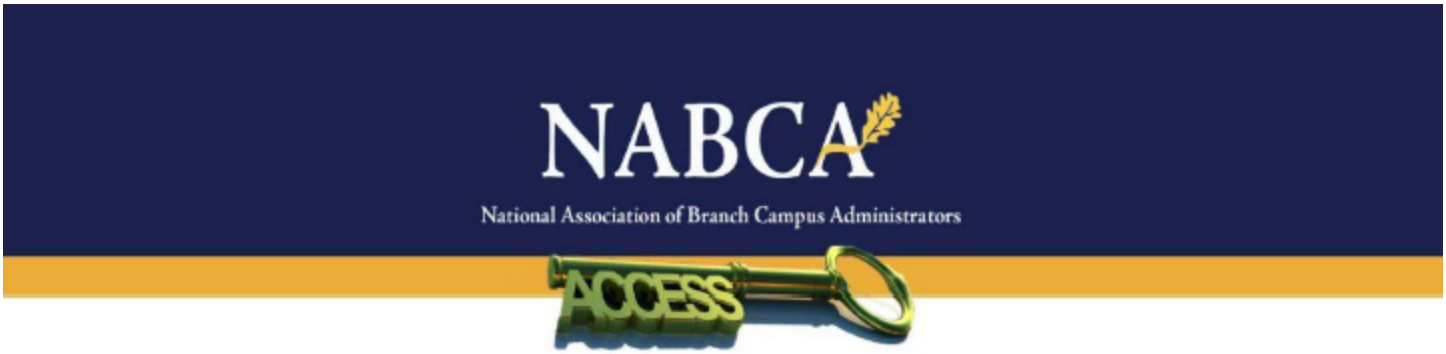

Access

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Access: The Journal of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators

Access: The Journal of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators is a peer-reviewed journal written and published by and for higher education presidents, provosts, deans, administrators, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders who have a vested interest in branch campuses and remote locations.

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Submission Guidelines

Share your research, knowledge, and expertise with other branch campus leaders. In order to expand our research and knowledge on branch campuses, we welcome a variety of both research and practical submissions. You may submit a traditional scholarly research article, literature review, case study, best practices article, or an opinion piece.

Must be in English and follow the style guidelines set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), Sixth Edition (2009). Should be a maximum of 7,500 words, not including abstract and references (if applicable); double-spaced (including quotations and references); and references must be complete and placed at the end. If a submission substantially cites the work of another author, a signed agreement giving permission to reprint the material from that work's copyright holder must be included.

One copy should be submitted electronically to journal@nabca.net as an email attachment in MS Word using the submission form provided. Please include the word "Access" in the subject line. Authors should retain a copy of all submissions. If you do not receive a receipt of response to your submission within one week, please check the submission email address and resubmit.

The National Association of Branch Campus Administrators

The National Association of Branch Campus Administrators (NABCA) is a professional organization committed to supporting the mission and goals of higher education professionals who work at a location that is separate from their parent/main campus, often called "branch," "satellite," "regional," or "center." NABCA is committed to providing a setting for the improvement of leadership, teaching, and research for branch and regional administrators, staff and faculty in higher education, and to advocate for and accelerate the growth of their locations. Our members work on higher education locations that range from centers with a population of 50 students to larger campus communities with 15,000 students, but the challenges they face are the same: from implementing academic programs, campus safety, and maintenance to student success initiatives and commencement celebrations. As an association, we equip public and private, national and international, two-year and four-year, and other higher education partners with the tools and resources they need to support the parent campus, students, and communities they serve.

For more information on NABCA, including becoming a member, visit nabca.net.

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Visioning an Anchor Institution Mission at a Branch Campus

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Abstract

Regional branch campuses have increasingly emerged as vital contributors to community development, particularly in their capacity to serve place-bound students. This case study examines the Stanislaus State Stockton Campus and its strategic evolution into an anchor institution. By implementing targeted initiatives across key domains—place-making, local procurement, inclusive collaboration, workforce development, and system-level reform—the campus has positioned itself as a catalyst for local wealth-building and community resilience. The outcomes of these efforts include increased community investment, rising student enrollment, external funding, improved institutional reputation, and expanded academic programming. The findings underscore the transformative potential of branch campuses in fostering sustainable regional development through anchor institution strategies.

Background

Universities are increasingly recognized as centers of education and research institutions but also as powerful anchor institutions—large, place-based organizations rooted in their local communities and unlikely to relocate (Democracy Collaborative, 2015). Their economic, cultural, and social influence extends far beyond campus boundaries. As anchors, universities drive regional economies through employment, procurement, and capital investment (Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999). They act as economic multipliers, stimulating local businesses, attracting talent, and fostering innovation and community regeneration (Glasson, 2003; Perry & Wiewel, 2005; Goddard & Vallance, 2013).

Universities promote community development, access to education, and social equity. Many incorporate service-learning programs, community-based research, and civic engagement into their missions (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011), often supporting underserved populations, local schools, health systems, and nonprofit organizations. University-supported community health programs, for example, can reduce disparities in access to care (Cantor et al., 2003). Inclusive strategies like community benefits agreements and shared governance models (Taylor & Luter, 2013) are critical in preventing university-led gentrification (Birch et al., 2013). Core to this work is a focus on equitable anchoring aligned with community wealth-building strategies (Taylor & Luter, 2013). Universities support social mobility through outreach, scholarships, K-12 partnerships, and higher education access that reduce long-term inequality (Benneworth & Sanderson, 2009). University branch campuses are especially well-positioned as anchor institutions, often serving place-bound students through local access, smaller class sizes, personalized support, and strong community ties. These campuses typically enroll large numbers of first-generation and Pell-eligible students, many of whom balance work, caregiving, and parenting responsibilities.

As such, branch campus missions often include close partnerships with local nonprofits, government, K-12 schools, and businesses leading to an alignment with broader community goals and laying the foundation as an anchor institution (Taylor & Luter, 2013). Unlike traditional economic models with top-down benefits, anchor institutions foster bottom-up growth by utilizing local assets to create sustainable wealth and leadership capacity, directly benefiting residents (Baciu et al., 2017).

Place and Identity: Stanislaus State Stockton Campus

Stanislaus State University (Stan State), a key part of the 23-campus California State University (CSU) system, plays a crucial role in serving the 1.6 million residents of California's six-county Northern San Joaquin Valley (CSU Stanislaus, 2023; TeamCalifornia, 2025). Located in Central California, this region is one of the nation's most agriculturally productive and demographically diverse areas. However, it also faces persistent challenges in income, education, and health equity. Approximately 15% of the population lives below the federal poverty line (Michael & Pogue, 2018), and only 18% of residents hold a bachelor's degree (SJDC, 2019), a figure well below the state and national averages of 36% and 38% respectively (US Census, 2022). Two counties are HRSA Health Professional Shortage Areas, ranking among the lowest in California for mental health care access (HRSA, 2025a) and are federally designated Medically Underserved Areas (HRSA, 2025b) with average life expectancy measures at the bottom half of California counties (Carlson, 2023). Its proximity to the San Francisco Bay Area further complicates efforts to recruit and retain health and education professionals, underscoring the need for "grow local, train local, keep local" strategies.

As a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), Stan State has a student body that reflects the diversity of the region, with 62% of undergraduates identifying as Hispanic/Latino(a), 69% being first-generation college students, and 62% being Pell-eligible (CSU Stanislaus, 2025c). The main Turlock Campus serves a more traditional undergraduate and transfer population, while the Stockton Campus predominantly serves place-based students—many of whom transfer from community colleges to complete their bachelor's degrees or pursue graduate programs, including teacher credentialing.

Over the past two years, the Stockton Campus has undergone a transformative journey as it has worked to embody the mission of an Anchor Institution. This case study will explore that journey, providing a roadmap for other institutions seeking to leverage their role as anchor institutions to drive community development and educational equity.

Approach: Anchor Mission at the Stockton Campus

Anchor institutions have the potential to drive community wealth building across seven key domains: place, ownership, buy local, collaboration, inclusion, workforce development, and system-level changes (Baciu et al., 2017). The Stan State Stockton Campus has made substantial investments in developing purpose, programming, and partnerships across these domains, all framed through the lens of community wealth building (Figure 1). These strategic efforts have resulted in a positive impact on the campus's reputation, recruitment, and retention, strengthening its role as an anchor institution and contributing to the broader regional community.

Figure 1. *The Stockton Campus has actualized an anchor institution misson through six domains: place, procurment, collaboration, inclusion, workforce development, and system change.*

Place: Leveraging Physical Assets for Community Wealth Building

Anchor institutions build wealth by activating underutilized local assets. Located within University Park, a 104-acre public-private redevelopment of the former Stockton State Hospital, the Stan State Stockton Campus is embedded in a historically underserved area adjacent to downtown Stockton. This strategic setting centers on education, health, and human services, and includes facilities such as the Stockton Unified Health Careers Academy, a rehabilitation hospital, mental health services, early childhood education, and health-focused businesses. Nearby schools, including KIPP and Pittman Elementary, contribute to a robust P-20 ecosystem.

Over the past two years, the Stockton Campus has expanded its community engagement efforts by deepening partnerships with local nonprofits and public agencies to provide accessible, mission-aligned programming. For example, United Way of San Joaquin and the City of Stockton selected the campus as the host site for their eight-month Nonprofit Capacity Building Program, which aims to enhance the operational effectiveness of local nonprofit organizations. Similarly, El Concilio—the region's largest Hispanic-serving nonprofit—hosts its annual three-day Women's Entrepreneurship Symposium on campus, bringing together students, faculty, local business leaders, and aspiring entrepreneurs to share knowledge and strengthen networks.

The campus has supported youth-focused educational initiatives, including a four-week Summer Algebra Institute for middle and high school students. In the current year, campus programming has further expanded to include movie screenings, college readiness workshops, and youth empowerment events. These efforts have increased campus visibility, community participation, reputation, and regional impact.

Buy Local: Supporting Economic Vitality Through Local Procurement

Anchor institutions foster community wealth building by supporting "buy local" initiatives, which help circulate financial resources within the region and contribute to the growth and sustainability of small local businesses. The Stockton Campus reinforces local economic development by engaging small, local businesses. While facing stringent state procurement regulations, the campus has tripled its number of approved food vendors—many of them minority- and women-owned—over two years. Additional partnerships with local event service providers strengthen the university's local economic impact and visibility.

Collaboration: Advancing Social Impact Through Strategic Partnerships

Anchor institutions play a crucial role in fostering collaborative initiatives by convening a diverse array of stakeholders, including nonprofits, governmental agencies, and public and private sector organizations. These collaborations are designed to develop and implement community-based programs that create meaningful social impact.

Through multi-sector partnerships, the Stockton Campus drives community-centered initiatives. A key example is the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site, launched in 2024 with partners including United Way, Community Partnership for Families, Family Resource Center, 211, Health Plan of San Joaquin, and El Concilio. In its first two years, the program processed over 880 tax returns, retained nearly $2 million in local refunds and credits, and trained over 30 student volunteers. Notably, the households served by the program included 21% individuals with disabilities and 8% veterans. Among the primary uses for tax refunds reported by participants, the top two were bill payment and savings (Figure 2).

In its second year, the program integrated students from regional community colleges into the tax preparation process, thus creating a pipeline for future recruitment. This collaboration increased the visibility of the Stockton Campus within the community, enhanced its reputation and brand recognition, and provided students with workforce ready skills.

