

First-Year Experience Programs: Speaking Truth to the Student Experience

CONFERENCE LEARNINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

Fall 2024 Illinois Center for Education Equity Conference

SUMMARY

There is an education crisis in the state of Illinois. While 47% of white adults have a post-secondary degree, only 29% of Black and 20% of Latina(o) adults have one. Black student college enrollment in Illinois is down by 37%, and the education system struggles to help Black students stay enrolled in the same institution each year. Enrollment and completion gaps are also notably present in low-moderate-income (LMI) communities.¹

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Amid ongoing deficits caused by structural racism and disinvestment in communities, we are privileged to work with students who demonstrate how asset-based planning can lead to positive outcomes. A panel of students from three Illinois institutions shared their experience participating in programs to support their transition into college on October 22, 2024, during the Illinois Center for Education Equity Conference.



INTRODUCTION

The student panelists spoke about their participation in first-year success programs at their post-secondary institutions (term can often be used interchangeably with bridge and early start programs, depending on the institution's own definition). Such programs extend beyond summer-only programming, providing year-round support, career exploration, and workforce resources not typically offered through standard coursework. These programs are often intended to provide support to first-generation college students, students from LMI families, and transfer students coming from community colleges.

Feedback from students and initial data discussed by conference attendees signal that going forward, **leaders should consider these programs as a promising strategy for improving attainment and closing gaps**. To do so, stakeholders should consider the following:



Stakeholders should collaborate to assess, improve, and grow First-Year Experience programs—and ensure students know about them.



Institutions should continue to provide career-related resources and workshops to help prepare students to consider their next steps into the workforce and adult life.



Programs and institutions should prioritize data collection and form a community of practice.

RESEARCH ON FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES

Common definitions for student programs used across campuses in Illinois include:

- **First-Year Experience (FYE) Programs:** Broad in scope, FYE Programs encompass various activities to assist first-year students in their academic and social transition, including orientation sessions, seminars, and additional wraparound support services.
- **Summer Bridge Programs:** These are short-term, intensive programs conducted during the summer before the freshman year, aiming to acclimate students to college life, enhance academic skills, and build a sense of community.



RESEARCH ON FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES (CONTINUED)

- **College Transition Programs:** These initiatives focus on easing the shift from high school to college by providing workshops, mentoring, and academic preparation.
- **Early Start Programs:** Often used interchangeably with “bridge” programs, these offer incoming students a head start on college coursework and campus integration

Regardless of the specific term used to describe the program, these high-touch programs can ease transitions into college. Originating in the 1960s, bridge programs were intended to address gaps in classroom learning with remedial courses and developmental education, but research has since shown that enrolling students in non-credit development education can hinder progress. Black students are more likely to be placed in developmental education, and subsequently earn fewer credits their first semester, thus widening time to completion and attainment gaps.²



[Moderator(middle): Dr. Antwone Cameron, Dean of Students, Chicago State University; Panelists: Jaylen Aimuwu, Governors State University, Jaguar LEAP Student; Milan Taylor, Chicago State University, Sophomore Academy; Carmin Jones, Northern Illinois University, CHANCE program; Vada Williams, Chicago State University, Rise Academy & Honors Program]

Unfortunately, there is limited data on the efficacy and enrollment in First-Year Experience programs. Tracking and measurement are not standardized across institutions, and information sharing is not robust. Research found that summer bridge programs focused on coursework to prevent the need for remedial and developmental education placement have short-term positive effects on student success. However, researchers note specifically that “reducing the barriers to college-level coursework for underprepared students may increase the likelihood that these students will persist and earn a college credential.”³ The researchers also agree with the student panelists that “providing more support and transitional experiences [will] help students reach and sustain attainment goals.”⁴ More support can take the form of:

1. Structured study time to get students used to the rigors of college coursework;
2. Personal advising from experts and peer mentoring from older students; and
3. Programming on skills needed to succeed in the transition from high school to college, such as time management, accessing campus resources, and asking for faculty help.⁵



LEARNINGS ON STUDENT PERSPECTIVES


The limited evaluation of First-Year Experiences made it particularly important to hear directly from students. The four student panelists shared their perspectives with conference attendees on their experiences in first-year experience programs, including the Chicago State RISE program, the Northern Illinois University CHANCE program, the Governors State University Jaguar LEAP program, and the Chicago State University Sophomore Academy. All four programs are considered FYE programs with details below.

