These affirmations and validations have recently been called microaffirmations (Ellis et al., 2019). Microaffirmations is a body of scholarship that can further describe the supportive environment SBPs create to support the college transition experiences of BIPOC students. Studies have shown that participation in SBPs positively impacts the academic skills of BIPOC students, which increases the likelihood of retention (Cabrera et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Turner et al., 2021).

Microaffirmations are intentional or unintentional exchanges that convey inclusion, support, and appreciation to individuals or groups who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment (Powell et al., 2013; Rowe, 2008). In college settings, microaffirmations convey to BIPOC students that they are welcome, visible, and capable of striving academically and socially on campus (Ellis et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2013). These verbal and nonverbal acts have been found to affirm BIPOC students' value, integrity, and shared humanity (Ellis et al., 2019; Jones & Rolón-Dow, 2018; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020; Sue et al., 2019) and have been utilized as a framework to combat microaggressions and fuel persistence and resistance amongst BIPOC and low-income students (Ellis et al., 2019). Students, faculty, peers, and staff have been found to convey microaffirmations to BIPOC students (Ellis et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2013; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020). However, researchers have not explicitly explored if the concept of microaffirmations accurately explains how students, faculty, peers, and staff interact with students in diversity-related university initiatives.

Understanding how these microaffirmations occur in programmatic contexts like SBPs can provide colleges and universities with valuable knowledge about how to support incoming BIPOC and low-income students on campus. Thus, this study aims to explore the concept of microaffirmations in a SBP designed to assist BIPOC, low-income, or first-generation students with their transition to college. More specifically, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Do microaffirmations exist in a summer bridge program designed to assist students with their transition to college?
2. If present, what is the impact of microaffirmations on students' college experiences?

Discovering such knowledge would further underscore the need for colleges and universities to implement comprehensive strategies for creating environments that genuinely appreciate and support the identities and lived experiences of BIPOC students.

Literature Review

Research that explores student experiences within SBPs usually discusses its academic and social advantages for BIPOC students transitioning into colleges and universities (Gandara, 2002; Kezar, 2000; Strayhorn, 2011). As universities aim to increase student retention and persistence, understanding the factors that lead to their departure and success (Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1987) is often used as foundational literature to design program structure and initiatives (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Historically, these programs were created as more students from underrepresented backgrounds began entering college (Kezar, 2000). As literature expands to uplift students' social and academic experiences, scholarship has shown the impact of SBPs by providing students with academic support and positive affirmations needed to succeed (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; Turner et al., 2021).

Previous quantitative studies have shown conflicting results about the impact of SBPs on students' skills and psychosocial outcomes (Strayhorn, 2011; Tomasko et al., 2016). Strayhorn's (2011) study examining the effect of a SBP on academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic and social skills found that SBP participation did not significantly predict a student's sense of belonging or social skills. However, Tomasko et al.'s (2016) mixed-method study on bridge participation at Ohio State University and STEM retention for BIPOC students found that participation in a SBP increased students' sense of belonging and social self-efficacy at the university.

Despite these conflicting results, qualitative methods centering student voices have provided more insight into the social experiences of students participating in SBPs (Cooper et al., 2017; Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2021). Tichavakunda and Galan's (2020) qualitative case study on first-generation, urban high school graduates' summer experiences before starting college revealed that students felt SBPs were valuable to their social adjustment on campus. Students mentioned increased social capital through gaining experience on campus and establishing a network of peers, friends, and faculty/staff. For historically underrepresented students matriculating to PWIs, becoming familiar with the university atmosphere and establishing a network of individuals on campus creates an environment where students can thrive socially and academically. In a qualitative study assessing student experiences in a SBP, Dorimé-Williams and colleagues (2022) described the importance of relationship-building with faculty and staff. Their participants appreciated the opportunity to build relationships early and viewed this as an advantage going into their fall semester. When discussing interactions with peers, in both Turner et al. (2021) and Morgan et al. (2020), students had positive experiences with diverse representations. However, they saw conflicting images with program diversity and campus demographics.

