

**Using Fiction to Support Identity Development and Transition in
Conditionally-Enrolled Students**

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Abstract. The transition to college can be difficult for many first-year students. Students who are conditionally enrolled may struggle more than their peers in terms of feeling comfortable in an academic setting. This case study explores how conditionally-enrolled students who participated in a summer bridge program read popular literature to explore their own struggles in the transition to college. Findings call for faculty and staff who work with conditionally-enrolled students to support and accept identity exploration in the classroom, particularly during the first semester.

Keywords: identity, first-year transition, fiction, faculty

As students transition to college, faculty and staff interact with young adults who struggle to understand themselves and their place in the world (specifically on their new campus). For over fifty years, researchers have noted this challenge is heightened for students who are labeled *high-risk* or *at-risk* based on previous academic achievement, first-generation status, and other social factors (Blythe, Darabi, Simon Kirkwood, & Baden, 2009; Egerton, 1968; Gordon, 1975; Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb, 1983; Lowe & Cook; 2010; Tinto & Sherman, 1975). Because students often bring evidence of their development into the classroom setting, it is crucial to foster an environment that allows identity development to be explored. Students labeled "high-risk" are more likely to achieve when they see examples of successful students who share identity and personality traits similar to their own (Bandura, 1977; Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Kestler, & Cordova, 2015; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Yet, there are not often opportunities for students to see exemplars in their first-year classroom settings. This study examined whether fiction about college students in transition can foster positive views of identity in conditionally-enrolled students. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How can fiction that is thematically focused on identity and college-aged student transitions aid in identity development and transition?
2. How can reading and writing assignments in a first-year course for conditionally-enrolled (often labeled high-risk) students help create a positive academic identity and ease the transition process?

Background and Framework

Development in the College Context

While student development and identity have been studied, little is known about student identity as it relates to conditionally-enrolled students in their first

semester of study. Arnett's (1998, 2011) Emerging Adult Theory argues that during the ages of 18-25 most people experience the freedom to explore the possibilities of adulthood and that the scope of this exploration is quite large. Emerging Adulthood brings with it greater opportunity for identity exploration than any other time in a person's life. If students are given an environment open to exploration, they are more likely to make meaning of and conceptualize their identity. Issues of alienation complicate the identity process. High-risk students often struggle to develop a personal identity that seems to fit into the world of higher education (Mann, 2008). To combat these issues, Mann (2001) argues that instructors must avoid passive teaching approaches (such as surface learning or rote memorization) and create deep learning experiences for students to truly engage with and be shaped by the content. Mann (2001) also argues for the use of hospitality and safety in the classroom. She asserts that students will feel more secure in their academic identity if they are welcomed into the classroom and if they feel safe to explore their thoughts without fear of criticism or retribution. In this study, my pedagogical choices were informed by Mann's (2001, 2008) directives, particularly with respect to providing deep learning experiences and creating a welcoming environment in which students feel safe. Practices such as interactive workshops, creative and visual projects, and class discussions also support Tapp's (2014) call for participatory pedagogy.

A student's sense of belonging on campus is impacted by their interactions with community members (faculty, staff, and students) at an institution. Strayhorn (2012) defines the sense of belonging in college as follows:

Students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 3)

Additionally, Strayhorn (2012) argues that students' sense of belonging is linked to their social identities.

Writing, literature, and identity

While some research exists on the relationship between writing and identity development, there is scant research on identity development related to reading fiction. Alder (2016) noted there is a strong connection between learning and identity formation. Both Alder (2016) and George (2012) agree that identity formation is difficult because it is multiple, ever developing, and renegotiating. Personal connection with the material and being given a space to think independently is vital to identity development. These goals can be accomplished through the everyday practices of being in an English class (Alder, 2016).

The ability for self-reflection and the capacity to understand oneself in a particular environment can be partially determined by the involvement of the instructor. Kill (2006) provided evidence that the work of renegotiating classroom identity lies on the shoulders of the instructor just as much as it does the student. Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007) noted that students desire a deep connection with their

instructor, similar to the connections present in secondary education, but that often instructors are unavailable. Scanlon et al. (2007) argued that a lack of support creates a constraint on student ability to move from knowledge *about* being a student at the university level to knowledge *of* being a student [author emphasis]. Further, they argued that *situated interaction* (Scanlon et al., 2007, p.237) is key to identity formation. Likewise, Lave and Wenger (1991) posited that the phenomenon of learning is directly linked to identity; that is to say, identity changes as learning happens.