Quick Reference: First-Year Experience (FYE) Programs at Chicago State University, Governors State University, and Northern Illinois University, as described by conference panelists

Program Attributes	Chicago State RISE	Northern Illinois McKinley Deacon Davis CHANCE	Governors State Jaguar LEAP	Chicago State Sophomore Academy*	Typical summer bridge program
Offered outside of only summer pre-college (available year-round or multiple years)					
Offers coursework for credit					
Provides career-focused programming					
Provides resources such as laptops and books					
Provides 1:1 advising/counseling					
Facilitates access to campus resources					
No cost to student	First-year tuition and fees also included				
Peer mentoring component					

* Chicago State University Sophomore Academy is both a second-year success program and a first-year program for students who transfer in at the sophomore level.

See the appendix for descriptions of additional programs at Illinois post-secondary institutions.

 Indicates attribute is offered as part of the program



Key Learning:

The student panelists shared the following:



Panelists agreed that the transition from high school was hard, but their FYE programs helped. One-on-one mentoring and advisor time were mentioned as critical pieces of the program, along with the option to earn credit over the summer and the importance of community-building aspects.



Programs are important for many kinds of student groups, not solely first-generation college students. Student athletes who may not have the resources of a Division 1 school can benefit from transitional and ongoing support. Transfer students also find importance in transition support when entering a new institution. For example, transfer students can enroll in the Sophomore Academy at Chicago State University, a strategic use of a first-year program as support for transferring students. **Above all, the students were very clear that it was essential to their success and comfort on campus to be part of a community of people who looked like them and shared their lived experiences.**



Panelists agreed that **mental health is a key concern**, along with the culture of belonging on campus. Perceptions can define culture, and perceptions can equal reality for students who are coming into an institution for the first time. This not only applies to the statistics and hard data about program participants' background, racial makeup, and shared experiences, but also to how services like mental health support are offered and advertised in a culturally competent way.



Looking ahead to the future and entering the workforce is inextricably entwined with the perception of what college is for. Panelists spoke interchangeably about college support, navigating courses, and campus life with resume workshops and internship guidance. Campus success is tied to post-graduation accomplishment, when a student enters their wealth-building and career journey.



Raising awareness for and improving communication about early start programs should be prioritized going forward. Panelist Carmin Jones noted that she generally stumbled upon resources herself on campus and discovered her program at orientation week on her own. Jaylen Aimiuwu recalled that his summer program did not reach full capacity and wondered if it needed to be advertised better, as "it's a free program," and he is now seven credits ahead. **Students value the programs; more students should be made aware so they can participate.**

"Without Rise, I don't know how far I would have made it into my first semester...the discipline of being a college student having to learn [was particularly difficult]."

- Vada Williams, Rise Academy and Honors Program member at Chicago State University



During the panel, students highlighted a clear and simple message: while students' experiences with their programs were largely positive, stakeholders need to provide more **intentional support** before, during, and after program enrollment. Students spoke to “accidentally” coming across resources on campus, and a lack of dedicated support to help them transition from high school to college. However, they also emphasized the importance of their programs in supporting them as individuals, helping them to see themselves on their campus, and providing assistance with career-related preparation.

IMPLEMENTING THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

The students made clear that First-Year Experience programs provide an important way for students at Illinois schools to feel a sense of belonging and succeed on campus. Going forward, **leaders should consider these programs as a strategy for improving attainment and closing gaps through First-Year Experience Programs:**



Stakeholders should collaborate to assess, improve, and grow First-Year Experience programs—and ensure students know about them.

Intentional communication and messaging utilizing faculty, advisors, and other folks who engage firsthand with students (including partnering with high schools directly) to get the word out will help to prevent “accidentally” finding resources. Every student transitioning out of high school should be made aware of the opportunities these programs offer—and that they are usually free. Creating consistent policies and standards, aligning the messaging accordingly, and setting high expectations for students will help grow interest and advance student success.



Institutions should continue to provide career-related resources and workshops to help prepare students to consider their next steps into the workforce and adult life.

Panelists noted the importance of feeling prepared and “being able to sit in professional spaces” because of workshops on interview prep and career paths. They recommended offering even more events and resources on specific fields and industry options so student participants can better understand career paths that are open to them.



To build and grow better programs, stakeholders should **prioritize data collection.** Tracking and measuring student experiences, both quantitatively and qualitatively, will help leaders make informed decisions about program design and implementation, and will support storytelling and fundraising.

Institutions should consider implementing a consistent tracking program for enrollment and outcomes, including career success after college, and collaborate across institutions (including K-12) to improve metrics over a longer period of time.



IMPLEMENTING THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES (CONTINUED)

In addition to coursework itself, many factors influence attainment, and wraparound supports such as those mentioned by the student panelists above are needed and should be further studied.

Strong data will also support a value proposition for Illinois schools. Post-secondary enrollment is down across the state. If an institution can clearly demonstrate a program that results in student success, more students will want to attend. **A community practice of collecting data** and expanding access to that data on bridge programs in Illinois would help turn concept into impact by supporting joint efforts to pinpoint the program features that drive success.