The aforementioned research shows how SBPs enhance BIPOC students' academic and social experience during their transition to college. With early social connections to peers, faculty, and staff influencing a sense of belonging, SBPs are unique spaces that

may ultimately benefit participants as they transition into PWIs, thus leading to a need to explore these interactions more closely. To this end, exploring if microaffirmations are experienced among summer bridge participants on campus may be particularly useful in understanding how positive affirmation can create a sense of belonging among SBP participants (Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Mills, 2020; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020; Tichavakunda, 2021).

Conceptualizing Microaffirmations

As previously mentioned, microaffirmations broadly are intentional or unintentional encounters and messages that convey inclusion, support, and appreciation to individuals or groups who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment (Rowe, 2008). These exchanges were initially conceptualized by Rowe (2008) to reduce harmful and deficit-oriented (i.e., microaggressions) events in the workplace and increase worker productivity by acknowledging and leveraging people's strengths. Since Rowe's conceptualization, scholars and practitioners have sought to understand how microaffirmations build community and validate and dignify the lived experiences of persons who have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised in society (Solórzano & Huber, 2020).

Guided by principles and tenets of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016), microaffirmations are verbal and nonverbal acts experienced by BIPOC racial groups that account for their racialized reality or assist them in resisting the impact of racism on their everyday lives (Jones & Rolon-Dow, 2018). These verbal (i.e., language) and nonverbal acts (i.e., nods, smiles, embraces) are subtle strategies that BIPOC groups consciously engage in to affirm each other's value, integrity, and shared humanity (Solórzano et al., 2019). The affirming expressions inherent in microaffirmation encounters are intended to produce moments of shared cultural intimacy among BIPOC groups that (a) affirm their humanity and dignity in everyday life and (b) acknowledge their agency, resilience, and collective self-worth (Solórzano et al., 2019). These encounters are also expressions that pay homage to past and present efforts to acknowledge, address, or combat racism perpetuated in the functioning of institutions (Jones & Rolon-Dow, 2018). In addition, they help to create a language for the strategies and messages of affirmation and validation that racially BIPOC groups engage in and convey to each other to counter deficit-based narratives inherent in microaggressions (Solórzano et al., 2019). Thus, these messages and expressions are multidimensional and serve as a means for promoting counter-stories and counter-spaces to address and resist contextual and individual forms of racism and discrimination experienced in everyday life among people who have been historically marginalized by race, class, and gender (Lee & Harris, 2020).

Microaffirmations Impact on Undergraduate Students

Research studies indicate that microaffirmations profoundly influence the campus experiences of BIPOC and low-income students. Ellis and colleagues (2019) showed how microaffirmations could be captured in a taxonomy of overt and covert messages from faculty, staff, and peers that support the academic success, personal success, and identities of first-generation college students. Students described interpersonal encounters that provide feedback and scaffold resources to support students on campus (i.e., microsupport). Microsupports were experienced when participants believed they were personally supported by faculty. They received affirming messages from professors about their college experience on campus, and staff showed genuine interest in their college experience. Microcompliments were another type of microaffirmation students experienced from peers and family who praised and admired their academic accomplishments and social identity. Finally, microvalidations were encountered when peers, faculty, and staff acknowledged the unique challenges first-generation college students face on campus.

Additional research has found that Black and Latinx undergraduate students believed their identities and lived experiences were genuinely affirmed when community members and the institution intentionally made their struggles and accomplishments known, visible, and appreciated on campus, as well as felt being advocated for and supported when they experienced race-related stress (e.g., racial microaggressions; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020). Similarly, Ellis and colleagues (2024) identified that an academic program that leverages social and racial justice principles in its curriculum and pedagogy promotes microaffirmations for BIPOC students. Such spaces were found to cultivate and affirm participants' identities, lived experiences, and future goals. Students also reported that the microaffirmations they received from instructors enabled them to advance and grow in critical social justice knowledge about marginalized communities. Moreover, microaffirmations—whether received individually to promote institutional belonging or value the contributions of ethnic, cultural, and gender groups—have been found to promote academic self-efficacy, especially in science (Estrada et al., 2019). The microaffirmations experienced by students also positively influenced self-efficacy in Demetriou and colleagues' (2024) study. They discovered that microaffirmations gave undergraduate students the confidence to improve their performance in academic coursework and persevere through educational and personal difficulties.