Yet another approach to understanding identity can be seen in the *novel method* (King, 2013). For the novel method to work, the student reader must be acutely aware of the chosen text. Such awareness will allow the student to develop a framework for understanding their identity through characters, situations, and metaphors in the novel (King, 2013). This exercise, while useful, is not often used in literature classes where the focus is on the content, not the reader or student-as-writer. In the current study, students undertook the novel approach to writing about their own identity.

The framework for this study utilizes King's (2013) novel approach, Mann's (2001, 2008) directives, and Tapp's (2014) work on participatory pedagogy to guide an introductory seminar in literature aimed at assisting student identity development. Daily class assignments were constructed with the intent to create a space for students to consider their identity and how it might change in their transition to college. Their final formal assignment (discussed later in the article) directed the students to use the novel method (King, 2013) to explore their identity via the lives, situations, and circumstances of fictional characters. This framework put an emphasis on self-exploration and understanding of identity development while fostering an environment that allows new college students to be active participants in their learning.

Methods

This case study focuses on the early transition of conditionally-enrolled students during a summer bridge program. The stories of their lives, explored and explained via works of fiction, highlight their reality as new students. Such data may give instructors and student support staff a clearer understanding of the transition process that occurs in a condensed time-period common in bridge programs.

Context

This study was conducted at a regional university with conditionally-enrolled students. Conditionally-enrolled students must participate in the Bridge Program (BP). These students have an average ACT score of 18 and an unweighted high school GPA of 2.7. Such numbers traditionally indicate that student academic success will be limited, labeling them as "high-risk" students. BP students are cohorted (20-25 students) and take three classes together in a five-week long summer program. The learning community structure allows for some content overlap between the three classes. Students in this study were enrolled in a

learning community that consisted of a literature seminar (the subject of this article), introductory psychology, and a university transition course.

Students read various texts throughout the summer session but focused most of their time and attention on the novel *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013), a fictional account of one student's first year at a large, public university. This text was chosen because of its realistic depiction of the characters' college transition processes, specifically how the main character struggled to understand herself and her identity in the college environment. After reading the texts, students explored their identities as it related to the characters and circumstances in the novel or other course readings.

Participant selection

I recruited participants from two BP cohorts enrolled in my English literature seminar. Students enrolled in the course were given the choice to opt out of the data collection though they remained in the course. The sample size for the document analysis portion was 41 (18 male, 23 female). In the sample, 33 students identified as White, 3 as Black, 1 as Native American, 2 as multiracial, and 2 as Latinx. The sample, while convenient, was also purposeful in that it "highlight[s] what is typical, normal, and average" (Patton, 2015, p. 268) in the BP population. All participants were asked to complete a follow-up interview the following fall semester and four participants (one male, three female) agreed. The demographics above help to describe the typical makeup of an BP cohort; however, I do not wish to suggest that demographics can clearly inform an understanding of the group. The participants' lived experiences, social identities, and personal circumstances affected their identity development.

Data collection

The data collection began with attribute coding (Saldaña, 2009) for participants. Participants were given pseudonyms. Additional demographic information was collected on the participants based on university records from the Registrar's office: age, hometown, intended major, ethnicity, and gender. Written responses to two prompts were downloaded from Blackboard and re-identified with student pseudonyms.

Assignment One asked students to "describe how you identify yourself as a student and a person. What drives you? How do you make choices for yourself? What is most important to you? Give specific examples from your life and make sure you fully explain your answer." Assignment Two was completed during the last week of the semester:

Throughout the course of the semester we've read a number of pieces that have featured college-aged students and their attempts to understand themselves and their place in the world. Choose a character with which you most identify—that is not to say this character is an accurate reflection of *you* but that there is something in the character that you can identify with (for example you may understand their demeanor, their background, their thought process, etc.). Use examples from both the text and your own life to

describe who you are and how literature helps you discover this identity. You may choose to discuss multiple characters from the same text or use characters from different texts. However, if you use more than one example, you must be detailed and specific in each example. You must specifically reference from the text to demonstrate your understanding.

Data Analysis

During document analysis, I looked for trends in student interpretation of their identity. Bowen (2009) explains that “documents provide a means of tracking change and development” (p. 31). By using the documents as the primary data source, I ascertained whether student identity development shifts occurred. Thematic analysis protocol (Bowen, 2009; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was used to identify patterns in the student writing and interviews.

