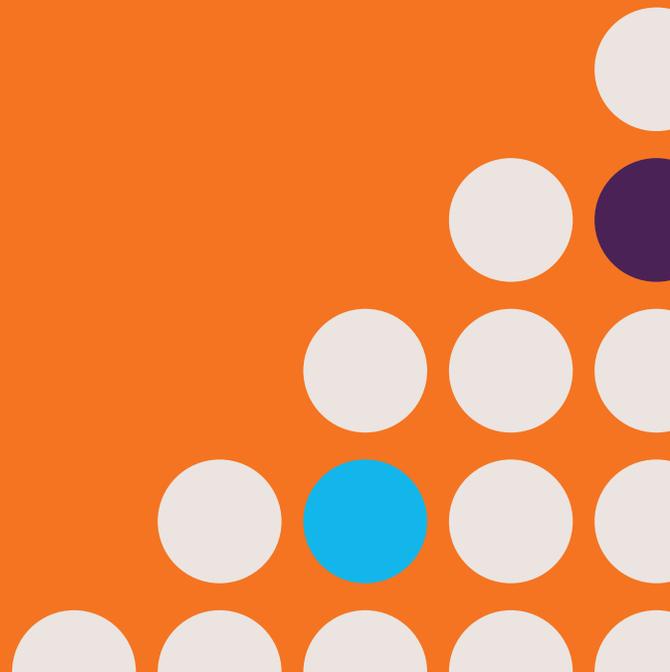


**PA STATE GEAR UP-3  
ISSUE BRIEF:**

# A Longitudinal Look at Summer Bridge Program Participation And Perceptions

The following issue brief was designed to accompany the Pennsylvania (PA) State GEAR UP-3 Final Evaluation Report, providing a deeper look into a specific topic salient to the seven-year program evaluation. PA State GEAR UP-3 was a seven-year state grant (2014–2021) developed to enhance academic improvement and early college awareness among at-risk youth and their parents. The program was implemented with an entire cohort of students beginning in grade 7 and followed through high school and into their first year of post-secondary education. The combination of academic support through tutoring, exposure to campus life through college visits and summer bridge programs, and information sharing through counseling and other events produced a well-rounded support system for PA State GEAR UP-3 students, enabling them to make informed decisions for their future.



# A Longitudinal Look at Summer Bridge Participation and Perceptions



## SUMMER BRIDGE PARTICIPATION RATES

Rising 9th graders joined summer bridge programs for an introduction to high school life and tutoring support to prepare for greater academic rigor:

**421**

PA State GEAR UP-3 students participated in grade 9 summer bridge.

Graduating seniors joined COVID-19 safe, on-campus or virtual Summer Bridge Programs at the respective colleges in which they enrolled for support with remedial academics, self- and time-management, finding tutoring and counseling resources, and learning about the college environment.

**32 / 1,761**

PA State GEAR UP-3 students participated in College Summer Bridge.

Recognizing that transitions from middle to high school and high school to college are vulnerable junctures in the postsecondary pipeline, PA State GEAR UP-3 offered rising 9th graders and new high school graduates the opportunity to join summer bridge programs — multi-week summer sessions designed to support anxious or struggling students into their new academic homes and dispel some of the feelings of isolation that can contribute to drop-outs among first-generation college students. Among the students who participated — and notably, their parents — summer bridge represented one of the most recognizable and positive features of PA State GEAR UP-3.

## WHY SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS?

Multi-week summer programs to bridge the transitions between schooling levels — from middle into high school and from high school into postsecondary education — have abounded in recent years as one approach to supporting at-risk secondary students in the “make or break” grade 9 year and struggling and/or first-generation college students in the critical first postsecondary year (Abbott & Templeton, 2013; Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Summer bridge program activities vary, but many programs focus largely or exclusively on intensive academic supports to help students maintain adequate academic progress and performance; others incorporate social-emotional and cultural aspects to address students’ barriers outside of academics (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Summer bridge programs into high school have shown some evidence for success in improving passing rates into grade 10 and increased feelings of social cohesion and motivation (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). Grace-Odeleye & Santiago (2019) describe conflicting evidence for bridge program effectiveness at the college level, with some programs showing positive influence on retention and degree attainment of students of color and positive, if diminishing, effects on academics (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Barnett et. al, 2012). PASSHE instituted summer bridge programs after grades 8 and 12 for the PA State GEAR UP-3 cohort.

In PA State GEAR UP-3 districts, the grade 9 summer bridge programs in summer 2016 served a variety of purposes from the perspectives of PA State GEAR UP-3 students, families and staff:

- Providing early academic interventions for struggling students
- Supporting students who were anxious about a new school environment, including transfer students entering from another district or school
- Bringing together students from different middle schools
- Introducing students to PA State GEAR UP-3 staff

In summer 2020, PA State GEAR UP-3 staff collaborated with faculty and staff at a number of PASSHE colleges and universities to offer college summer bridge programs tailored to the transition from high school to college. Students, PA State GEAR UP-3 students and staff and PASSHE college faculty reported their understandings of the bridge programs' aims as:

- Providing remedial academic support for provisionally admitted students, i.e., a “second chance”
- Introducing students to non-cognitive self- and time-management techniques to smooth the transition to independence
- Introducing students to on-campus and virtual resources to support success, e.g., tutoring, advising, writing support, or study groups
- Offering early college credits
- Awarding laptops and \$1,000 scholarships to participating students
- Establishing advising/mentoring groups

### SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Rising 9th graders joined the grade 9 summer bridge program for an introduction to high school life and tutoring support to prepare for greater academic rigor: 421 students participated in the grade 9 summer bridge program. Four years later, 32 graduating seniors joined COVID-19 safe, on-campus or virtual college summer bridge programs at the respective colleges in which they enrolled for support with academics, self- and time-management, finding tutoring and counseling resources, and learning about the college environment.



