The Role of Peer Social Capital on Successful Transitions to College and Persistence

Kimberly F. Case, PhD, Goshen College
Aliah Carolan-Silva, PhD, Horizon Education Alliance
Robert Reyes, PhD, Messiah College
# Introduction

1st year college experiences are critical to

- Persistence
- Completion

- Adjustments
  - Academic
  - Social
  - Psychological

(Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kim, 2009)

**Students of color**
- Cultural context
- Racial climate

(Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Oseguera, 2008)

As students of color enter PWIs, there is a need for increased attention to the factors that

- contribute to their successful transition
- academic and social well-being

(Fry, 2011)
Summer bridge programs

» Higher retention (Walpole et al., 2008)
» Increased retention for minority students (Hicks, 2005).
» Academic skills and self-efficacy: use of technology; understanding a syllabus (Strayhorn, 2011); increased use of services (Terzian, Moore & Hamilton, 2009); self-confidence, reduced anxiety, and realistic personal goals (Stratton, 1998)

Gaps

» Quantitative ways of measuring success (GPA, credits earned, etc.) leaves gaps in capturing social and personal benefits
Peers & college success
(Astin, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Swenson, Nordstrom & Heister, 2008)

Importance for students of color

» Latino sample: peer support predicted social adjustment (Schneider & Ward, 2003)

» Lack of peer support negatively predicted adjustment to college and GPA (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005)

» Latino students (lower achieving): greater probability of persistence associated with higher levels of importance on socializing with friends (Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007)
Peer social capital

**Social capital theory** (Bourdieu, 1986)

» An individual’s social connections provide **differential access to resources**, depending on the amount, nature, and accessibility of the resources within their networks.

**Peer social capital**

» Peer group connections that encourage **“academic effort engagement, academic success, and educational attainment”** (Stanton-Salazar, 2004, p. 28).

» Trusting, and **emotionally strong relationships yield the most substantial effects** (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005; Swenson, 2008).
Peer social capital

Peer Social Capital and Educational Achievement

» Peer relationships provide access to multiple types of resources (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005).

» Students of color provide important resources for each other: modeling pro-academic behaviors and norms and supporting ethnic identity development (Stanton-Salazar, 2004).
Research questions

» How does an intensive summer bridge program contribute to students’ development of peer relationships?

» What role do peers play in supporting the social and academic adjustment and well-being of students of color in their first year of college?
Methods
Context and Population

Context
» Private liberal arts
» 900 students
» 20% students of color and international
» Grant funding

S.A.L.T.
» 3-week residential
» Students of color
» 3 academic credit course
» Academic and social components
» Academic role models
# Qualitative Data sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>End of SALT</th>
<th>End of 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(n = 20)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2011</strong></td>
<td>Written responses</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(n = 22)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Interviews lasting up to 1 hour*

*$5 gift card incentive for participation in end-of-year interviews*
Sample

» 3 international
   (Ethiopia, Canada, Zimbabwe)
» 31 Latino/a
» 4 Asian
» 3 African American
» 1 Native American

Participants \((n = 42)\)
Procedures

- Nature of relationships with peers
- Resources gained through these relationships

Themes

Interviews digitally recorded

Verbatim transcripts

2nd level of coding – Peer Social Capital

Initial inductive coding

Association between peer relationships and social and academic skills
Findings
Major Themes

Developing a sense of community during SALT

Confidence to face new experiences

Utilizing peers as academic resources
Developing a sense of community during SALT

“Like family”
Living and learning together

SALT has prepared me in many different aspects, not only academically but it has brought me new family members, and people I can rely on during the school year for a little encouragement. (Paloma)
I feel much closer to my fellow SALT students now and I am sure it was due to the fact that we were roommates and dorm neighbors. I know which friends can help me academically, spiritually, and emotionally because I was able to live with them in the dorms. (Salvador)
...I found myself within the first week, connecting with them easily, **but seeing other people** kind of floating around in their own groups and thinking I might not share that much in common with them...but I’m sure there’s some aspect... and so just **wanting to know**, I mean **it’s such a small group**, and we **interact so closely**, just wanting to know what that person is like really **pushes me to get to know other people**. (Samuel)
The SALT program definitely provided preparation for…. [what] I could experience with my academic ability and my social life! I feel familiar and comfortable with the campus. I was nervous about the academics but after enrolling in English 105, I feel confident about how I will do during the fall. I already made great friends and I’m excited to come back for the fall to meet them again, and others as well! (Estela)
Confidence to face new experiences