Writing Analysis

Documents were coded by theme based on prompt. Prior to the first reading of the documents, I identified four descriptive code themes I thought would be apparent in most of the responses: students’ belief in their intelligence or their ability to be a good student; being hardworking; being unfocused on school work or not seeing it as a top priority; and their confidence level related to identity. Identifying themes prior to reading the documents, or *a priori*, can enable an analysis that directly answers the research question (Saldaña, 2016). This approach allowed me to focus on the goal of answering the research questions: 1) how can fiction that is thematically focused on identity and college-aged student transitions aid in identity development and transition? and 2) how can reading and writing assignments in a first-year course for conditionally-enrolled (often labeled high-risk) students help create a positive academic identity and ease the transition process? As new themes presented themselves, they were recorded. Analytic memos were written after each coding session. During the third (and final) coding phase, themes were further delineated by additional sub-code grouping and by applying magnitude coding.

Interviews

After the interviews were completed, I transcribed each one. Copies of the transcripts were emailed to the participants for their review. After corrections were made, transcripts were coded. I began with *a priori* coding because of the nature of the study. Saldaña (2016) explained that because the concept of “identity” is so varied across disciplines and contexts, it is “most likely essential” to pre-establish codes (p. 72). In the first round, I looked for codes related to family influence on identity, perception of self as student, and confidence, to which I applied magnitude coding in order to “indicate intensity, frequency, direction” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 86). During the first round, I made note of emergent codes and applied magnitude notations to these as well. In the second round of coding, I used pattern coding to help develop themes from the emergent codes.

Trustworthiness

As both the course instructor and the researcher, I used several strategies to increase trustworthiness. First, I obtained IRB approval from the study site. Use of multiple data points allowed me to corroborate findings to draw conclusions (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My role as instructor allowed me to fully understand the context of the classroom and aspects of the BP program that other researchers might not benefit from. Four months passed between the completion of the class and the analysis of data. This lapse in time allowed for the analysis to be a distinct process from the initial grading that took place during the semester.

Findings

Five major categories presented themselves in analysis of the documents and interviews: the relationship between the literature content and “real life,” the importance of family and friendship, the prevalence of shyness and/or “social awkwardness,” the effect of college stereotypes, and the multiplicity of identity.

Reality reflected in writing

Many of the participants identified with the characters they encountered in literature. The characters enter college for the first time, and, therefore, much of what they endure was also experienced by the students enrolled in the course. While the accounts the students read were fictional, the literature helped students realize their feelings were not uncommon. Students pointed to the relief they felt knowing that their struggles were not unique. Linda stated:

It is also nice to know that I can identify myself with someone else and that other girls experience the same feelings and struggles that I have or will experience. *Fangirl* allows me to read and feel what they are going through as if it were my emotions. It is nice because some of the things that they go through, I can look back on my life, and I can see where I've dealt with a similar situation. [...] *Fangirl* gives you the opportunity to see the experiences and lessons that have been contributed and learned to the lives of Wren and Cath, and this allows me to understand and feel the book on a personal level.

The comfort students found in reading about struggles similar to their own allowed students to understand that transition is hard for many, and, despite their strife, they can be successful college students. William echoed this sentiment when describing his reaction to the required reading: “In a way, you feel as if you're not alone and that there's someone else out there going through the same struggle as you.” Students may worry that they are the only one having trouble with their transition as people are not prone to sharing their perceived weaknesses, yet William found relief in knowing he was not alone. Seeing characters experience similar moments of hardship demonstrated that not only were the students not alone, they also saw characters change and ultimately experience the positive outcomes of being a college student.

The relief many students experienced also gave them confidence to seek out help and to persevere through the challenging aspects of their college transition, which echoes Arnett's (2011) criteria of Emerging Adulthood: accepting responsibility for one's actions and making independent decisions. The students believed their success was possible because the characters were also successful. The various ways in which students used characters and situations to explain their identity as students demonstrates that using literature as a tool for self-exploration can be effective. Further, it points to the value in using King's (2013) novel approach to using a primary source as means to understand oneself. Students clearly articulated the connection between their lives and course readings in cogent, distinct ways. These findings support Alder's (2016) assertions that identity development can take place in English assignments and Lave and Wenger's (1991) findings that learning and identity formation are linked.