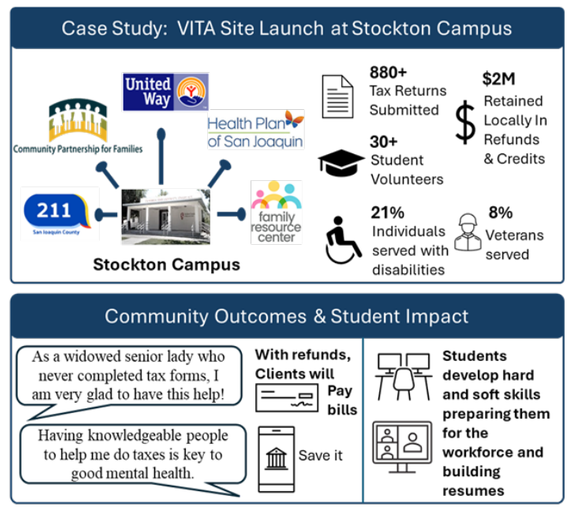

Figure 2. *The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) coalition has come together to provide free tax assistance to low-income community members in San Joaquin County.*

Inclusion: Training Community Health Workers

Anchor institutions play a crucial role in promoting economic inclusion by creating pathways to living-wage jobs creating financial security for individuals and families. In alignment with this mission, the Stockton Campus launched an 80-hour Community Health Worker (CHW) training program. CHWs bring valuable lived experience to provide essential services such as health navigation, outreach, and referrals to critical resources. The work of CHWs directly addresses health disparities, improves access to healthcare, and contributes to enhanced community health outcomes.

In collaboration with Health Plan of San Joaquin, the campus launched an 80-hour CHW program in partnership with Health Plan of San Joaquin, the regional managed care plan. Offered at no cost in English and Spanish, it prepares up to 90 individuals annually, with students completing 900 hours of community service. In the program's inaugural year, 55 students were trained in English, and 20 students completed the program in Spanish. Most of these students reside and work in San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties (Figure 3).

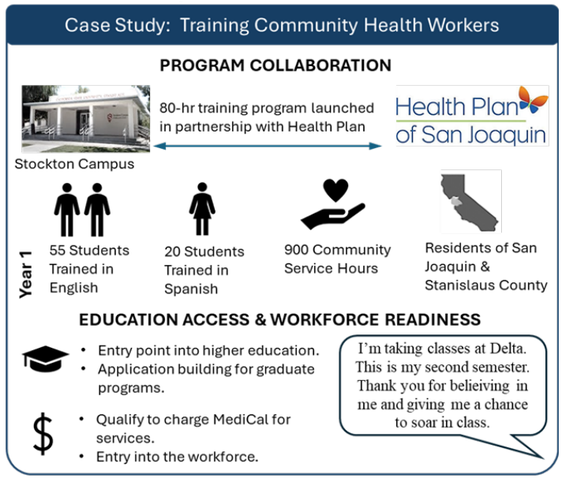

Figure 3. *The Community Health Worker Training Program allows community members to enter into community health work and for their organizations to bill for services provided. Some participants enter into higher education programs for the first time or into graduate studies.*

The program enhances both workforce readiness and educational access. The CHW program has served as an entry point into higher education for participants. The training utilizes the same learning management system as our regional community college partner, fostering seamless transitions to further education. Notably, from the first cohort, one participant applied for the Stockton Campus Master of Social Work (MSW) program, and several others sought admission to regional community colleges.

Workforce Development: Pathways to Health, Behavioral Health, and K-12 Careers

Anchor institutions play a vital role in workforce development. At the core of the Stockton Campus's mission as an anchor institution is empowering individuals to build wealth through educational attainment (Figure 3). Through programs like Warriors on the Way, the campus has created seamless transfer pathways with regional Community College students to complete bachelor's degrees in as little as 18 months. Warriors on the Way has placed a Stan State transfer coordinator on each of our regional community college transfer partners campuses. That has led to consistent growth in transfer students, with a 30% increase in enrollment in Fall 2024 (CSU Stanislaus, 2025a). After graduation, more than 72% of graduates remain in Stockton, and 95% stay in California (CSU Stanislaus, 2025b).

Stockton is a medically underserved area, grappling with shortages of nurses, primary care providers, behavioral health providers, and allied health professionals. The region faces challenges in recruiting health professionals. As such, long-term employment sustainability requires a grow-local, train-local, keep-local approach. The work in introducing students to careers in healthcare starts in high school and is paralleled by growth and expansion of local training programs (Figure 4).

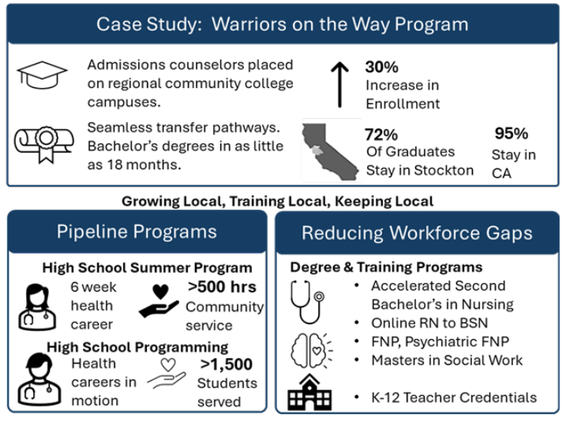

Figure 4. *Closing local workforce gaps in health, behavioral health, and K-12 teachers while increasing bachelor's degree attainment.*

The Stockton Campus offers a free six-week summer program for high school and community college students interested in health careers. Students hear directly from health care providers, participate in simulation activities, learn skills to be successful in college and health career programs while earning three college credits. As part of the program, students spend Fridays at local nonprofits, strengthening their applications for health professional schools while providing over 500 hours of community service.

In addition, the campus hosts year-round high school and community college visits, career panels, and simulation activities through a comprehensive "Health Careers in Motion" menu that includes sessions on Health Careers in a Team Sport, Preventing Burnout, Imposter Syndrome, Tips for Getting Into your Dream Health Profession, Pathways in Nursing, Conflict Resolution, Anxiety, Public Health, Finding Your Belonging in College, Chronic Disease Management, Motivational Interviewing, Healthcare Ethics, Trauma, and Successful Interviews. Over 1,500 students and community members were reached in the first four months of the program.

Addressing the Nursing Shortage: The Stockton Campus offers an Accelerated Second Bachelor's in Nursing program that trains registered nurses (RNs) in just 18 months. Additionally, the nursing program collaborates with Associate Degree Nursing programs offering an integrated and fully online RN to Bachelor's in Nursing program with an accelerated pathway to a Family Nurse Practitioner degree.

Addressing the Behavioral Health Provider Shortage: The Stockton Campus offers a hybrid two-year and part-time three-year Master of Social Work (MSW) program. The part-time program was launched in Fall 2024 through a partnership with Health Force Partners, which provides paid internships and clinical supervision.

Addressing the K-12 Workforce Shortage: The Stockton Campus plays a critical role in training the next generation of educators, offering programs for future elementary, middle, and high school teachers.

These initiatives cultivate and retain local talent by providing exposure to healthcare careers while fostering a model of "grow local, train local, and keep local" to serve the needs of San Joaquin communities. Through these targeted workforce development programs, the Stockton Campus is helping to address local workforce shortages and build a more resilient and sustainable local economy.

System-Level Changes: Advancing Social Mobility

Anchor institutions play a transformative role in reenvisioning economic activity by providing opportunities for social mobility to all community members, particularly the most vulnerable and underserved populations. For 25 years, the Stockton Campus has partnered with CalWORKs to offer trauma-informed workforce readiness training called Wellness WORKs!, which provides participants with soft skill development to prepare them for wellness and the workforce. Participating in the program has been shown to decrease participants' negative thoughts, boost self-esteem, and increase positive change (Martin et al, 2010; Martin et al., 2012). Over 12,200 community members have been served, and in a recent follow up, over half of participants secured employment or continued education within three months of program participation (Figure 5).

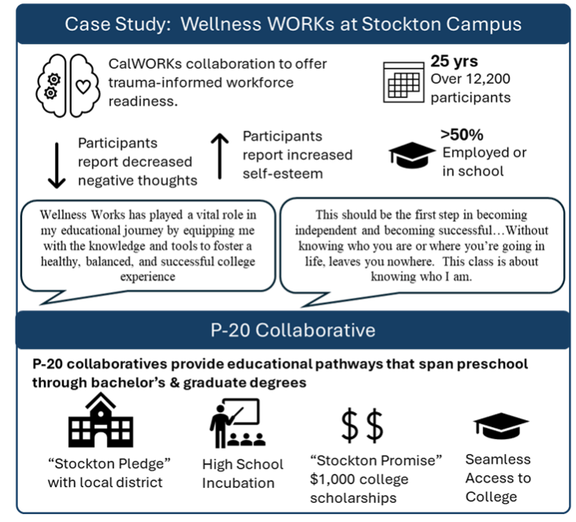

Figure 5. *The Stockton Campus enacts system change by supporting college entry through CalWorks Wellness WORKS program and by participating in a P-20 collaborative.*

Recognizing that the decision to pursue higher education is heavily influenced by prior academic and social experiences, opportunities for success must begin long before students are ready to transition to college. To strengthen college access, the campus is a partner in Stockton's P-20 collaborative, which creates education pathways that span the entire educational lifecycle, from preschool to bachelor's or graduate degrees. The P-20 collaborative includes a Stockton Scholars Program with scholarships that provide up to $1,000 annually for students who graduate from a Stockton high school (Stockton Scholars, 2025).

Anchor Institution Impact

The impact of these efforts over the past two years has been significant, with more than $2.5 million in grant funding secured for anchor institution initiatives at the Stockton Campus. This represents approximately 16% of Stan State's overall grant funding. Notably, there has been rapid growth in student enrollment, with the campus nearly doubling its enrollment in just two years and representing approximately 15% of Stan State's total enrollment. The CHW program has provided over $120,000 in stipends to participants, who received free, workforce-ready training. The VITA program retained nearly $2 million in the community. Additionally, VITA's marketing efforts provided no-cost campus branding, with the program prominently displayed in every Department of Motor Vehicles and Community Health Clinic waiting room across San Joaquin County. VITA student-volunteers are then prepared to contribute to local workforce needs. Through these anchor institution initiatives, the campus has grown student employment opportunities, enhanced student resumes, and increased student acceptance into graduate programs.

Beyond student success, the impact of these initiatives extends to faculty leadership, research, and scholarly opportunities. Partnerships with local agencies and nonprofits have created additional grant funding prospects and further strengthened the campus's role in community service and workforce development. These collaborations also provide students with valuable service-learning experiences, networking opportunities, and exposure to real-world applications of their studies (Figure 6). Ultimately, this work has helped to actualize a robust P-20 pipeline, laying the foundation for both individual and community wealth-building through education and economic mobility.