*Honestly, I feel like the summer program really prepared us for coming into college.”*

—GEAR-UP3 STUDENT

### STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS

Students who participated in the grade 9 summer bridge program reported that the program helped them “come out of their shell” or **“transition to high school.”** Students remembered their grade 9 summer bridge program participation even many years later, sharing about how they met and got to know new people from different middle schools and had new experiences. The summer program was seen as especially valuable for transfer students or those who were anxious about entering high school.

For the students who participated in college summer bridge programs at PASSHE colleges, many valued the experience as an **academic second chance** and an opportunity to get a **jump start on earning expensive college credits.** According to one student:

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*“[Summer Bridge] helped me get into a school that I didn’t think I would be able to get into. So, I basically signed up immediately, went to the College and Career Center and told them I wanted to find out more and...signed up.”*

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*“GEAR UP has this program — and I really like this program — the Summer Bridge program. It’s really helpful for the students that are coming from the middle school to high school.”*

—PARENT

In addition to their generally positive reflections on summer bridge programs, PA State GEAR UP-3 graduates also shared their **recommendations for improving future iterations of the transition programs**. Students suggested the PASSHE college summer bridge could be improved by:

- Allowing more time to settle in to campus before activities begin
- Starting activities later in the day to adapt to teenagers’ work and sleep schedules

### PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE GRADE 9 SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM

Parents spoke positively about the grade 9 summer bridge program, pointing out that it gave students **something productive to do during the summer months**. One parent reflected:

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*“It really helped me in the summer when they [PA State GEAR UP-3] did the summer camp here for two weeks. I think it was like a two-week program, and they went on trips, and they did fun things besides hiding on cell phones.”*

One parent remembered that the grade 9 summer bridge program served multiple purposes for her child, “to get them on track and everything, get a feel of the school, and then also getting help or assistance with reading, math, or whatever the case may be they might have needed assistance with at the time.” The program’s **mix of academic, noncognitive and social supports** appealed even to students who were initially reluctant, per one mother’s anecdote:

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*“It was so funny, because he [my son] was like, ‘Mom, I do not really want to go to this [Summer Bridge] thing.’ He said, ‘I might have to go to school two weeks early.’ And I’m like, ‘It’s not two weeks early. It’s just to get a feel of everything.’ And that first day, he came back with a whole story about it, and he was like, ‘Oh, Mama, I like this program. This program is pretty decent. I think I’m going to stick it out. I’m going to stick it out and go.’”*

Parents also mentioned that the grade 9 summer bridge program supported students who were anxious about the transition to high school, helping them to feel more comfortable entering grade 9.

### GRADE 9 SUMMER BRIDGE PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE

The grade 9 summer bridge program had a positive effect on student attendance in MP1 of grade 9. On average, the absence rate of summer bridge participants in MP1 of grade 9 was 1.21% compared to 2.74% of non-summer bridge participants.

## METHODS

This longitudinal look at the PA State GEAR UP-3 Summer Bridge program applied a qualitative-forward integrated analysis to explore participation, perceptions, and any lasting influence of the Summer Bridge in grade 9 or Summer Bridge before College. Analysts combined and re-analyzed quantitative participation and enrollment data with qualitative interview and focus group data from Years 2 through 7 of PA State GEAR UP-3.



QUALITATIVE  
ANALYSES



QUANTITATIVE  
ANALYSES



INTEGRATION  
ANALYSES

## SUMMER BRIDGE AND COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

College summer bridge programs aimed to provide intensive academic support to academically struggling students — and, by extension, to help those more likely to drop out in their first college semester stay enrolled. Quantitative data, however, show no such effects of the summer bridge program with PASSHE schools on student persistence into the spring semester of college. This could be attributed to low participation in summer bridge programs due to COVID-19 restrictions and uncertainties, leading to a small sample size that makes statistically significant differences between summer bridge participants and non-participants unlikely. Although there were no meaningful quantitative differences found, Year 7 PA State GEAR UP-3 students reported in focus groups that the program benefited them in their first year of college. According to one summer bridge program into college participant:

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*“The program over the summer that we got to be a part of did really help set us up for success for our first year in college because coming into college, I didn’t get the best grades in high school, so being able to prove myself [was important.]”*

Others shared that the Summer Bridge into college program made them feel “proud of myself for getting out of my comfort zone,” provided “a good started for me, personally, on how college was going to be,” helped “make connections before you came onto campus” or “gave us studying habits.” For some first-generation students, the bridge provided a **head start to learning the lay of the college land**. One student recalled:

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*“When I came [to college] in the fall, people didn’t know how to use things that I knew how to use, because I learned about it in the summer. I learned a lot of studying tips, a lot of stress relief tips, so I feel like that helped me a lot for coming to school because it wasn’t as overwhelming as it probably would have been if I just would have come on my own. I don’t really have people in my family that went to college, so I was really confused about it, and [with Summer Bridge] I saw a great program that helped me be more prepared than I would have been if I didn’t go.”*

## References

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