Family relationships

Many students noted both at the beginning of the term and at the end that the importance of family was key to their identity. Students explained that family members gave them strength, encouragement, and increased self-esteem. Interestingly, in nearly equal measure, a second group of students identified negative family relationships as markers of their identity. In both positive and negative relationships, students pointed to the influence family members had on their belief in their ability to succeed in college. Chelsea highlights the impact family encouragement played on her ability to transition to college:

When I first moved to college, I felt very alone and homesick like I had no one at all, I didn't know anyone here so that made it worse. My family went out of their way to FaceTime me every day, send me care packages in the mail, and even surprise me with visits to make me feel loved and as if they were still there for me even if they were not physically with me every moment of the day.

The encouragement Chelsea received from her family helped her get through the transition in a manageable way. Though she felt lonely at times, she knew she was not alone. She remarked that her family interactions were what drove her to succeed and they were the reason she "gives her all" at school. These findings reflect Vygotsky's (1978) theory of sociocultural cognitive development that suggests that development is advanced through social interaction. In Chelsea's example, her family's scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978), or temporary support, gave her the confidence to engage in the new college setting while still feeling supported by those at home.

While Chelsea and many others found encouragement and strength to succeed in their family interactions, other students found strength through unsupportive or poor relationships. These relationships reminded the students of their goals and, in some cases, students worked to prove naysayers wrong. Eric explains, "My parents have always told me that I don't have the drive or willpower to succeed, and ever since high school, I have been trying to prove them wrong." For Eric and others, the negative feedback and disbelief in their abilities proved to be a form of

encouragement. Rather than meet family expectations, the students chose to rise above adversity and believe in themselves when those closest to them did not.

Awkwardness Abounds

Transitions are often difficult and as students struggle to adjust, discomfort can reign. For many, discomfort manifests in the form of shyness or feeling intensely awkward in social situations. Yet, as students struggled with their awkwardness, they found comfort in the fact that others felt the same way. Nearly two-thirds of the students highlighted their affinity for the character Cather (Cath) from *Fangirl* who is particularly shy and struggles to connect to her peers. Cath is an introvert and has few friends early in her college transition. Many students explained that their own situation mirrored Cath's, even the students who did not identify as introverted. Sarah describes her interactions with others as "painfully awkward" and "cringe-worthy" because she doesn't often engage in social interactions. Sarah's ability to equate her general state of shyness and social awkwardness to that of a character gave her a bit of comfort because she knew what the character was going through.

Many students discussed being unprepared for college life in general and for social interactions in particular. Tiffany explains that social situations in college were stressful: "[Cath's] fear of judgement in social situations is something I can definitely relate to [...] Cath and I both fear venturing outside of our comfort zones, making natural college stress multiply." While learning a new environment and meeting new people are natural stressors for students in transition, the level of preoccupation students had with their awkwardness in social situations is telling. This may be due to less frequent genuine face-to-face contact (Kim, 2017). It is encouraging that students are aware of their need to increase social skills as this indicates their self-awareness and desire for interaction. However, faculty may want to consider encouraging more face-to-face dialogue and social interactions to give the students practice with interacting with others and becoming adept at reading and understanding others. Participatory pedagogy (Tapp, 2014) would provide a space for students to interact one-on-one and may alleviate some of the social fears like those experienced by my participants. In this study, students noted that the multiple activities in class helped them connect with people and talk with them when otherwise they would not have interacted.

The Effects of College Stereotypes

In class discussions, interviews, and their writing, many students confirmed that the expectations of college are largely built on what they've seen in popular culture. They believed that nearly everyone would drink (and to do otherwise would be frowned upon), that college is a non-stop party, and that academics barely fit into their perceived image of college. Brittney explains:

I have my heart set on getting that infamous college experience—the one from the movies [...] While Wren is feeling the need to experiment, I do too, however, not on Wren's level [...] My version of experimenting runs along the

lines of going to parties with my friends. I like to dress up and have a good time but still be safe.

Here, Brittney highlights what she has been told about college. The fact that her impressions have nothing to do with academics stands out. Her concern is only with her social life: academics appear as an afterthought in her summary of what college should be. Similarly, students note that independence and *freedom* are a key component of college life.