Conclusion

A college degree boosts lifetime annual earnings by $1 million, increases homeownership, improves health outcomes, and extends life expectancy. Anchor institutions like Stan State Stockton amplify these benefits by addressing structural inequities and fostering community prosperity. Through place-based investment, strategic partnerships, and mission-driven programming, the campus is advancing economic and educational equity in San Joaquin County. At the heart of the campus's transformation—from a state hospital to a branch campus and now to an anchor institution—is restorative justice in action. This transformative work has contributed to Stan State's recognition by the *Wall Street Journal*, where the university was ranked number four nationally for Social Mobility and number fourteen

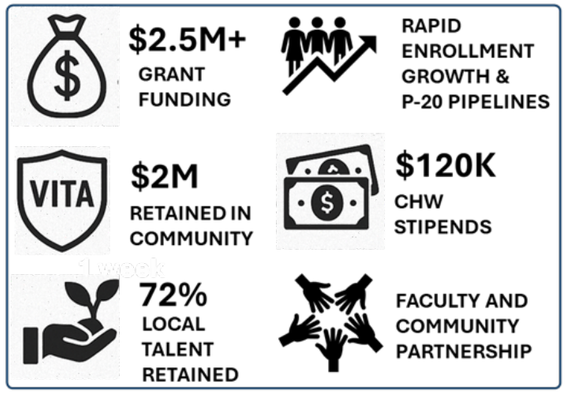

Figure 6. *The Stockton Campus anchor missioin has created growth in grant funds, programming, enrollment,and partnerships, creating positive impacts for the campus and community.*

for Best Value (CSU Stanislaus, 2025d). As it prepares for further growth—including a new Health and Human Services Training Center and Event Center in Spring 2026—the campus is poised to deepen its impact as an anchor institution supporting "grow local, train local, keep local" initiatives.

At the heart of a successful anchor mission is a shift from the traditional "Ivory Tower" model to a place-based institution that intentionally engages with the community, asking: "What are your needs, and how can we help?" Through this reciprocal process, authentic partnerships are formed, and the university identifies and fulfills its unique role in higher education—one that distinguishes it from peer institutions.

This approach fosters a symbiotic relationship in which the community begins to see the campus as an integral part of its fabric—a place that belongs to them. In turn, the community takes an active role in the University's success, envisioning themselves as students, graduate scholars, employees, collaborators, and employees.

Together, this work drives both individual and collective advancement by addressing disparities in education and health, and by reducing economic inequities, ultimately contributing to the creation of community and generational wealth.

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Effects of an Artificial Cohort on First-Generation Branch Campus Students

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Miami University Regionals

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the Courses in Common (CiC) program, an artificial cohort initiative, on college belonging, engagement, academic support, and course grades among branch campus (commuter) students. Data were collected via cross-sectional surveys, comparing CiC and non-CiC students, as well as first-generation and continuing-generation students. Results indicated no significant differences in belongingness or engagement between CiC and non-CiC students. However, CiC participants reported significantly higher levels of venting support, and first-generation CiC students experienced greater esteem and informational support compared to their peers ($p < .05$). Additionally, first-generation students earned grades nearly a full letter grade lower than continuing-generation students, a significant finding ($p < .05$), highlighting persistent inequities. The study underscores the potential of cohort programs like CiC to enhance peer support among commuter-campus students. Still, it emphasizes the need to address confounding variables, such as basic needs insecurities, to improve academic success. Future research should explore the effectiveness of cohort-based interventions across diverse commuter campuses, including branch campuses, community colleges, technical schools, and online programs, through longitudinal and mixed-methods designs. This research contributes to understanding how commuter-campus students—particularly first-generation and minoritized populations—can be better supported to achieve equitable educational outcomes.

Keywords: *branch campus, commuter campus, first-generation student, belonging, artificial cohort, academic support, academic achievement*

Introduction

Retention is a critical metric in higher education, reflecting the percentage of first-time undergraduates returning to the same institution the following fall (Irwin et al., 2024). This is particularly important due to the predicted demographic decline in enrollment and the current trend of fewer 18 to 24-year-olds attending college (Campion, 2020; Mathews et al., 2023). Improving retention rates improves financial stability and bolsters institutional reputation, which is vital in times of political and cultural divisiveness (Adlof et al., 2023; Burke, 2023; Marcus, 2023). Therefore, identifying effective retention strategies is a priority in higher education.

Although much research addresses retention rates and the effectiveness of various interventions at colleges and universities (Addison et al., 2023; Adlof et al., 2023; Costello et al., 2022; Eather et al., 2022), there is a significant gap in the literature focusing on retention at branch campuses (Fitzpatrick, 2024; Wrench et al., 2010). Branch campuses (BCs), typically serving commuter students, are geographically separate from main campuses (MCs), which usually serve residential students (Schuman, 2009). In one study at a Midwest university's BC, Jacquemin et al. (2019) found that students completing more coursework at the branch campus were less likely to graduate within six years, suggesting possible resource disparities between the main and branch campuses.

While similar to community colleges, BCs have distinct political and financial structures that present significant differences that are often overlooked (Bird, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2024; Schuman, 2009). Consequently, community colleges may also have different physical environments than BCs, and research has indicated that physical environments impact college students' perceptions of belonging (Garvey et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2021; Reilly, 2023), which may impact student retention (Nunn, 2021; The Center for First-Generation Student Success [The Center], 2020).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2019) defines a BC as "a campus or site of an educational institution that is not temporary, is located in a community beyond a reasonable commuting distance from its parent institution, and offers full programs of study, not just courses" (p. 2). The number of BCs across the United States is unknown because colleges and universities that must report their institutional data to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) are not required to report their BC data separately (Reilly, 2023; Williams, 2023; Wrench et al., 2010).

Another challenge in recognizing BCs is that colleges and universities often call their BCs by other names, including satellites, regionals, and centers (Reilly, 2023; Schuman, 2009). Many flagship state universities have branch campuses. For example, Ohio has 14 public state universities with 24 regional BCs. Kent State University has six regional BCs, Ohio University has five, The Ohio State University has five, and Miami University has two (Ohio Department of Higher Education [ODHE], 2024).

Unlike MCs, BCs often function as commuter campuses, where students juggle academics with part-time jobs, family responsibilities, and outside friendships (Bird, 2014; Schuman, 2009; The Center for First-Generation Student Success [The Center], 2020). This may explain why BC students are more likely to attend college part-time (NCES, 2023; The Center, 2020). Consequently, their limited time on campus outside classes can hinder their sense of belonging due to fewer interactions with peers and professors.

Various factors create barriers to BC student success (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Duran et al., 2020; Fan et al., 2021; Jack, 2019; Museus et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020; Rehr et al., 2022). Among these barriers, developing a stronger sense of belonging meaningfully impacts retention rates (Nunn, 2021; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). To improve BC students' sense of belonging, our study investigates the impact of enrolling students in a Courses in Common (CiC) program. This program establishes cohorts to help students connect with their peers and faculty within their Career Community. The CiC program is similar to an artificial cohort or a learning community, in which students are placed in or form groups, they take classes with or work with each other over time. Our Advising Office developed a series of Career Communities, grouping similar majors into blocks. For example, the Arts, Communications, and Humanities majors are combined into one Career Community. Other career communities include groups in engineering, math, technology, and health and sciences. Academic Advisors pre-registered students for the CiC program and then discussed it with them during Orientation. Based on the student's major or career of interest (if they had not chosen a major), advisors would enroll students in two or more courses (i.e., courses in common or blocks) aligned with the most appropriate Career Community.

A robust sense of belonging is crucial for college students' mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and academic success (Nunn, 2021). This is especially significant for marginalized populations, including first-generation students on BCs, who often face multiple layers of marginalization. As a result, first-generation students are less likely to graduate than their continuing-generation peers (The Center, 2020). Research indicates that first-generation students often choose two-year community or technical colleges over four-year institutions (The Center, 2020). However, many also choose BCs of large universities for their lower costs, smaller class sizes, and more personal faculty interactions (Hoyt & Howell, 2012). These students are often unaccounted for in federal reports, as their data are not required to be disaggregated from the main campus (Williams, 2023). This study examines whether participation in the CiC program impacted BC student success and sense of belonging, particularly for first-generation students.

Literature Review

Belonging and Academic Performance

Belonging is crucial for mental health and a significant predictor of academic success (Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Tinto, 2017). Students with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to use campus resources, enhancing academic achievement and belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Belonging meets a fundamental psychological need, contributing to overall well-being. It extends beyond fitting in, as Strayhorn (2012) describes it as a "feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group" (p. 3). Taormina and Gao used drive theory (Seward & Seward, 1937, as cited in Taormina & Gao, 2013) to measure Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), suggesting that the lack of belonging creates a need for it, such as loneliness leading to a need for connection.

Belonging needs are innate and universal, with exclusion potentially being "the most common and important cause of anxiety" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 157). Supporting this, the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) surveyed 18,755 undergraduate students from 38 U.S. institutions (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2024). The survey combines branch campus (BC) and main campus (MC) students. Results showed 65.7% of students felt they "belong at my college/university" (ACHA, 2024, p. 3), indicating that about one-third did not feel a sense of belonging, potentially impacting retention. Additionally, 32.4% reported that anxiety had "negatively impacted their academic performance in the past year" (ACHA, 2024, p. 5), aligning with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) idea that a lack of belonging contributes to anxiety. The ACHA (2024) defines a negative impact on academic performance as "negatively impacting a class or delaying progress toward a degree" (p. 5).

Demographics of Belonging

While everyone has a fundamental need to belong, some students face greater challenges in feeling a sense of belonging on college campuses (Costello et al., 2022; Duran et al., 2020). Through drive theory (Seward & Seward, 1937, as cited in Taormina & Gao, 2013), loneliness can be seen as the absence of belonging. This aligns with the findings of the most recent ACHA's American College Health Assessment (ACHA) (2024) that revealed women (52%) and trans/gender non-conforming students (68.4%) were more likely than men (50.7%) to score high on the UCLA Loneliness Scale and reported lower senses of belonging (ACHA, 2024; Fan et al., 2021). Correspondingly, the survey indicated that both women and trans/gender non-conforming students were less likely to report a sense of belonging compared to men (ACHA, 2024; Fan et al., 2021).

Marginalized populations, beyond gender identities, also struggle with belonging. Pre-existing societal identities impact their college experience (Costello et al., 2022; Duran et al., 2020). The National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (2022) defines marginalization as exclusion based on social identities and the unequal distribution of resources. Those with multiple marginalizations, such as first-generation students, are especially vulnerable and underserved, often feeling out of place upon entering college. First-generation students are more vulnerable than continuing-generation students due to factors such as low-income backgrounds, minority status(es), dependent responsibilities, and gender (The Center, 2020).

Many studies indicate that minority students, multi-ethnic students, and first-generation college students report a lower sense of belonging than majority students (Cahalan et al., 2024; Duran et al., 2020; Fan et al., 2021; Gopalan et al., 2020; Jack, 2019; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Tinto, 2017). Fan et al. (2021) found that non-Christian students and those with moderate to liberal political views were significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging than their Christian and conservative counterparts. The majority group reported a higher sense of belonging than the minority group. This study highlights that the campus environment, including mission, culture, and space, impacts belonging.

Common minority groups among college students include non-white, female, and 25-year-old students (NCES, 2023). First-generation students often belong to one or more of these groups (The Center, 2020). They comprise just over half of the undergraduate population and are likelier to attend public two-year colleges (The Center, 2020) and BCs (Hoyt & Howell, 2012).

Additionally, over half of first-generation students received Pell Grants, compared to just over one-third of continuing-generation students. Furthermore, first-generation students were much less likely to graduate with a degree or certificate than their continuing-generation peers (The Center, 2020).