Although evidence indicates that microaffirmations contribute to nonacademic outcomes such as academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging, more empirical evidence is needed to understand how these encounters occur in college transition programs such as SBPs in aiding the college transition experiences of BIPOC and low-income students (Kornbluh et al., 2021; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2020). Thus, given the vital role of microaffirmations in supporting the undergraduate experiences of BIPOC and low-income students, exploring how the identities and lived experiences of racially BIPOC students are uplifted by their participation in an SBP is critical. We use microaffirmations as a theoretical framework to examine positive relationships experienced by summer bridge participants. Our study

uplifts positive experiences during SBPs by focusing on how students describe the subtle positive acts and gestures that lead to positive and foundational social experiences. Understanding how SBPs promote microaffirmations may be vital in identifying key events and experiences that promote their sense of connection to a campus community and decisions to continue pursuing their undergraduate degree despite encountering academic and social challenges.

Methods and Data Analysis

The data presented here comes from a larger qualitative study that utilized case study methodology (Merriam, 2009) exploring SBP alumni's recalled experiences at a large 4-year Research I, PWI in the Midwest region of the United States. The previous study highlighted the long-term influence of programmatic support structures and the connection to students' navigation of their undergraduate program. The case study approach allowed participants to make sense of their experiences in the SBP and reflect on memorable influences on their lives within years of participation (Merriam, 2009). We chose to have participants recall their experiences rather than interviewing students in SBP to understand if their experiences impacted the totality of their academic career. As institutions become more strategic with opportunities provided to students, it is important to decipher the ways programs can influence retention beyond their duration. For this paper we used a subset of data to examine the ways that the participants were affirmed academically and socially during and immediately after their SBP participation. Exploring their initial affirming interactions with faculty, staff, and peers demonstrated the ways that their participation in the program influenced a positive sense of belonging and self-efficacy leading to a successful transition to college.

Site

The PWI has over 40,000 undergraduate students and approximately 6,000 first-year students. The majority of the students are White (69.3%), followed by Asian (13%), Black (4%), Latino/a (4%), and Native American (0.3%). The 7-week living-learning SBP is one of several programs designed to assist high achieving underrepresented students transition into the university. The mission/goals of the program are to strengthen academic skills through foundational courses, provide personalized advising and instruction, acclimate students to the university's academic rigor, establish a supportive and diverse environment, shape students' personal and social adjustment to the campus environment, and expose students to campus resources. Students enrolled in the SBP take 8–9 credit-bearing courses in English, writing, math, and a first-year reading seminar, which is considered a full summer course load at the university. All credits taken apply to students' four-year degree requirements. Each student is assigned to an academic advisor in the SBP who serves as their assigned advisor for the duration of their academic career.

Participants and Recruitment

Given our focus on the long-term influence of a SBP, data focused on participants who had transitioned through the program and college within a 10-year period. Participants included students who identified as program alumni who had participated within a three-year period between 2008 and 2010, graduated from the university by 2016, and maintained at least a 2.5 GPA. They were recruited through a listserv provided by the summer program director. A list of students who participated in the SBP between 2008 and 2010, graduated with at least a 2.5 GPA, and had been in communication with a summer SBP staff member within the last year was generated. Twenty-three students met those criteria, and all were invited to participate in the study. Seven students responded. Another recruitment email was administered to increase the pool of participants, generating one additional participant. Thus, eight students agreed to be interviewed—five identified as Black, two as Latinx, and one as White. The White student has been excluded from this study as this study focuses on microaffirmations, which are derived from ideologies embedded within racial microaggressions; further information about each participant is in Table 1. Data consisted of hour-long semi-structured interviews with follow-up phone calls. Participants were asked about their backgrounds and upbringings, the influences of the SBP on their academic and social experiences, and long-term interactions with other peers, faculty, and staff after the summer. Sample questions included: What influences contributed to your decision to go to college? How do you feel the SBP contributed, if at all, to your academic experience at the university? How do you feel the SBP contributed, if at all, to your social experience at the university?