From anxiety to excitement
- Safety net
- Mutual support

I’m pretty sure SALT friends are going to make college a lot easier….just knowing there’s somebody there who can help you, not only on homework, but if you have a problem in your personal life, knowing there’s somebody there. It’s a lot easier for us. (Anahi)

...So I have a support system and I’m also there if they need support too. So it’s a two way street. (Ana)
SALT helped me to make new friends and so once I started college I didn’t feel lonely and I felt like I could hang out with those people more....and yeah it just really helped with that. Through them I was able to meet more friends and so that helped too. (Andrea)
Utilizing peers as academic resources

Who do you turn to?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of difficulty</th>
<th>PEERS</th>
<th>OTHER SOURCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACADEMIC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Faculty, Staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Utilizing peers as academic resources

Drawing on diverse skills of peers
- Exchange of talents
- Recognizing successful peers

[RAs]. Since they’ve been through that, they know what I’m taking about if I have questions. I think they’re going to be one of the key helpers during the academic year, and maybe some of my friends too….they may be better at a subject and I’ll be better at other subjects. We…can both help each other. (Maria)

I notice if they’re responsible, if they actually pay attention in class, I notice their grades and…how they work and if those are the kind of people that I like to work with and they seem like people that actually study. (Mia)
Utilizing peers as academic resources

**Drawing on diverse skills of peers**
- Residence halls - convenient access
- Commuters - technology

...In most of my classes I know like two or three people....So I just ask them and sometimes we get together or just talk on the phone or text or Facebook works very well, or Skype. And then I can be at my house and they can be here on campus and I can Skype with them and ask them questions and then I get my homework done and I actually understand what I’m supposed to do... (Mia)
Utilizing peers as academic resources

Cultivating pro-academic behaviors
- Study groups
- Motivation

Study with other people, that’s basically it…. By myself I won’t get the motivation to do it, but if I’m with other people that are doing the same thing, or just studying in general, I will be a little bit more motivated. (Alex)
Utilizing peers as academic resources

Cultivating pro-academic behaviors
- Accountability

From the SALT program...I’ve seen how homework becomes more of a communal thing, like pushing each other to sit down, and keeping each other accountable....I’m learning how [studying together] is a resource that you don’t automatically think about, but it’s a major resource. When you have other people keeping you accountable for study time, it makes it so much easier, and at the same time, it makes the studying more enjoyable....And with the SALT program I feel like I’m gonna have such a head start... (José)
I’m learning how to manage time and I learned even about studying by myself and finding a place to study so I could focus. But also realizing that it can be good to study with other people that are in your class, and going to see the professor to ask questions and stuff. In high school I didn’t really do that much, but I found that it’s helpful to do that. (Andrea)
Discussion
BRIDGE PROGRAMS
Prime venues for developing social capital

» Peer relationships can be mobilized to provide access to resources that “ultimately facilitate goal accomplishment” (Stanton-Salazar, 2004, p. 25)

» To become social capital, peer relationships must connect students with valuable resources
Confidence in new contexts

» Transfer of social skills learned in SALT to the larger college context

» Reduced anxiety in the transition to college (Stratton, 1998)

» Peers -- a source of comfort and security during this critical entry point

» Peers served as an important conduit to academic, social, and personal resources for managing the challenges of college life.
Reciprocity: “two-way street”

Sense of membership within SALT encouraged reciprocity and the exchange of resources

» For social networks to function as social capital, resources must flow in both directions (Coleman, 1998)

» Participants received benefits from peers and they made contributions to the social and academic well-being of peers.
Drawing on peer relationships

Instrumental Nature of Social Capital
“Investment Strategy”
(Bourdieu, 1986)

» Strategically draw on peer resources
» Discernment when selecting peers as academic resources
» Effective source of academic support, not simply the most convenient source.
“Like family”
Importance to students of color

» Shared, intense experience; Not alone in choice to attend PWI (Swenson, 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005)

» Pro-academic behaviors reinforced through role modeling of other students of color (Stanton-Salazar, 2004)

» Social and psychological boost: adjustment to college and attachment to the institution (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Schneider & Ward, 2003)
Limitations

» One institution; one program
» Self-reported experiences of peer engagement
» Extent to which these relationships contributed to actual academic outcomes
» Comparison group
Implications

BEYOND SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS...

» Building a sense of community in the classroom where **academically meaningful peer relationships** can flourish

» **Small Groups** - instruction on how to function effectively

» Promoting **social capital** through **new student orientation** and in **clubs** and **organizations**
Summer Bridge Program → Peer Social Capital → Decreased anxiety in transition to college → Pro-academic behaviors in the 1st year

» Academically Meaningful Relationships
References