First-Generation Students and Belonging

First-generation college students are commonly defined as individuals whose biological parents did not complete a four-year degree (The Center, 2017). Despite making up just over half of the college student population (The Center, 2020), first-generation students often belong to one or more minority groups and face significant challenges in developing a sense of belonging. They are more likely to come from working-class families, navigate the unfamiliar culture of higher education, and attend college part-time, often at public two-year institutions (Phillips et al., 2020; The Center, 2020). These factors, along with multiple responsibilities, may impede socialization and belonging.

Research on BC student populations is significantly limited compared to two and four-year institutions that are not BCs. At one large Midwest public university, BC students were more likely to experience anxiety, lack a supportive friend group, and feel less college

belonging compared to MC students (blinded citation, 2022). Institutional data from the university where our study was conducted (blinded citation, 2023) illuminated demographic differences: Both BCs have a more diverse student population (70% White at BC vs. 80% at MC), a higher percentage of students aged 25 and older (83% at BC vs. 1% at MC), more first-generation students (32% at BC vs. 14% at MC), and more Pell Grant recipients (27% at BC vs. 12% at MC). Additionally, BC students are more likely to enroll in online programs (31% exclusively online at BC vs. less than 1% at MC) and attend part-time (33% at BC vs. 3% at MC). Among first-generation students, 46% at BC received Pell Grants compared to 19% at MC.

These barriers may contribute to lower retention rates at these BCs (53% at BC1 and 62% at BC2) compared to the main campus (90%). Developing classroom-based interventions tailored to first-generation students may help combat these barriers and improve student achievement and retention.

Affordability is a significant challenge for first-generation students (Rehr et al., 2022), making BCs appealing because they have lower costs than MCs (Hoyt et al., 2012; Schuman, 2009). BCs also offer smaller campuses and classrooms, which can be less intimidating for first-generation and marginalized students (Bird, 2014; Hoyt et al., 2012; Schuman, 2009;). Mechur et al. (2020) suggest that community and technical colleges are critical access points for higher education, particularly for first-generation students. It is within reason, then, to believe that this sentiment also holds true for BCs. Unlike MCs, BCs typically adopt an open-access mission, making higher education more accessible academically, financially, and geographically for marginalized groups, including first-generation students (Bird, 2014; Schuman, 2009).

Last but in no way least, first-generation students from working-class families often experience a cultural mismatch at four-year universities (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Marcus, 2023; Phillips et al., 2020). Their working-class values, which emphasize interdependence, often conflict with the values related to independence emphasized in higher education. This cultural dissonance creates an "unseen disadvantage" (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 1189), making it harder for first-generation students to navigate and engage in college, thus creating yet another hindrance to their sense of belonging.

Artificial Cohorts and Learning Communities

While not a cure-all for BC students' significant barriers, college cohort programs or learning communities (e.g., CiC) offer multiple benefits. Lei et al. (2011) identify positive peer relationships, cooperative learning, feelings of cohesiveness, and higher retention and graduation rates as advantages of cohort models. Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) found that cohort participants valued peers' emotional and social support.

Similar to our study, a San José State University study of incoming first-year students who participated in a block scheduling program, or artificial cohort, took at least two courses together. Their program increased the retention rate from 81.4% to over 90% (Backer & Kato, 2017), with students reporting positive views of the block scheduling. Buck and Tyrrell (2022) noted that "a blended approach in combination with the focus and structure facilitated by block delivery teaching is positive for both student engagement and attainment" (p. 1088). Additionally, a longitudinal study on undergraduate psychology students in a learning community reported positive impacts on student performance and involvement in department and university life (Buch & Spaulding, 2008).

While cohorts or learning communities have drawbacks (Lei et al., 2011), numerous studies highlight their benefits. The social advantages (Buch & Spaulding, 2008; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006) might foster a sense of belonging among cohort students. Examining whether cohort models (e.g., CiC) can enhance the educational attainment of first-generation students is worthwhile. Given that BC students spend much less time on campus outside of classes, the potential benefits of a cohort intervention may prove particularly effective. Hypothetically, students in CiC programs might report different levels of belonging, engagement, and academic performance compared to non-cohort students. Understanding how first-generation and continuing-generation students benefit from these programs and if there are differences is particularly interesting.

Research Questions

We investigated four variables: college belonging, engagement, academic support, and course grades. We made three comparisons for each: all CiC students vs. non-CiC students, first-generation CiC students vs. continuing-generation CiC students, and first-generation CiC students vs. first-generation non-CiC students. Our research questions for each variable were:

College Belonging

RQ1a: Are there differences in college belonging between students enrolled in the CiC program and those not in the program?

RQ1b: Are there differences in college belonging between first-generation and continuing-generation college students in the CiC program?

RQ1c: Are there differences in college belonging between first-generation students enrolled in the CiC program and those not in the CiC program?

Engagement and Academic Support

RQ2a: Are there differences in student engagement and academic support between students enrolled in the CiC program and those not in the program?

RQ2b: Are there differences in student engagement and academic support between first-generation and continuing-generation college students in the CiC program?

RQ2c: Are there differences in student engagement and academic support between first-generation students enrolled in the CiC program and those not in the program?

Course Grades

RQ3a: Is there a difference in course grades between students enrolled in the CiC program and those not in the program?

RQ3b: Is there a difference in course grades between first-generation and continuing-generation students enrolled in the CiC program?

RQ3c: Is there a difference in course grades between first-generation students in the CiC program and those not in the CiC program?

Method

Participants

A total of 90 students consented to participate in this study, with 72 retained after data cleaning. Participants were enrolled across six different 100-level introductory courses. Ages ranged from 18 to 36, with a mean age of 19.69 (*SD* = 2.93). Approximately 40% identified as female, 51% as male, 4% as non-binary/third gender, and 4% preferred not to say. About 78% identified as White/Caucasian, 7% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% as Hispanic, 3% as Black/African-American, and 6% as multiple ethnicity/other. Over half (58%) identified as first-generation college students, 35% were not first-generation, and 7% were unsure. Around 87.5% were full-time students, and 12.5% were part-time. For 54%, this was not their first semester of college courses, while 46% were in their first semester. Lastly, 70% were first-year students, 25% sophomores, 3% juniors, 1% seniors, and 1% other.

Procedures

Before data collection, the authors obtained a list of all CiC blocks offered on regional campuses during the Fall 2023 semester. Each block comprised three-five different classes that CiC students could enroll in together (i.e., courses in common). We selected blocks offering primarily face-to-face classes and identified one class from each block for data collection. After receiving IRB approval, the primary author emailed each instructor of the target class to request permission to recruit students. Once a mutually agreeable class period was selected, a research team member attended that class period to collect data.

Upon arriving at the selected class period, the researcher introduced themselves using an approved script and distributed study packets to each student. Each packet contained two copies of the informed consent form, two copies of a University FERPA release form, and one copy of the survey instrument. Additionally, each student received a raffle ticket for a chance to win a $25 Visa gift card. Following the script, the researcher explained that any student present—regardless of participation—could enter the drawing by submitting their ticket along with a blank survey packet. The drawing took place immediately after the packets were returned. Students were instructed to keep one copy of the informed consent form and FERPA release for their records and to read the informed consent form attached to the study packet.

After completing the informed consent form, students were instructed to read the FERPA release form. They were informed that we were only interested in collecting educational records related to the specific course we were attending. They were asked to sign the FERPA form and complete the survey if they agreed. Participants then turned in their survey packets to the researcher. After collecting all the packets, the researcher asked the class instructor to draw a winning ticket from an envelope containing the collected tickets. The winning ticket number was announced, and the student with that ticket received the gift card. All students were thanked for their participation, and the class was dismissed.

After final grades were submitted for the semester, the researchers provided the signed FERPA forms to the regional office of Institutional Research. This office supplied a spreadsheet with the final grades for students who consented to release this information. The researchers matched final grades with survey responses using student names and unique University ID numbers. The Institutional Research office also provided a list of students enrolled in each CiC block, including the number of CiC courses each student took. This data was

also matched using student names and unique IDs. After pairing, verification, and data cleaning, student names and IDs were deleted from the dataset.

Measures

The survey instrument contained a standard demographic section and approximately 38 questions belonging to pre-existing measures. Each measure contained a brief set of instructions to help students process each question and each portion of the survey instrument. The preexisting measures included the Student Engagement Scale, College Belonging Questionnaire, and Student Academic Support Scale.

Student Engagement Scale

Student engagement was measured using 13 items developed by Mazer (2012; 2013). Each item is measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale that asks participants how often (never to very often) they engaged in particular class behaviors. Example items include listening attentively to the instructor during class, reviewing notes outside of class, and discussing the course materials with others outside of class. Student engagement is broken down into four subscales (silent in-class behaviors, oral in-class behaviors, thinking about course content, and out-of-class behaviors), with past alpha reliability estimates ranging between .77 and .92 (Mazer, 2013). The present study reports alpha reliability of .74 for silent in-class behaviors with one item removed (M = 17.85, SD = 2.25), .97 for oral in-class behaviors (M = 8.99, SD = 3.55), .82 for thinking about course content (M = 14.56, SD = 3.94), and .75 for out-of-class behaviors (M = 16.69, SD = 5.59).

College Belonging Questionnaire (CBQ)

Arslan (2021) developed the CBQ to measure social acceptance or inclusion and social exclusion among college students. The scale is measured using 10 Likert-type items on a 7-point scale with 1 meaning strongly disagree and 7 meaning strongly agree. The measure includes two subscales: social acceptance and social exclusion, with social exclusion items being reverse-coded for consistency. Arslan (2021) notes that, after reverse coding, the items can be summed together to create an overall belonging score, with higher scores indicating greater levels of college belonging. Past reliabilities for CBQ are reported as .89 for social acceptance, .71 for social exclusion, and .81 for overall belonging (Arslan, 2021).

The present study reports alpha reliabilities of .84 for social acceptance (M = 25.47, SD = 5.03), .73 for social exclusion (M = 25.68, SD = 5.48), and .83 for overall college belonging (M = 51.15, SD = 9.14).

Student Academic Support Scale (SASS)

Mazer and Thompson (2011) developed the SASS to measure several different types of support college students can receive from other students (informational, esteem, motivational, and venting). The 15-item SASS is measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale in which participants "indicated how often each type of support occurred over the last month by a friend in a specific class" (Mazer & Thompson, 2011, p. 218). Answer options range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (about every day), and answers are summed together to generate a score for each subscale. The subscales demonstrate excellent reliability in past studies, with Mazer and Thompson (2011) reporting alpha reliability estimates ranging between .84 and .94 for the different subscales. The present study reports alpha reliability estimates of .92 for informational support (M = 13.28, SD = 5.43), .89 for esteem support (M = 5.40, SD = 2.68), .72 for motivational support (M = 4.49, SD = 2.01), and .71 for venting support (M = 3.10, SD = 1.48).

Results

College Belonging

RQ1a asked if there were differences in student belonging between those students enrolled in the CiC program and those not in the program. An independent samples t-test was conducted, and no statistically significant difference was found for overall college belonging, t(70) = 1.335, $p > .05$. In addition, no statistically significant difference was detected for the social exclusion subscale, t(70) = 1.096, $p > .05$, or the social acceptance subscale, t(70) = 1.226, $p > .05$.

RQ1b asked if there were differences in college belonging between first-generation and continuing-generation students enrolled in the CiC program. An independent samples t-test was conducted and was not statistically significant, t(31) = 1.180, $p > .05$. Likewise, no statistically significant difference for the t-test comparing the social exclusion subscale, t(31) = 1.668, $p > .05$, or the social acceptance subscale, t(31) = 0.605, $p > .05$, was found.