CONCLUSION

There is work already being done in consideration of these perspectives. Chicago State University recently launched a survey to capture the RISE program students' experiences, and the learnings will be released later this year. The Illinois Board of Higher Education's strategic plan for *A Thriving Illinois* highlights priorities on supporting transfer students through investments in the transfer infrastructure, which is key for ease of administrative and cost burdens on students and families. Illinois is also working through a new approach to funding its post-secondary institutions, with a proposed formula based on student needs using data reflecting each institution's student population and outcomes. The commission has been holding listening tours to gather student perspectives across the state.

Above all, student panelists at the October 2024 conference emphasized the need to **continue to listen to student experiences, cultivate belonging and community, and grow and change the programs according to student needs. To respond to the education crisis in Illinois and turn around enrollment and attainment rates, dedicated and intentional support will be necessary to improve First-Year Experience programs, increase access, and increase student enrollment.**



THANK YOU AND ABOUT THE CENTER

This conference would not have been possible without the generous donation of time and expertise from our panelists. Thank you .

The Illinois Center for Education Equity will address the state's crisis in connecting Black communities to a college degree through research, policy, and practice driven by diverse stakeholders. The statewide initiative will convene employers, the secondary and postsecondary education systems, faculty, students, legislators, philanthropy, and community-based institutions to collect data and release research that tracks Illinois' progress with supporting Black students and to identify policies and practices that diverse stakeholders must deploy to eliminate the equity gap for Illinois' Black students.

Note on the Timing of the Research: The conference was held in October 2024, prior to the significant shifts in the federal policy landscape currently in the works in 2025. However, the issues and the desired impacts for the state of Illinois and our students are still clear and have not changed.

REFERENCES

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4. Elisabeth A. Barnett, Rachel Hare Bork, Alexander K. Mayer, Joshua Pretlow, Heather D. Wathington, and Madeline Joy Weiss, with Evan Weissman, Jedediah Teres, and Matthew Zeidenberg, *Bridging the Gap: An Impact Study of Eight Developmental Summer Bridge Programs in Texas* (National Center for Postsecondary Research, June 2012), http://www.postsecondaryresearch.org/pdf/22731_NCPR_TexasDSB_FullReport.pdf.
5. Tonisha B. Lane, Kali Morgan, and Megan M. Lopez, "A Bridge Between High School and College: A Case Study of a STEM Intervention Program Enhancing College Readiness Among Underserved Students," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 22, no. 1 (2020), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1521025117729824>.



RESOURCES: BRIDGE AND EARLY START PROGRAMS IN ILLINOIS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

A non-exhaustive list of additional bridge programs at Illinois state institutions is shown below:

Community Colleges

College of Lake County

Programs: Automotive Technology, HVAC, Certified Nurse Assisting, Phlebotomy Technician, Healthcare Office Assistant. Bridge/Pre-IET programs in Healthcare, Manufacturing, Early Childhood Education, Administrative Management & Technology, Computer Information Technology.

Danville Area Community College

Programs: Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Manufacturing.

Elgin Community College

Programs: Basic Nurse Assistant Training, CNC Operator, Dental Office Aide, EMT-Basic, Industrial Maintenance, Phlebotomy, HVAC, Welding. Bridge/Pre-IET programs in Early Childhood Education, Health Care, Industrial Arts.

Heartland Community College

Programs: Business Technology. Bridge to Workplace Technology.

Illinois Central College

Programs: Production Welder, CNA, Medical Office-Basic. Bridge/Pre-IET programs in Healthcare and Manufacturing.

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges

Bridge programs in Healthcare and Manufacturing.

McHenry County College

Bridge Programs: Administrative Office Management, Business, Healthcare, Manufacturing.

Morton College

Bridge to Healthcare Careers Program: Prepares students for CNA, Medical Office Support, Nursing, or Physical Therapy Assistant programs.

Rock Valley College

Summer Bridge Programs: Eight-week programs for students to explore their selected pathway of interest.

Universities

Illinois College

TRIO Summer Bridge Program: A 10-day program (five days online, five days in-person) for first-generation college students to strengthen academic skills.

Northeastern Illinois University

Summer Bridge Programs: Offers the Summer Transition Program (STP) to help students get a jumpstart on their academic career.

Northwestern University

College Bridge Program: Admits 25 high school juniors from Chicago Public Schools each summer to enroll in courses as part of the Northwestern Summer Session.

Knox College

Summer Bridge Programs: Offers two programs for eligible incoming students prior to new student orientation to provide tools for success.

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Illinois Scholars Program Summer Bridge Experience: Designed to guide undergraduate students' transition to the university.

University of Chicago

College Bridge for CPS Students: Offers programs for Chicago Public Schools students to take college-level courses during the summer.