William wrote about the importance of freedom, "When I got here, I did my work and I still do it, but I went to parties and I turned up a lot because my mom isn't here and I can do what I want." Yet, William also recognizes the limits of such an experience, "But in all reality, you don't want to become the life of the party because it can bring you down without you even knowing it. You can see that in Wren." William identified his practices as being similar to those of characters he read about and applied the lessons to his own life. He recognized that many (including him) view college as an opportunity to party and experience freedom while at the same time noted how those practices were not ideal conditions for success. Interestingly, students expressed how even parents fall into the belief that college is supposed to be like the movies. Robert explains, "My parents told me that I needed to not be such a good kid and go out and party and have fun (as long as I passed my classes)." It is evident that popular culture influences both student and family expectations of college, and when those expectations are not grounded in academics, concerns about social opportunities can have significant weight. Further, how students understood their own identity was built on the stereotypes they were familiar with—even with the acknowledgement that such stereotypes were not necessarily positive.

The influence of stereotypes of college on students played a significant role in the choices students made when they arrived. Many, however, learned from their mistakes just as the characters they read about did. Michelle discussed the realities and downfalls of the college experience:

She [Wren] turns to alternative methods of coping such as partying every weekend and participating more in her social life than in her education. I can relate to this as well because I have been very involved in the social aspects of life these last five weeks. In the end, Wren eventually realizes that she needs to focus on more important things like getting an education. The past week has really opened my eyes to the fact that I need to step it up if I want to remain a student at this university. I need to focus on school even if I miss out on the social parts of being a college student.

After reading about the fictional character's situation, Michelle could articulate how her own expectations of college life had negatively impacted her.

While some (like Brittney, William, and Michelle) looked forward to the "college experience," others struggled to find their place in a world that seemed unwelcoming to them. Sarah stated, "I know what it is like to be the kid who doesn't want to make friends, party, and go crazy in college. It separates you from

a lot of people, and Rowell depicts this well with Cath in the novel.” Jennifer confirms Sarah’s reaction:

How she [Cath] was like in her room and she never wanted to go out and everything, I felt like I was going to be like that and so I related to that. And then I saw that I didn't need to be like that when I was like, reading the book. So, it made me realize I need to like go out and make friends and find out who I am and not just be scared. I think with *Fangirl* it made me realize that I was spending too much time in my room and not really making friends because I was scared of not fitting in kind of deal. So, it made me realize, you know, I'm actually pretty okay. [...] I mean there's no covering this up. BP was full of like, alcohol, drugs, and partying. Everyone is just like, wild. And I was like, this isn't me! [...] And then when I met my friend group I was like, oh, these people are a lot like me. They don't party and do drugs and this will be okay.

Jennifer highlighted that because many of her peers seemed concerned with partying, she felt as though she would not fit in. Many students experience similar desires for freedom in their first few weeks on a college campus. This desire might have been heightened in the BP group as their first time on campus came as soon as two weeks after high-school graduation. By asking the students to consider aspects of their identity through fiction, students were provided with an avenue to explore their values and their identity as student. These findings support Alder’s (2016) call for identity exploration as well as the importance of providing a safe place students to learn from and question themselves (Mann, 2008).

Multiple Identities

Very few students stated that they only identified as one character they encountered in their readings. While the characters they engaged with were layered and round, students clearly understood that their own identity could not be boiled down to any one aspect or example. Michelle explained how she identified with more than one character and how those identities helped her make decisions. Referring to the characters Cath and Wren, she stated:

I see myself in both of them. They are two completely opposite individuals, and I feel like I am a mix of the two of them. Reading this book was a very great experience, and it helped me see where my priorities should be though my time at [University]. I need to exhibit characteristics of both Wren and Cath. Be social, but do not let it take over. Focus mainly on your education, that is what you’re here for after all, but do not let it stop you from enjoying yourself.

Michelle and others demonstrated that their identity cannot be boiled down to one clear marker and that to do so would be a disservice to themselves. The students in this study began to recognize the layers of their identity and that different aspects of their identities can complement or complicate how they function in their new environment. Such observations may suggest that their time spent in class thinking and reading about college student identity allowed them to understand the

multiplicity of identity, an observation supported by both Alder (2016) and George (2012).