RQ1c asked if there were differences in college belonging between first-generation students enrolled in the CiC program and first-generation students not enrolled in CiC. An independent samples t-test was conducted, and no statistically significant difference was detected for the overall college belonging, t(49) = 1.305, $p > .05$. In addition, no statistically significant difference was found for the social exclusion subscale, t(49) = 1.695, $p > .05$, or the social acceptance subscale, t(49) = 0.564, $p > .05$.

Student Engagement and Academic Support

RQ2a asked if there were differences in student engagement and academic support between students enrolled in the CiC program and those not enrolled. An independent samples t-test was conducted for each student engagement subscale: oral in-class behaviors, thinking about course content, out-of-class engagement, and silent in-class behaviors. No statistically significant difference was detected between CiC students and non-CiC students for oral in-class behaviors, t(69) = 0.300, $p > .05$, thinking about course content, t(70) = 0.678, $p > .05$, out-of-class engagement, t(70) = -0.016, $p > .05$, or the silent in class behaviors, t(70) = 1.771, $p > .05$.

An independent samples t-test was also conducted for each student's academic support subscales: informational, esteem, motivational, and venting. No statistically significant difference was detected for informational, t(88) = 0.762, $p > .05$, esteem, t(88) = 0.148, $p > .05$, or motivational, t(88) = -0.30, $p > .05$. We did find a statistically significant difference on venting, t(49.879) = 2.109, $p < .05$, between CiC students (M = 4.49, SD = 2.97) and non-CiC students (M = 3.31, SD = 1.79), with CiC students reporting higher levels of venting support.

RQ2b asked if there were differences in student engagement and academic support between first-generation and continuing-generation college students enrolled in the CiC program. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare these two groups for each student engagement and academic support subscale. No statistically significant differences were detected for oral in-class behaviors, t(31) = 1.609, $p > .05$; thinking about course content, t(31) = 1.310, $p > .05$, out-of-class behaviors, t(26.987) = 0.861, $p > .05$, or silent in-class behaviors, t(27.416) = -0.436, $p > .05$.

When examining the t-test for academic support for esteem, we did find a statistically significant difference, t(31) = 12.227, $p < .05$. First-generation CiC students (M = 7.56, SD = 3.78) reported higher levels of esteem than continuing generation CiC students (M = 5.06, SD = 2.61). No statistically significant differences were detected for the information subscale, t(31) = 1.617, $p > .05$, motivational, t(31) = 1.135, $p > .05$, or venting subscales, t(31) = 0.194, $p > .05$.

RQ2c asked if there were differences in student engagement or academic support between first-generation students enrolled in the CiC program and those not enrolled in the CiC program. An independent samples t-test was conducted for each student engagement subscale: oral in-class behaviors, thinking about course content, out-of-class engagement, and silent in-class behaviors. No statistically significant difference was detected between first-generation CiC students and first-generation non-CiC students for oral in-class behaviors, t(48) = 0.78, $p > .05$, thinking about course content, t(49) = 0.761, $p > .05$, out-of-class engagement, t(49) = 0.895, $p > .05$, or silent in class behaviors, t(49) = -0.236, $p > .05$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted for each student's academic support subscale: informational, esteem, motivational, and venting. A statistically significant difference was detected for informational support, t(49) = 2.236, $p < .05$. First-generation CiC students (M = 17.13, SD = 7.50) reported higher levels of informational support than first-generation non-CiC students (M = 12.80, SD = 5.87). No statistically significant differences were detected for esteem, t(49) = 1.716, $p > .05$, motivational, t(49) = 0.713, $p > .05$, or venting, t(18.093) = 1.940, $p > .05$.

Course Grades

RQ3a asked if there was a difference in course grades between students enrolled in the CiC program and those not enrolled in the program. An independent samples t-test was conducted comparing the end-of-term GPA (0-4.0 scale) of each student's letter grade in the class from which they were recruited and whether they were a CiC student. We did not detect a statistically significant difference in end-of-term course grade and CiC program status, t(62) = 0.743, $p > .05$.

RQ3b asked if there was a difference in course grade between first-generation and continuing-generation college students in the CiC program. The independent samples t-test to answer this question was nonsignificant, t(35) = 0.206, $p > .05$. However, when broadening this analysis to compare first-generation students and students who do not identify as first-generation, we did find a statistically significant difference, t(57.962) = 2.867, $p < .05$, d = 0.681. Continuing-generation students (M = 3.68, SD = 0.69) earned a higher course GPA than first-generation students (M = 3.01, SD = 1.14).

RQ3c asked if there was a difference in course grades between first-generation students enrolled in the CiC program and those not enrolled in the CiC program. No statistically significant difference was detected in course grades between these groups of students, t(42), = 0.041, $p > .05$.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of a CiC cohort program on students' college belonging and academic achievement. We compared students in a CiC program with those who were not and also considered their generational status (i.e., first-generation or continuing-generation). Our study produced mixed results, revealing that the CiC program was not a definitive solution to multiple problems. We did not find statistically significant differences in college belonging, student engagement, or academic achievement (i.e., course GPA) between CiC and non-CiC students. However, we did uncover significant differences in our research questions, especially for first-generation students in the CiC program.

The first significant finding was that CiC students reported higher levels of venting (part of academic support measures) than non-CiC students. In all likelihood, taking multiple classes with a core set of individuals (i.e., a cohort) may allow students to get to know each other and feel more comfortable venting to their peers about their courses and instructors. While having someone to vent to is good, it may not improve students' college belonging (Tinto, 2017) or academic achievement.

We found it intriguing that there were no significant findings in belonging between first-generation and continuing-generation CiC students. However, there were significant findings in state self-esteem as measured by the SASS (Mazer & Thompson, 2011, p. 216), with first-generation CiC students reporting higher levels of esteem than continuing-generation CiC students. This discrepancy may be due to the complex relationship between self-esteem and belonging (Cameron & Granger, 2020), where self-esteem influences perceptions of belonging and acceptance and vice versa. Trait self-esteem, established early in life and stable over time, may affect an individual's perceptions of belonging. First-generation students, often from minority groups (The Center, 2020), may have lower trait self-esteem, leading to a lower sense of belonging despite peer acceptance. Alternatively, state self-esteem may not have had enough time (less than one semester) to impact belonging.

Similarly, first-generation students in the CiC program reported higher levels of informational support than first-generation students not in the program. Again, access to familiar students may have allowed CiC students, first-generation students in particular, to feel more comfortable, which enabled them to ask their peers questions regarding similar classes or college in general. Perhaps the peer-to-peer informational support helped boost first-generation CiC students' esteem, as reported above.

Lastly, we observed differences between first-generation students and their continuing-generation counterparts. Specifically, first-generation students earned lower course grades. When converted to letter grades using our university's standard scale, continuing-generation students were 0.02 GPA points below an A-, while first-generation students were 0.01 GPA points above a B. This nearly full letter grade difference is particularly noteworthy in the context of the many barriers facing first-generation students (Broton et al., 2020; Duran et al., 2020; Fan et al., 2021; Gopalan et al., 2020; Rehr, 2022; The Center, 2020).

These outcomes are not entirely unexpected. While belonging is crucial for student achievement (Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2017; The Center, 2020), it is only one barrier that first-generation college students face. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, individuals must first meet their basic physiological and safety needs before addressing social needs like belonging. Research by Baker-Smith et al. (2020) indicates that first-generation students and other minority groups often struggle to meet their basic needs, including consistent access to adequate food, housing, and transportation, due to financial insecurity and other challenges. Therefore, an improved sense of belonging or academic support alone may not overcome the many obstacles hindering the academic success of first-generation college students.

Limitations

Spector (2019) noted that cross-sectional research designs often face skepticism, requiring clear justification. The efficiency and affordability of this design were critical considerations, particularly given budgetary challenges in higher education (Adolf et al., 2023; Campion, 2020; Matthews, 2023) and the limited time and resources available to BCs faculty (Schuman, 2009). Beyond practicality, the current political and social divides in higher education (Burke, 2023; Marcus, 2023) and cultural clashes between higher education norms and the working-class culture of first-generation and other minoritized groups influenced our decision. These factors led us to select a cross-sectional survey design for its practicality, participant anonymity, and potential to encourage honest responses.

While this design offers certain advantages, it also has inherent limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2021), including its inability to establish causality. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling and the small sample size restricts the generalizability of our findings to other branch campuses.

Implications for Future Research

Despite these limitations, our findings provide valuable insights and lay the groundwork for future research to explore further how artificial cohorts can support first-generation students.

For future research involving first-generation students and the use of artificial cohorts to enhance belonging and academic achievement, we recommend controlling for students' ability to meet their basic needs since, according to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, students are less likely to be concerned with belonging if their basic needs are not being met. Additionally, conducting longitudinal studies of cohort programs to evaluate belonging and academic outcomes, such as grade point averages and graduation rates, would also provide stronger evidence.

Finally, we recommend further exploration of cohort-based programs like the Courses in Common model across various commuter campuses, including BCs, community colleges, technical schools, and fully online programs. These campuses are more likely to enroll first-generation college students, making them critical sites for testing and refining interventions to enhance belonging and academic success.

Until we gain a deeper understanding of how to foster a sense of belonging among commuter-campus college students—who are often first-generation and from minoritized populations—we cannot fully support their academic success.

Conclusion

The results from our study partially support the development of artificial cohorts (i.e., CiC blocks) to help BC students. While the CiC program did not appear to generate additional academic success, future revisions to the program may be able to build upon the improved sense of academic support that we found and help reduce the barriers faced by first-generation students.

Our study addresses a notable gap in the literature regarding first-generation students on branch (commuter) campuses. Unlike community colleges, BCs have distinct financial and political structures, impacting their environment and resources. This distinction underscores the importance of research specific to BCs, which often enroll more first-generation, minority, female, and older students than the main campus.

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Can Summer School Programs Bridge the Gap to College Readiness?

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Abstract

For the past decade, educators and school leaders have struggled with declining student achievement in math and reading. This paper synthesizes current research on effective strategies to address this decline. Summer math programs generally yield small-to-moderate gains in math achievement, whereas targeted summer interventions can dramatically improve algebra proficiency and college readiness. Conversely, summer school programs have yet to produce meaningful improvements in reading. Research indicates that programs focused on individualized student support or differentiation strategies, accelerated learning, and high-quality instruction have a positive effect on student math achievement (Boss & Railsback, 2002). Additional studies suggest that high school summer bridge initiatives that emphasize algebra preparedness and college transition yield statistically significant gains in academic persistence and student GPAs (Harris & Vick, 2023; Grace-Odeleye, 2015). Lastly, readiness outcomes are measurably attributed to school-climate features, such as social belonging and relational safety (Alonso-Rodríguez et al., 2025). These findings suggest that strategically designed summer and bridge programs can help close the gap in college-ready math, particularly for low-income and disadvantaged students.