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	SBC Cohort	Residency Status	Family Background	First Generation	Ethnic Group
Leslie	2008	In-State	Two Family household	No	African American
Samantha	2010	Out-State	Single parent household	Yes	African American
Alexis	2010	In-State	Two Family household	Yes	Latino
Brandon	2010	Out-State	Divorced	No	African American
David	2009	In-State	Two Family household	Yes	Latino
Maurice	2010	In-State	Single parent household	Yes	African American
Megan	2008	In-State	Single parent household	Yes	African American

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using an emergent, inductive process and then connected our study to the critical theoretical approach (i.e., microaffirmation) in Dedoose coding software (Carspecken, 1996/2014; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). First, we used a data reduction technique (Neumann, 2009) where we reread each interview, pulled the data specific to their summer bridge experiences, and then reanalyzed it. We compiled the participant transcripts and then asked an analytic question of the data (Neumann, 2009) to garner responses from alums describing how they were affirmed literally or figuratively by peer advisors, staff, and faculty during their summer experience. We coded the data for possible responses to the analytic question using in-vivo coding.

To study microaffirmations, all four authors initially reread the transcripts and had peer debriefings to discuss the participants' positive and negative experiences while attending the SBP. Afterward, all four authors reviewed and confirmed that students had positive experiences in the SBP. We then coded the data using Ellis' (2019) three types of microaffirmations, a deductive approach considering whether the data might relate to these subtle forms of support specific to students of color (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Moreover, Ellis' microaffirmation taxonomy was appropriate in the present study given that the majority of our sample identified as a first-generation college student. The deductive codes and definitions guiding this component of our data analysis are displayed in Table 2. It is important to note that the interview protocol did not explicitly ask questions about subtle instances of being affirmed by peers, staff, and faculty. However, through dialogue, the participants talked about times when they were affirmed and how these events shaped their college success. There may have been other experiences that students had that shaped the students' sense of belonging. However, we focused our analysis on the explicit recollections that emerged unsolicited. The transcripts were entered into Dedoose along with three codes that align with microaffirmations: *microsupport*, *microcompliment*, and *microvalidation*. The first and third authors reread all the transcripts and coded instances of microaffirmation. Once coded, the second and fourth authors discussed quotes entered under each code to determine the fit and look for nuances. Only quotes that all authors agreed upon remained as data.

We employed trustworthiness techniques (Carspecken, 1996/2014). As a team, we practiced peer debriefing meetings (Carspecken, 1996/2014) throughout the different analysis phases. During this peer debriefing process, we realized that we needed to identify and differentiate who the various types of support and affirmation emerged from to acquire a richer analysis. We discussed our positionalities, backgrounds, and theoretical experiences relative to data analysis and interpretation. All authors of this study research racial BIPOC students navigating higher education through different pipeline or pathway interventions, with one author's philosophy rooted in the affirming experiences students encounter on college campuses. Three authors identify as Black women and one identifies as a Black man. All authors have backgrounds working with SBPs in an administrative or research capacity, with two authors having transitioned

Table 2. Microaffirmation A Priori Codes and Definitions From Microaffirmation Literature

Code	Definition
Microcompliment	Subtle communications that imply praise, admiration, or respect (e.g., an instructor tells a student, "I am glad you are here").
Microsupport	Explicit, intentional communications that provide feedback, scaffolding, or resources intended to support an individual who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment (e.g., active listening and eye contact, expressing interest and attention, providing referrals or academic/personal strategies).
Microvalidation	Communications appreciating the experience, thoughts, or feelings of an individual who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment (e.g., verbally affirming student's feelings: "I see how frustrating this is" or "I appreciate how difficult this is").

through a summer program, allowing for a deeper analysis of the affirming experiences students shared within their program.