Implications

The conditionally-enrolled students who participated in this study highlighted various identities that new students bring to their college experience. While their identities are diverse, their understanding of themselves and others in the college transition highlight commonalities that faculty and staff members should be aware of and consider addressing. Faculty who teach conditionally-enrolled students should be aware of the various factors that impact student transition and how those transitions may contribute to classroom performance. For example, professors could engage in conversation about the transition process and what students' expectations of college life are—such discussions should take place beyond the confines of a university studies/transition course. As the students in this study affirmed, the readings and subsequent class discussions allowed the students to explore not only character development but also their own development in a time of stress and transition. In the interviews, students noted how helpful it was to have such conversations in class. These frank conversations allowed for relationship building that can support a sense of belonging in students (Strayhorn, 2012).

Acknowledgement of the emotional toll transition can take on a student may serve to alleviate some of the stress related to academic performance. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory that given appropriate support (scaffolding) from the teacher, new students (including those considered high-risk) can thrive in the college setting. Though students in this study had an instructor who specifically focused on addressing these issues in class, most students do not experience such conversations in a typical first-semester classroom setting. Students may feel more comfortable seeking advice or help from a professor if they know the professor is attuned to what students are going through emotionally and socially while they are trying to prove their worth in their new college environment. The findings in this study confirm Scanlon et al.'s (2007) earlier assertions that first-year students seek relationships with their faculty members and look to them for support.

While bridge programs for conditionally-enrolled students seek to prepare students for college-level work, failing to acknowledge the social and emotional development needed during this time is a terrible misstep. Universities should expect faculty members to prepare students academically while at the same time support social development. Administrators may need to revise or reconsider the scope of programs for conditionally-enrolled students by training faculty to have such conversations, even if those topics are tangentially or unrelated to the course material.

Students in this study affirmed Arnett's (1998) theory that early adulthood presents a great opportunity for identity exploration that is often manifested in one "making independent decisions" and "accepting responsibility for one's actions" (p. 7). As students explore their new environment, they are bound to also experience moments of hesitation, confusion, and self-doubt. Faculty who can provide

environments for exploring these decisions and feelings may build confidence and a sense of belonging in students, particularly with the use of fiction or non-fiction pieces that highlight what is common during a time of transition. This could be done in a number of college courses, such as transition courses and those in the fields of anthropology, communications, political science, psychology, sociology, and writing.

Finally, as the findings of this study highlight, family perceptions and interactions influence students in their attempts to be successful in their new college environment. Not only should family members try to understand their role in student success, they too, might benefit from reading some of the fictional pieces the students read in class. I encourage parents to familiarize themselves with current issues new students face, particularly in relation to the results highlighted in the findings of this study: how family dynamics and college stereotypes influence students' understanding of college and that students are entering a new phase in life in which they begin to understand themselves as multifaceted individuals. Such preparation will allow parents to continue to support students even as they are expected to navigate this new phase of their lives more independently.

Limitations

The majority of students who seemed to understand themselves better because of the literature were white, female students. This is likely because a majority of the characters from readings were also white, female students. While male characters were present in various readings, most were white. Fictional representations of people of color in the transition to college are scant. Various socio-economic and academic backgrounds were depicted in the required readings; however, racial differences were not prevalent. Though students did not address the readings' lack of diversity in their writing or interviews, it is possible students did not relate to characters because the characters seemed different from themselves.

Conclusion

Conditionally-enrolled students often struggle with the college transition and developing a positive student identity (Mann, 2001). Many of the participants pointed to aspects of a character's life that echoed their own: struggling to fit in, knowing who they are, and finding friends in a new environment. Students found comfort in reading about characters similar to themselves. The identification with successful students (albeit fictional) helped students feel empowered to continue in the Bridge Program and in college. Many students indicated that they learned something about themselves based on the characters' actions when they too experienced issues related to transition, social situations, or poor life-choices. These findings confirm Alder's (2016) and George's (2012) previous findings related to identity exploration in the classroom.

While this study did not seek to prove causation, it is worth noting that 95% of the participants continued their studies in the fall and 85% were still enrolled a year later (compared to the institutional retention rate of 79.9%). There were likely a number of factors that contributed to the success of these participants; however,

those in the study directly attributed their strong academic identity to their summer experience. Use of fiction that focuses on the college transition may encourage students to accept their feelings about their transition and recognize that while transitions are difficult, they can succeed in their new environment. Faculty and staff who work with students in transition must accept (and expect) that students will not leave their social selves outside of the walls of the classroom. To expect students to bring solely their academic identity with them to the classroom would be unwise and unsupportive. To prepare for students to work through their transitions in the classroom with the support of faculty and staff may provide the confidence and comfort students need to succeed.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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