Introduction

More than ever before, access to and success in higher education depend greatly on students entering postsecondary institutions with sufficient knowledge and preparation in mathematics. Many students, particularly those from low-income or other disadvantaged backgrounds, arrive at college underprepared, increasing the need for remediation and negatively affecting overall student persistence.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have faced the dual challenge of addressing learning loss while supporting students' social and emotional recovery. Hashim et al. (2023) reported that educators and school leaders identified students' socioemotional well-being, mental and physical health, and safety as top priorities in pandemic recovery efforts, followed closely by student learning and achievement gains. Many students returned to the classroom after prolonged social isolation and trauma, experiencing setbacks in maturity, engagement, and social development. As a result, districts have had to balance the urgency of improving academic achievement with the need to rebuild students' emotional preparedness for learning.

When intentionally designed to support students' academic and social development, summer school programs (Callen et al., 2025) and bridge programs—initiatives that help high school graduates transition to and succeed in college (Grace-Odeleye, 2015)—can effectively improve college readiness, especially in marginalized populations. The aforementioned pattern is apparent at the high school level, with summer bridge programs closing the gap between secondary and college-level mathematics competency. Research indicates that increased rates of students' sense of relational belonging and academic self-efficacy resulting

from the implementation of these programs are both significant predictors of student persistence into postsecondary education (Grace-Odeleye, 2015; Alonso-Rodríguez et al., 2025).

Students entering postsecondary institutions prepared for credit-bearing math is a critical factor in college persistence and completion. Historically, economically disadvantaged and underserved populations are far less likely to enter higher education institutions (HEIs) ready for college-level mathematics, leading to an increased reliance on remediation and declining long-term outcomes. Research suggests that well-developed summer school programs and bridge courses can close some of these readiness gaps (Lynch et al., 2022).

This paper aims to synthesize current research on the effectiveness of summer school and high school bridge programs in improving academic achievement and college readiness. It also provides actionable implications for K-12 districts and HEIs seeking to support disadvantaged students and enhance equitable learning opportunities. The central argument is that strategically designed summer programs–particularly those that are targeted, high-dosage, and integrate academic rigor with socioemotional supports–are a viable strategy in improving match achievement and college readiness, especially among disadvantaged and underserved students. These findings are particularly relevant to HEIs, as increasing the number of students who arrive college-ready can reduce the need for remedial coursework, enhance retention and persistence, and improve long-term student success.

Findings and Implications

Summer Programs: Math Gains

In a 2025 study, researchers analyzed student-level NWEA MAP data from eight U.S. districts (approximately 400,000 students) to examine the impact of summer school attendance on academic achievement between spring and fall 2022 (Callen et al., 2025). Researchers found that summer participants gained approximately +0.03 standard deviations more in math than comparable non-participants, accounting for roughly 2–3% of the districts' estimated pandemic learning losses. These modest but meaningful gains were most pronounced among upper elementary students and in more academically focused programs. No significant effects were observed in reading achievement. With an average participation rate of only 13% across districts, the researchers noted that limited enrollment likely contributed to the overall modest impact of the programs (Callen et al., 2025). Callen et al. also noted that summer school programs usually lasted 15 to 20 days, with varying levels of instruction intensity (2025). The average attendance was 68%, meaning that most students only received 10-14 days of instruction, which is significantly less than the recommended doses for summer school programs. Additionally, noted were differences in content, scheduling, recruitment, staffing, and district support, which likely contributed to variations in effectiveness (Callen et al., 2025).

A 2022 meta-analysis of 37 experimental and quasi-experimental studies of summer math programs found that summer programs had similar positive impacts on standardized math assessments (+0.10 SD) and broader math outcomes, including course grades (+0.11 SD) (Lynch et al., 2022). To contextualize these effects, Matsudaira (2008) compared the cost-effectiveness of summer school with that of other interventions, noting that, dollar-for-dollar, summer programs may yield more than twice the benefit of class-size reductions. In a Tennessee STAR experiment, student achievement improved by 0.20 standard deviations when class sizes were reduced by one-third, at a cost of $13,000 per student. Conversely, summer programs typically cost between $1,500 and $3,300 per student while producing achievement gains of approximately 0.10 standard deviations (Matsudaira, 2008). Consistent with these findings, Lynch et al. (2022) also reported that programs explicitly focused on math produced stronger learning outcomes, aligning with prior research that demonstrates improved achievement through increased time on task and content-specific instruction.

High School Summer Bridge Programs

High school summer bridge programs aim to prepare junior and senior students for postsecondary education by integrating targeted mathematics instruction, college-transition workshops, and mentoring features. Empirical data indicate statistically significant impacts on students' persistence and achievement throughout their high school education. For instance, Harris and Vick (2023) found significant results that emphasized the benefits of a structured bridge program, with students exhibiting a 39 percent decreased likelihood of dropping out of high school, in addition to notably higher first-year GPAs when compared to peers who did not participate in summer bridge programs. Based on the findings of Alonso-Rodríguez et al. (2025), academic development is not the only contributing factor to students' success. Rather, restorative and community-based practices within secondary school settings facilitate the development of a positive socioemotional environment that promotes emotional well-being and cohesion among students, which are considered to be driving forces for academic readiness and classroom engagement.

Targeted bridge programs, which blend academic intensity with student mentoring, illustrate commensurate patterns in a high school environment, regarding students' academic readiness (Harris & Vick, 2023; Grace-Odeleye, 2015). Notwithstanding, there are limitations regarding student outcomes, as implementation quality and attendance consistency are prominent determinants of student outcomes in high school bridge programs. For instance, the works of Vincent (2021) and Huang et al. (2023) emphasize the impacts of fidelity, teacher capacity, and system-level supports on the implementation of secondary school initiatives.

Program Effectiveness and Design Considerations

Evidence across studies points to three major design principles: focus, dosage, and fidelity. The strongest gains are found in student-targeted, curriculum-aligned, higher-dosage summer programs focused on math readiness. Broad-spectrum, lower intensity programs produce meaningful but much smaller gains, yet they are unlikely to close student academic and college readiness gaps at scale. To maximize impact, summer programs should:

- Deliver instruction for five weeks or longer, five days per week, with 3-4 hours per day dedicated to academic instruction.
- Ensure programs are content-focused with clear grade-level learning objectives and sufficient time for enrichment activities.
- Support and expand on teacher preparation and qualifications and student incentives such as accessible transportation, meals, and supplies.

A recent study found that intensive algebra-focused summer programs produce greater gains in algebra readiness in randomized trials. The Elevate Math program reported substantial gains in algebra-readiness diagnostics for participating middle-school students, with readiness percentages rising markedly for participants, even with the majority still requiring some additional support. The results demonstrate that program design, specifically unambiguous, targeted algebra instruction with diagnostic placement and concentrated dosage, produces threshold-relevant impacts far exceeding the meta-analytic average (Snipes et al., 2015).

Low participation is a significant obstacle; even a highly effective program will have limited system-level impact if only a small portion of students attend regularly. Selective enrollment practices and policies may also limit equitable access and skew outcomes. The findings emphasize that scale, duration, intensity, recruitment, and fidelity are crucial. Policymakers and districts should view summer school as just one tool and include it in a comprehensive, multi-year recovery plan, which also involves school-year supports such as tutoring, extended learning time, and differentiated and targeted instruction (Callen et al., 2025).

Research revealed several effective strategies to address this decline in student achievement when developing effective summer school programs. Districts should ensure programs are content-focused programming with clear grade-level learning objectives and sufficient time for enrichment activities. Programs should focus on higher-dosage, academically-focused instruction. Ensuring sufficient dosage (multiple weeks, daily academic time) is critical to student achievement gains. Noted as the best-case dosage scenario for summer school initiatives are programs that deliver instruction for five weeks or longer, five days a week, with three-four hours per day dedicated to academic instruction (Callen et al., 2025). Additionally, critical issues of no lost instructional time (time on task), teacher preparation and qualifications, student incentives such as transportation, meals, and supplies can't be overemphasized. These findings highlight that summer programs and bridge initiatives have the potential to substantially improve math readiness when implemented with fidelity, suggesting that postsecondary institutions have a role to play in supporting and scaling these efforts.

Implications for Higher Education

Given the shrinking pipeline of college-ready students, HEIs should adopt a more proactive approach to engaging and promoting K-12 readiness through collaborative summer programs. Harris and Vick (2023) noted that recent evaluations of bridge initiatives yielded measurable positive outcomes with respect to student preparedness and retention via documentation of improved GPAs and persistence among students who attended bridge programs that were supported or facilitated by HEIs. Likewise, Alonso-Rodríguez et al. (2025) and Vincent (2021) emphasize a decrease in student attrition rates and enhanced engagement as a result of transitional experiences. These supports can come in the form of facilities, academic instruction, or site supervision.

These partnerships can take multiple forms, including shared facilities, instructional support, or site supervision. For disadvantaged student populations—where only 25–55% of students are initially college-ready–research demonstrates that well-designed summer school programs can increase readiness by

roughly three-five percentage points. These outcomes translate to roughly 30–50 additional college-ready students per 1,000 disadvantaged students (Lynch et al., 2022). Intensive models, such as the Elevate Math summer program, have achieved gains of 0.70 standard deviations, which reflects an increase of 20 percentage points in readiness (Snipes et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Many postsecondary institutions have struggled to meet enrollment and graduation goals, compounded by the shrinking size of the college-going population. K–12 summer-school math programs are a viable strategy to combat these issues by increasing the population of students prepared for college-level math. Broadly implemented programs demonstrate modest but meaningful gains (≈ +3-5 percentage points in readiness), while targeted, high-dosage interventions yield larger improvements in achievement, especially for disadvantaged students.

However, to achieve large, relevant increases, districts should invest in targeted, high-dosage general math and algebra readiness interventions for disadvantaged student cohorts and combine those with broader offerings with strong implementation support to turn short-term gains into long-term college success. When extrapolating these findings to the secondary education level, recent evidence regarding bridge programs and academic transitional experiences is further underpinned by not only academic rigor, but relationship-centered support. As a result, secondary education programs that implement student mentoring, restorative practices, and engaging higher education collaboration have shown both a statistically significant increase in mathematical readiness, as well as resiliency with respect to enhanced student persistence and socioemotional development (Alonso-Rodríguez et al., 2025; Grace-Odeleye, 2015; Harris & Vick, 2023).

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Case Study:

Evaluating Variables Driving Early College Academy Success

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Abstract

Early College Academies (ECAs) provide high school students with the opportunity to earn both high school and post-secondary credit. Wichita State University (WSU) launched Shocker Academy ECA in Fall 2023 but has not yet achieved anticipated enrollment targets. This case study explores key factors, including funding mechanisms, stakeholder engagement, and program structures that affect ECA success. A comparative analysis of three other institutions (Miami University in Ohio, the University of Mississippi, and Coastal Alabama Community College) will highlight the best practices and lessons learned for ECA growth and sustainability.