As a group, we understood the ways our experiences differentiated from the participants, dialoguing about our intentional experiences as program administrators and researchers who had transitioned to college with and without a SBP. We also discussed the different forms of microaffirmations to see if and how the participants' experiences counted as a microaffirmation during and after the program until we reached a consensus.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. Participants in this study were asked to recall their experiences in the SBP. Considering students attended the SBP years prior to the interview, they may have struggled to recall past events or unconsciously reshaped past experiences to align with their current beliefs and values. The study was also not designed to explore microaffirmations; therefore, the opportunity to explore deeper meaning of this phenomenon during the interview did not occur. Exploring these deeper meanings would have allowed participants to conceptualize their own understanding of microaffirmations as it pertains to their lived experiences. Having these participant conceptualizations would have enabled us to further contextualize the microaffirmations they experienced in relation to their engagement in SBP activities. Despite these limitations, we believe this study provides authentic perspectives that further our understanding of microaffirmations in an SBP.

Findings

Our findings reveal that microaffirmations are essential in understanding the positive undergraduate experiences of SBP participants. Two key themes emerged describing how microaffirmations were experienced by students in a SBP. Our first theme describes how microaffirmations were experienced through the genuine relationships students built with peer advisors, instructors, and staff. Our second theme describes how the relationships students built in an SBP positively reinforced their academic confidence and sense of belonging at the university. Below, we present data that demonstrate the presence of microaffirmations as they relate to assisting program participants with their transition to college and overall college experience.

Theme 1: Microaffirmations Through Personalized Support From Peer Advisors and Adults

Many participants readily recalled the heightened levels of support they felt while participating in the SBP. The program's structure as a living-learning community, where students take courses, engage in activities, and live together, enabled students to spend much time together and foster rich connections. This structure allowed students to engage with peer advisors within the classroom and residence hall, allowing relationships to form organically.

As out-of-state students, Brandon and Samantha found support from their peer advisors and other participants within the summer bridge community. Samantha established a group of friends and peer advisors whom she called her family. Brandon developed strong relationships with individuals from the SBP. He stated, "I had friends I could call on to just talk to." Peer advisors were especially helpful to Megan. She shared, "The peer advisors were good at acclimating me into the college environment." Megan continues, "Peer advisors stuck out a lot because I was like really close with one of the peer advisors, and she was like more like a friend than anything else, and they have such a big influence on whatever we did." Notably, upper-class students who served as peer advisors played a vital role for students in the program academically and socially. Academically, the participants appreciated having peer advisors, academic advisors, and instructors who were focused on them and could talk about courses above and beyond what course to select for the fall. Socially, participants appreciated being around other students and peer advisors who helped them build community before starting the fall semester. Knowing that peer advisors and other program participants were valuable resources contributed to Brandon's adjustment to campus. He shared:

> So, like I said, the best resource for me was just the people, the PAs [peer advisors], the advisors, the teachers, semi because they were more engaging, I will say more than some of the teachers that I had in the fall, especially in the big lecture classes. And also, just the kids, the kids who are a big resource that are my peers were a big resource because they knew what, everybody

> had that same common goal. So, everybody was working towards the same [goal] because everybody's running towards the same thing.

Brandon appreciated the support of the program's peer advisors, instructors, and academic advisors, which continued beyond the SBP. Brandon discovered that his fellow bridge participants were a significant resource in the fall term, especially in large lecture classes. Peer advisors were also critical for Samantha's first-year adjustment to campus as an out-of-state student who longed to find community within the program.

She described,

> Being that I was out of state and I didn't already have a community or people to fall back on, I was in dire need of trying to find that. So, that way, I knew that I wouldn't leave. So, I think I took more advantage of those relationships and tried to invest more in them because I knew how important they were to my survival at [the university] and, so I think that is why I purposely clung onto some of my PA's [peer advisors] and I think they clung on to me because they knew I needed that and we just genuinely got along. Yeah, and actually, I'm like their little sister, and like they really are family to me because of that.

Brandon and Samantha valued the mentorship of peer advisors and believed they understood their college transition experience and needs. This shared understanding enabled Brandon and Samantha to foster genuine relationships with peer advisors. These long-lasting relationships with peers, program faculty, and staff promoted a supportive environment, preventing Samantha from leaving the university. Samantha shared the impact of the relationships built within the program.

> I don't think I would have stayed at [the university] if I didn't if I wouldn't have gone through it, to be honest. Just because I built friendships that I still have to this day because of that program. Both of my best friends are results of that program. People that I call my family are results of that program who's kept me maintained and encouraged me while I've been in school. Yeah, I think that's the best takeaway that I could possibly ever have is that I left with a community that's still true to this day.

This passage shows that Samantha's relationships with peer advisors were authentic and beneficial to her academic success and psychological well-being. This connection with peer advisors carried on after the program. Living in the residence hall with program participants created access to a reliable resource. The participants' responses in this study revealed that the SBP provided a supportive environment for them to develop long-lasting friendships with other program participants (i.e., peer advisors).

Other participants described how peer advisors and instructors uplifted them through verbal affirmations, which nurtured their sense of self and were manifested through personalized support. These verbal expressions explicitly demonstrated how folks at the university appreciated their presence and empowered them to collectively embrace

the value and worth of the communities they represent. This was particularly evident for Alexis, who recalled witnessing other students being affirmed when misbehaving to impress others. Alexis explained,

> But it was nice that the PAs [peer advisors] were telling them like hey, why are you doing this? . . . You should value yourselves, you know. You're young, intelligent, beautiful young women . . . It was just nice to have that . . . to like have them telling you [these things].

Alexis appreciated the affirming comments and noted that the peer advisors extended support rather than reprimanding the students. This action increased her self-efficacy as she believed she, too, embodied those same characteristics. The peer advisors referring to her as intelligent and beautiful was their way of affirming her intersecting identities as a young woman and student. This showed Alexis that despite the conversation deriving from a negative encounter, they complimented and affirmed her instead of reprimanding her for perceived destructive behaviors. This subtle act of positivity impacted Alexis as she appreciated their affirmations and handling of her as a young woman beginning college. Maurice had great respect for his peer advisors. He described,

> They were people actually to look up to, you know. They were black women, you know, very intelligent, handled their business, and they basically, they kept it real . . . you know, in a lot of things, not just academic but a lot of, you know, the social ills, things of that nature and just how to survive and navigate being on campus. That's what I got from them.

Maurice's compliments about his peer advisors showcase his deep appreciation and regard for their presence within the program. Advisors and instructors were also vital in providing personalized support. Maurice discussed support from his academic advisor and math instructor. He shared, "My advisor was a great support system for me here . . . when things were challenging." Maurice described his math instructor as "very supportive." He often went to his math instructor for "math things," which was very beneficial as an economics major. Alexis also felt her academic advisor was a great resource, particularly when exploring majors and career options. She explained, "Even though I didn't come as frequently as I should have probably to see my advisor, I did come, and I did receive help, like in figuring out what I want to study." Leslie reported about the individualized attention and academic support she received from her math instructor. Her instructor made time for students in the program during the evenings and weekends, which made students feel cared for. Leslie shared,

> So, I feel like [my math instructor's] personality and her passion and her dedication towards whether it be math or the program in general just automatically played a role on other students cause you went into her class, and you felt like somebody truly cared for you. Like she took the time to do one-on-one tutoring, you know, tutoring in the evenings, tutoring on Saturdays, and she made her schedule fit your schedule so you could really succeed not only in the bridge program but at [the university] overall.

The support from friends within the program, instructors, staff, and peer advisors provided academic encouragement throughout her college career.

Theme 2: Cultivating Confidence to Engage Academically and Socially on Campus

Participants recalled how the program validated that they deserved to be at the university. Despite their racial-ethnic background, socioeconomic background, or test scores, the program welcomed them to campus and provided resources to help them achieve in the SBP and beyond. Program participants encountered microaffirmations when they felt confident academically and socially and a sense of belonging on campus. David shared that participating in the program "definitely just helped to make it feel comfortable." He continued, "I had some confidence to advance to regular year, and I knew the campus now, and so I left it just [feeling] more at ease." Participants such as Brandon established a strong academic foundation within the SBP, which allowed him to sustain a solid GPA throughout his college career. Brandon stated, "I learned what it was like to pursue a future at [the university] through the academics in Bridge." Leslie ended the program with a 3.5 GPA and was proud to overcome the feeling of intimidation and not being good enough to do well academically at the university. She explained, "It was pretty much a boost to get you acclimated with the campus, with the classes, with the workload."