Introduction

Early College Academies (ECAs) allow high school students to earn dual credit for both high school and college through specialized programs. These programs may be offered on university campuses or through partnerships with high schools, private institutions, and homeschooling networks. The American Institutes for Research (2019) highlights that early college high schools can significantly reduce the time and cost required to earn a postsecondary degree. Research has also found that early college high schools yield long-term academic and economic benefits for students (Atchison et al., 2021). ECAs typically take one of three structural forms: they are either fully immersive, where all classes that students take are on the college or university campus; blended immersion, where some of the college or university classes are offered concurrently within the high school and some are offered at the college or university location; or early college high schools, which are blended high schools offering both high school and early college curricula within the high school only. (Figure 1). The American Institutes for Research (2019) explains that Early Colleges aim to serve students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

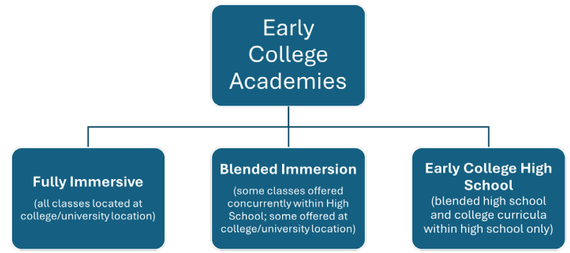

Figure 1. *Common hierarchies of structures of early high school academies offered by institutions.*

Wichita State University (WSU) introduced the Shocker Academy ECA program in Fall 2023 in collaboration with Wichita State University Tech, a technical college also located in Wichita, affiliated with Wichita State University and Maize Unified School District (USD) 266. Maize USD 266 has 2 high school campuses located within 2 miles of Wichita State University West. USD 266 reported a total high school enrollment of 2555 for the 2024-2025 school year, 1224 of whom are juniors or seniors (Kansas State Department of Education, 2025). Although still in its early stages, the program

intends to boost university enrollment by providing university-level courses to high school students at reduced tuition. However, participation has not grown at the rate initially projected.

Early discussions with Maize USD lead to estimates of approximately 25-50 total students per class of students combined between the two high school locations. The program was additionally designed to recruit students from nearby districts and homeschool families, expanding participation beyond USD 266. Table 1 shows student headcount by high school between program launch in Fall 2023 and Spring 2025.

One major factor influencing the accessibility of Early College Academies (ECAs) is the variation in funding models. Some programs benefit from direct state subsidies, allowing students to enroll at minimal or no cost, while others rely on tuition discounts or private funding sources. These disparities can create significant barriers for underrepresented students, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds who may struggle with even modest tuition fees. Additionally, students in districts with limited state support may find fewer opportunities for dual enrollment, reducing their chances of earning college credit while still in high school (Duncombe & Mann, 2022).

Geography and transportation further impact participation in ECAs. Barnett and Stamm (2010) explain students and families often bear the costs of transportation to college campuses, which can make participation unattainable for low-income or rural students. Programs that require students to attend classes on a university campus present a logistical challenge for those who do not have access to reliable transportation. Without institutional support, such as shuttle services or public transit partnerships, students without a personal vehicle may be excluded from participation. As a result, only students with access to private transportation can fully engage in on-campus learning, reinforcing existing socioeconomic disparities in higher education access (Duncombe & Mann, 2022).

To identify the factors that influence an ECA's success, this case study will compare WSU's Shocker Academy with three other institutions—Miami University (Ohio), University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), and Coastal Alabama Community College. Data from these institutions will be examined.

The primary focus of this research is to determine which factors, including political, financial, and community-based variables, might be best included in an ECA to drive recruitment and retention of high school students.

Table 1. Enrollments in Wichita State University West's Shocker Academy program by semester and student school of origin.

School	Fall 2023 Headcount	Spring 2024 Headcount	Fall 2024 Headcount	Spring 2025 Headcount
Maize South High School	16	16	12	14
Maize High School	4	2	3	1
Eisenhower High School	3	2	0	0
Valley Center High School	1	0	0	0
Andover eCademy	1	0	0	0
Bishop Carroll Catholic High School (Private)	1	0	0	0
Roberts Private Academy (Private)	1	1	1	0
Faith Academy (Private)	1	1	0	0
Life Prep (Private)	1	1	0	0
Homeschool	0	0	1	7
Unknown	0	0	1	0
Total	**29**	**23**	**18**	**22**

This study also examines how differences in funding models, tuition discounts, and state policies influence ECA enrollment. Additionally, it explores the roles that various stakeholders, including parents, students, and state legislators, play in the growth and development of an ECA.

Literature Review

Research on dual-enrollment and early college initiatives often underscores the importance of lowering postsecondary costs and improving college readiness. (Edmunds et al., 2017). However, legislative financial support varies significantly among states, which can substantially affect ECA barriers to entry for high school students and their families. In settings with robust state-level funding, dual-enrollment programs often experience strong enrollment growth, while programs without such support must rely on institutional tuition discounts and/or outside sources of support, especially to reach lower-income, first-generation, and at-risk students (Duncombe & Mann, 2022).

Shocker Academy does not receive direct state support; however, it uses a Market Based Tuition (MBT) approach to offer discounted tuition rates to ECA students. Prior to Fall, 2025 students were charged a rate of $99 per class, excluding the cost of books and materials. This rate has increased to $149 beginning Fall 2025 (Wichita State University, 2025). Comparison ECA programs studied offer different funding methods, which, when compared to WSU West's Shocker Academy Program may disadvantage Wichita State University and Wichita State University Tech's ability to recruit students into Shocker Academy.

ECAs frequently encounter challenges related to tuition affordability, particularly in the absence of external funding. Without sufficient state or institutional support, tuition costs can be prohibitive for students from lower-income backgrounds (Duncombe & Mann, 2022). Faculty requirements also pose a significant barrier, as accreditation standards mandate instructors meet strict credentialing criteria, which can limit the availability of qualified educators and restrict course offerings (Hoffman & Vargas, 2010). Additionally, hesitation among participants remains a key obstacle to ECA expansion. Some students report perceived barriers to pursuing postsecondary enrollment even in early college models, which suggests communication of the long-term academic and financial benefits remains critical (Edmunds et. al., 2017). Furthermore, differences in state policies create an uneven playing field, with some states providing robust funding and regulatory support while others leave dual enrollment programs to operate with minimal assistance. This policy variability creates frequently complex funding models with program expenses covered by multiple sources (Duncombe & Mann, 2022). This complexity can impact enrollment, accessibility, and overall program sustainability, making strategic advocacy and institutional adaptability crucial for long-term success (Hoffman & Vargas, 2010).

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data (enrollment, cost analysis) with qualitative data (interviews, policy documents). Quantitative metrics will include enrollment statistics from the inception of each ECA program, as well as a comparison of different financial support mechanisms. Qualitative data will consist of interviews with ECA administrators and an analysis of relevant legislation and institutional agreements.

Data Analysis will involve descriptive statistics to summarize enrollment trends, cost-per-credit, and program demographics. Comparative analyses will highlight how WSU's program measures against those of other institutions.

Comparative Analysis of Early College Academy Models

To better understand the factors influencing ECA success, Table 2 provides a structured comparison of Wichita State University's Shocker Academy alongside similar programs at Miami University (OH), the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), and Coastal Alabama Community College. The analysis highlights funding models, tuition structures, enrollment trends, and stakeholder engagement.

Wichita State and University of Mississippi are similar in their funding mechanisms and direct costs to high school students. They both have minimal state level funding to directly support high school enrollments and largely rely on tuition discounting or scholarship availability to lessen the burden of enrollment on students. University of Mississippi does not have a formal ECA program in place. However, it does have an immersive summer residential program for high school students that enrolls between 80-110 students, which is considerably higher than Shocker Academy. However, University of Mississippi has considerable funding to offset student costs for this specific program. Other high school enrollment programs have much more limited funding available to offset student tuition

Table 2. Comparison of different high school pre-college programming.

Feature	Wichita State (Shocker Academy)	Miami University (Early College Academy)	The University of Mississippi (Pre-College Programs)	Coastal Alabama CC (Dual Enrollment)
Program Location	Kansas	Ohio	Mississippi	Alabama
Funding Model	Reduced Tuition Rate (Market-Based Tuition (MBT))	College Credit Plus (CCP)/State Appropriations/ Tuition Abatements	Mississippi Dual Enrollment/ Dual Credit Scholarship Program	Dual Enrollment for Dual Credit
Student Tuition Cost Per Course	$99/course; Increasing to $149/ course FL-25	$0/course	Varies by program; higher price than community college options	$0/course for eligible courses
Matriculation to College Enrollment	30% (Includes FL-25 Admissions)	46% of CCP students continue with Miami U; 80-90 students each year	33% total; vast majority of dual-credit students participate in summer immersive residential program	~9% of total student enrollment continues with Coastal Alabama
Materials/ Books Provided	No	Yes	No	Yes
Program Structure	Blended Immersion	Full Immersion	Blended Immersion for Most Programs/ Full Immersion Summer Program	Mostly Early College High School Delivery
State Policy Support	No direct subsidies; Greater support for 2-yr technical education/ community colleges	Direct subsidies at reduced tuition rate	No direct subsidies; Greater support for 2-yr technical education/ community colleges	Appropriations from the Education Trust Fund to support H.S. Student Scholarships;
Stakeholder Engagement	Limited Early Buy-In from Parents and Districts; Recent growth with homeschool families	Strong with additional high schools being added; engaged student success coaching	Ala carte high school students primarily come via high school counselors; community partners/ champions key to engagement	Varies; Some districts are very responsive others are very difficult to work with; same with parents
Recruitment Strategies	Initial Outreach to School Districts and Homeschool Networks	Outreach to School Districts; Transportation arrangements for students	Having well trained staff to assist with recruiting; Offering academic and non-academic enrichment for immersive programs	Cost of credit hours $0 help do most of the selling for them; providing strong student support systems
Enrollment Trend	Steady to Slightly Downward; Far below projected enrollments	Growing; 9 high schools with an additional 2 schools being added	Varies by program from slightly downward to slightly upward; overall stable	Rapid high school head count growth across 64 partner high schools

and struggle to grow in an increasingly competitive environment. Wichita State's Shocker Academy seems to have similar challenges with growth with a potentially cost prohibitive tuition structure for low income and at-risk populations.

Expected Constraints And Challenges

Financial Constraints

Wichita State University's early college academy operates without direct state subsidies, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in tuition rates. The recent tuition increase announcement from $99 to $149 per class, effective beginning with the fall 2025 semester, could reduce enrollment demand, as affordability is a key factor for students and families considering dual enrollment options. When compared to other programs studied, it appears that Wichita States ECA is neither the cheapest nor the costliest compared to other comparison institutions.

It should be noted programs studied that have a tuition fee passed through to families tend to underperform high school programs where funds were either discounted or offset with public monies in full. These were also programs that drew more low-income and at-risk students, granting opportunities to students who may not otherwise have access to a college education. From this study, it appears students and families are price conscious when making academic decisions.

Faculty Resources/Availability

Another challenge has been the availability of qualified faculty, particularly for specialized courses. Ensuring enough instructors with appropriate credentials can be difficult and may limit course offerings and program expansion. According to Earls (2023), the availability of qualified faculty and strong community engagement are critical predictors of academic success in early college entrance programs. This is perhaps felt most severely at institutions that struggle with recruitment of departmental staff or need staffing for larger enrolling courses than typical high school courses.

Wichita State's Shocker Academy program originally offered courses on schedules that mimicked the bell schedule of the local school district it draws the most student enrollments from. However, university faculty support for this schedule was inconsistent and pushbacks from departments led to cases where courses could not be taught because available faculty were teaching on a schedule that overlapped bell schedule start and end times. Additionally, many Wichita State University departments have limited faculty and bias toward offering classes on the main university campus where classes have a likelihood of higher enrollments than if the section were instead offered as part of the Shocker Academy program.

Legislative Support

Legislative policies in Kansas further complicate the situation because the state does not provide broad-based funding for dual enrollment programs. This places Wichita State University at a disadvantage compared to institutions in states where government funding and legislative support make such programs more financially accessible to students. Hoffman and Vargas (2010) provide a comprehensive guide for policymakers on designing effective early college programs, emphasizing the need for robust legislative support.