Students also gained confidence in other areas of academic life on campus. For instance, Samantha believed she could confidently engage in her classes due to being in the SBP, sharing, "I think [the summer bridge program] just overall like prepared me to speak up in class." While reflecting on her summer experience, Leslie also felt more confident in her academic performance due to her participation in the SBP. Leslie said,

> So, I was really intimidated and kind of scared go to [the university] because looking on paper, in my opinion, I didn't qualify, so I feel like being a part of [summer] bridge really gave me that boost of confidence that I needed to be at this huge university and this huge predominantly White university as well as being the only Black kid in class and having to maneuver and figure out that and different identities. I feel like it was helpful in that sense.

Before entering the university, Leslie was not as confident in her ability to do well academically. After participating in the SBP, Leslie felt the program motivated her to do well as a Black student attending a PWI. Brandon felt more confident connecting with students who did not look like him.

> You know, we have different values [and] we have different experiences that brought us to this point, but we can all find a common goal to pursue together, and that helped me socially. I felt more comfortable actively seeking out those common goals within relationships with people outside of the

> Bridge program. So it just gave me a more secure sense of myself as far as my ability to develop relationships.

The development of multiple relationships aided the participants in cultivating a sense of belonging and connection to the university. David talks about how participating in the summer program helped him "feel a lot more connected to campus or just the people on campus. Who we get to share those experiences with, talk about sharing successes with, without the fear of being any type of stereotype or anything like that . . ." Leslie also discussed how the SBP helped with the social aspect of transitioning to college. She summed up her transition: "I got to learn the campus . . . be independent on my own and getting a step ahead." Having the feeling that you are not alone provides a sense of validation. Alexis appreciated knowing other students from different areas also participated in the SBP. She shared,

> Even though we were all in the same boat, we were all from different areas, so that was really nice to have people from not just only Detroit, but from other different cities and to see what their experience was like.

Participants also discussed how different the fall term looked compared to the summer. Megan appreciated meeting other students, particularly other Black students in the program. She explained how the program contributed to her transition to campus.

> Just knowing people before, you know, starting school for real, and it was nice knowing Black people because when I started [in the fall term], I was like . . . ugh, there is no one around. It's like, it was like really weird. It was like I was not expecting that, to like be in a class where like 100 people and there'll be like two Black people.

Discussion

This study captures how microaffirmations appear in a SBP in two major themes: (a) personalized support from peer advisors and adults and (b) confidence to engage academically and socially on campus. Utilizing students' voices, the study offers insight into the most impactful experiences when determining how an SBP affirms students and increases self-efficacy and sense of belonging. Our study expands research on SBPs by exploring how these settings promote microaffirmations and increase positive college transition experiences for participants. By examining the prevalence of microaffirmations in students' initial introduction to college, we can conceptualize how early exposure to positive messages is connected to the success of belonging and a sense of inclusion on campus.

For many students in this study, participating in the SBP eased their college social and academic transition. Students in our research often reported close friendships they had with peer advisors. These close relationships enabled participants to identify and trust a peer or instructor they believed was genuinely interested in supporting them through

their college careers. Students described receiving personalized support from advisors and instructors who were aware of their identity and lived experience as bridge students yet used their knowledge and resources to support their academic success. This was especially evident for Leslie, where she described how her math instructor provided individualized tutoring sessions for students on weekends. This genuine interest and personalized support align with the findings and conceptualization of microsupport in Ellis' (2019) research on microaffirmations with first-generation college students. He identified that microsupports were prominent in the college experiences of first-generation college students when adult advisors and instructors expressed genuine interest in students' academic and career success and used their knowledge to help students achieve their goals. While our findings overlap with Ellis' microaffirmation conceptualization, our study adds to the line of research by describing that peers in formal advising roles within an SBP can be a vital source of microsupport for students transitioning to a college campus.

The affirming encounters described by participants also align with Solórzano's conceptualization of racial microaffirmations, which are subtle verbal or nonverbal strategies People of Color engage that affirm their dignity, integrity, and shared humanity (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2019). Students in our study, such as Alexis, shared how peer advisors and instructors conveyed racial microaffirmations that empowered the collective intellectual self-worth of Black women in the SBP. Study participants viewed these encounters as racially validating and were protective of the transition challenges they experienced as incoming Black students on campuses. Our theme complements existing research by Rolón-Dow and Davison (2020), who found that institutions promote a sense of belonging when students of color encounter microaffirmations that recognize and value their presence and experiences on campus and protect them from harmful or derogatory behaviors and practices connected to their identity (i.e., microprotections). Moreover, our findings show that peer advisors and instructors had unique qualities as microaffirming persons for students in our study. One quality of note included being critically aware of student identity and lived experiences of social groups that can impact their college experience while caring for and encouraging their success on campus. This quality was described by students in a Koch et al. (2020) study, which found that the microaffirmations they received made them feel empowered, connected, and better about themselves on campus. Students in our study had similar experiences, which extends existing microaffirmation research by showing that cohort-based transition programs such as a SBP are valuable mediums for creating racially affirming spaces for students of color.

The connection between microaffirmations and confidence is evident in prior research. For instance, Demetriou and colleagues (2024) found that microaffirmations influenced students' beliefs in their academic capabilities to complete course assignments and exams while navigating and persisting through various personal challenges. Students in the study by Demetriou et al. described how the microaffirmations they received enabled them to take pride in their work and maintain a hard work ethic. Our interviews extend this research by revealing that academic self-efficacy can also be fostered

in college transition programs like a SBP and are critical for connecting students of color with university peers and instructors who promote racial microaffirmations and personalized support in a high-performing and comfortable academic environment.

Students in our study described the academic confidence and sense of belonging they gained from these positive encounters, which enabled them to thrive in their transition to campus. Students, such as Alexis and Megan, appreciated that the SBP they were a part of enabled them to meet other Black students from diverse backgrounds. This exposure helped them to successfully adjust to and navigate the challenges of being underrepresented in academic spaces such as classrooms. However, despite such challenges, students like Samanatha attributed her confidence to engage in a classroom setting from the time and relationships she built in the SBP. This finding is corroborated by existing research that has found participation in a SBP to be positively associated with student academic performance (Strayhorn, 2011) and that the difference between a student staying and leaving college comes down to positive interactions with forms of social support in advising, counseling, and mentoring (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Our study extends both bodies of literature by showing that the impact of microaffirmations on self-efficacy for students of color to academically and socially engage on campus includes the development of a supportive community, life-long relationships, and personalized support from peer advisors and instructors.

Implications for Theory and Practice

We recommend more research within other SBPs to capture messaging from faculty, staff, and peers, such as microaffirmations that bolster underrepresented college students' academic and personal support. We believe additional empirical knowledge in this area can bolster broader university efforts that aim to support the college transition experiences of historically underrepresented student populations on campus. We also encourage universities to offer professional development opportunities for student affairs practitioners to learn how to effectively utilize microaffirmations while engaging with students. Faculty should be encouraged to embed these practices in how they provide feedback and dialogue with students inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, we recommend scholars continue to explore microaffirmations to determine the various ways they can be communicated to students (verbally, visually, etc.).

Much of the current research on microaffirmations discusses its prevalence at PWIs (Ellis et al., 2019, 2024). As such, future research could examine student experiences across minority serving institutions, especially Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). A comparative analysis of SBPs at PWIs and HBCUs could also provide insight into the range of academic and social influences across institution types. Such research would give a fuller understanding of student perceptions related to culturally relevant institutional interventions and the influence of microaffirmations against racial microaggressions on varying types of college campuses.

Conclusion

This study produced initial evidence-based understandings of microaffirmations within a summer transition program (i.e., Summer Bridge). The results of this study indicate that SBPs can be essential spaces for microaffirmations to occur and for creating a supportive community that generates organic relationships and instills confidence and a sense of belonging within participants. Our themes illuminate multiple aspects of microaffirmations and how they impacted SBP participants' experiences with professors and academic and peer advisors. By exploring microaffirmations, we were able to showcase how positive reinforcement can support the college transition experiences of incoming students. This exploratory study aimed to provide preliminary knowledge to faculty, university administrators and staff, and current and future students about sustaining and increasing student success through positive encounters such as microaffirmations.

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