Gaining Community/Family Buy-in

Gaining buy-in from key stakeholders, including parents, students, and local high schools, is essential for the success of the early college academy. Strong engagement and trust-building efforts are necessary to ensure program viability and long-term sustainability. According to Earls (2023), community engagement plays a pivotal role in the success of early college programs.

Increased Competition

Wichita State University also faces intense competition from private universities and community colleges in the region. Although it is the largest local university, WSU must differentiate its offerings and demonstrate the value of its early college academy to attract and retain students in a competitive landscape. Friends University, also located in Wichita, Kansas, offers an ECA in collaboration with the much larger Wichita USD 259 school district. In addition, Butler County Community College, in the neighboring county where Wichita State is located has a robust ECA as well.

Preliminary Discussion

At this stage, WSU's main obstacle lies in balancing affordability with the desire for significant enrollment growth. Institutions in states with firm legislative backing for dual enrollment may have a competitive advantage. While WSU's MBT strategy offers some affordability, careful communication of the program's value will be key.

Recommendations

Find Champions to Promote WSU Shocker Academy: Wendy Pfrenger, Director of Pre-College Programs, discussed the importance of community champions in advancing enrollments in University of Mississippi Pre-College programs offered. WSU Shocker Academy primarily relies on communications with high school counselors rather than seeking peers in the schools and community to also help promote the program. Seeking out these influential members in the community can help reach more potential students.

Start Communication with High School Students Earlier: WSU Shocker Academy reaches out to High School Sophomores and Juniors for enrollments in the program. Beginning this conversation earlier in their students' high school journey may help families make decisions that can make Shocker Academy a more viable option for their students.

Consider Options to Expand Free and Reduced Lunch Students: Currently all students in WSU Shocker Academy can access Wichita State University and Wichita State Tech classes at a significantly reduced rate. However, this may still be too high of a price point economically for some families. Wichita State University currently waives tuition for one course per semester for students who qualify for free and reduced lunches upon request. Expanding this program to allow additional course tuition to be waived further addresses equity concerns while also potentially increasing student credit hours in the program.

Coordinate with Local School Districts to Create Additional 2+2 Pathways: By collaborating closely with high school and district level administrators, institutions can streamline the transition from high school to higher education through coherent 2+2 pathways. Ensuring students satisfy both high school and college requirements is critical to student success and can also assist school districts in addressing faculty availability concerns. Illustrating clear progress toward a bachelor's degree, these school-district partnerships can bolster community trust, increase ECA enrollment, and improve overall retention in dual-enrollment programs as students pursue programming aligned with their academic and career goals.

Lobby State Legislators: When students complete their education sooner, they can enter the job market as productive members of society, which can have a significant economic impact. The additional years of income can positively impact that student and increase tax revenues collected by State and Local municipalities. Additionally, state support of ECAs can greatly reduce the cost of higher education to families, which has been a significant concern for Kansas and many other states' governments.

Conclusion

Early College Academies (ECAs) serve as a vital mechanism for increasing college accessibility and affordability, particularly for underrepresented student populations. By integrating secondary and postsecondary education, these programs provide students with a head start toward degree completion while reducing overall tuition costs. However, as demonstrated through this case study, the sustainability and success of ECAs depend on a combination of financial support, strategic partnerships, and strong stakeholder engagement.

Shocker Academy's initial enrollment challenges highlight the importance of structured funding models and proactive outreach efforts. Comparative analysis suggests that institutions with state-backed financial support or institutional subsidies tend to experience higher and more consistent enrollment. Wichita State University's tuition-based model, while offering reduced rates, may still present a financial barrier for some students, particularly those from lower-income households. Exploring additional funding mechanisms including partnerships with local businesses, scholarships, or state advocacy efforts could enhance program accessibility and long-term viability.

Beyond financial considerations, ECAs must actively cultivate relationships with parents, school administrators, and policymakers to strengthen program credibility and expand recruitment efforts. Engaging students and their families earlier, particularly before their junior year of high school, may encourage greater participation and long-term commitment to the program. Additionally, building community champions within high schools and local organizations may serve as a powerful tool for spreading program awareness and increasing enrollment.

Institutional support structures, such as faculty buy-in and course scheduling alignment, also play a crucial role in an ECA's operational success. Additionally, some ECAs lessen transportation barriers by offering courses fully online or by training high school teachers to deliver college-level coursework in their own classrooms. For instance, the University of Texas's OnRamps program offers a fully online dual enrollment model, allowing students statewide to complete college courses without traveling to a campus (OnRamps at the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.). While OnRamps enrollments have rapidly grown, it is not yet clear whether this online model fosters the same elevated rates of postsecondary matriculation that Miami University's fully immersive Early College Academy has demonstrated. This discrepancy represents a key topic for future research. Addressing faculty availability and aligning course offerings with high school schedules or online delivery methods may help ensure a seamless academic experience for participating students. Similarly, transportation and accessibility remain logistical hurdles that must be addressed to ensure equal opportunity for all eligible students, regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic status.

A key finding from this analysis is that fully immersive ECAs conducted exclusively on the host university's campus appear to have significantly higher rates of matriculation from high school into the sponsoring university. Although the underlying reasons remain inconclusive, it is suspected that the immersive environment fosters stronger connections between students and the institution, ultimately encouraging continued enrollment through degree completion. Universities that view ECAs primarily as a recruitment mechanism may therefore want to emphasize an on-campus, immersive model rather than a blended or fully high-school-based approach. Future research should explore the precise factors behind these increased matriculation rates and investigate how immersive campus experiences influence students' long-term academic trajectories.

Ultimately, while Shocker Academy has encountered early obstacles, the potential for growth remains strong. By adopting best practices from successful ECAs, leveraging targeted recruitment strategies, and advocating for legislative support, Wichita State University can position the program for long-term sustainability. A continued focus on affordability, stakeholder engagement, and structural alignment will be key in ensuring that Shocker Academy fulfills its mission of expanding college access and enhancing educational outcomes for high school students.

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Case Study:

Increasing Retention and Completion with a Living-Learning Community

Matt McLean

Ingram State Technical College

Prior Qualitative Study-Background

Auburn University-Lumina Foundation Grant Research

A research team from Auburn University received a $75,000 Lumina Foundation Grant to conduct a qualitative analysis (see Appendix) to determine the efficacy of Bibb Correctional Facility in implementing a Vocational Village. “Vocational Villages have been created to provide a positive learning experience for justice-involved adults, who are serious about completing career and technical education” (MDOC Vocational Villages, 2025). The Vocational Village model differs from the general population by housing participants in an educational dorm and allowing them the ability to self-govern. The educational dorm concept is an approach to increase the participation, retention, and completion of adult learners. Allowing the participants to self-govern in the educational dorm helps alleviate staffing issues and reduces the number of officers needed in hard-to-staff rural locations. Ingram State Technical College (ISTC) began using the Vocational Village model first at Bibb Correctional Facility, an Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) medium-security facility in Brent, Alabama. The ADOC has 14 correctional and 12 work-release facilities, and the potential exists to replicate Vocational Villages at 60% of these locations.

This project represented a collaboration among ISTC, ADOC, and Auburn University. The Auburn University research team worked with Bibb Correctional Facility (education facility for males) inmates, ADOC Officers, ISTC students, faculty and staff, and Alabama communities and employers to assess the viability of the proposed Vocational Village. The concept used by ISTC and ADOC was based on a similar program administered by the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) that demonstrated success.

The Auburn University team surveyed current and former residents of the educational dorm, ADOC officers assigned to the dorms, and ISTC faculty and staff involved with those students. These surveys consisted of semi-structured interviews with students, officers, faculty, and staff. This study concluded in March 2023. Survey question responses are in the Appendix.

ISTC established the Vocational Village, a living-learning community, at Bibb Correctional Facility in the Spring semester of 2022. Inmates participating in a career technical education (CTE) program at ISTC are housed in a dorm that serves as a therapeutic learning environment, fostering an honorary dorm atmosphere and supporting their success. ISTC proposed a partnership with ADOC to replicate the existing education dorm concept and expand the concept to the entire institution. ADOC is in the process of making Bibb Correctional a program-only camp where all inmates will be involved in educational or therapeutic programming offered at the institution or be transferred to another location. The complete transition is underway, and ADOC expects the transition to be completed in Fall 2025. As of November 2025, the transition is still in progress on the ADOC side of the project. The transition will be complete when there are no more general population (non-programming) dorms at Bibb Correctional Facility.

The Vocational Village provides participants with a dedicated space promoting an atmosphere conducive to learning, populated by individuals with similar interests and goals. The living-learning community is removed from the general population. Students attend classes and work-based learning labs and engage in tutoring, peer mentorship, therapeutic programming, and leisure time activities within a community where all residents have a similar focus

Quantitative Study-Introduction

This project represents a collaboration among ISTC, the ADOC, and the Lumina Foundation. ISTC received a supplemental grant from the Lumina Foundation to continue studying the Vocational Village model. The funding facilitated quantitative data tracking within ISTC's Office of Institutional Effectiveness. The previous study by Auburn University illustrates the viability of the Vocational Village model as an effective learning environment. ISTC's quantitative data collection is expected to reinforce the summary from the qualitative study. ISTC plans to track the semester-to-semester retention rates and certificate completion rates of the educational dorm students and compare those numbers to inmates not living in the educational dorm.

Bibb Correctional Facility currently has a population of 1703 inmates. According to recent reports (Corrections, 2024), Bibb is at 185% capacity. The original structure, with renovations, was designed to house 918 inmates. Brent, Alabama, is a rural community, 32 miles southeast of Tuscaloosa, 52 miles southwest of Birmingham, and 73 miles northwest of Montgomery, the state capital. The remote location of Brent, away from Alabama's population centers, makes it difficult to hire officers and adequately staff the correctional facility.

Ingram State Educational Dorm Structure

Bibb Correctional has six housing units, each comprised of four dorms or bays. Three bays in each unit are for the general population, and one is designated as a segregation unit. Each bay houses approximately 80 inmates in an "open dorm" concept. ISTC's Vocational Village pilot program was housed in E-Dorm, Bay 3. ISTC's educational dorm has approximately ninety residents. Most of the residents are either current or past students, teaching assistants, or part of the dorm's governing structure. Some non-ISTC residents are placed in the bay due to overcrowding or security measures under ADOC mandate. The dorm also has a secure classroom that is used as a learning resource center for tutoring, advising, library services, or study sessions. As of April 2025, ISTC has moved to C-Dorm and has expanded from one bay to two bays. Soon, ISTC will occupy all of C-Dorm. C-3 is for current students, C1 and C4 serve as dorms for students waiting to be enrolled or students who have graduated. ISTC's goal is to have C-Dorm solely for ISTC's currently enrolled students, incoming freshman, and alumni to allow students to remain in a more controlled environment versus general population.

ISTC's educational dorm has a more stringent code of conduct for its residents compared to the general population areas, and the leadership structure (comprised of participants) within the dorm adjudicates all disciplinary matters. The leadership group consists of three dorm representatives, two assistant dorm representatives, a sergeant-at-arms, a dorm clerk, an audiovisual crew, a service crew, and an information desk crew. The dorm representatives, sergeant-at-arms, and dorm clerk are all elected by the residents via secret ballot. The other positions are then appointed. The dorm representatives are charged with setting and revising policies, communicating needs to ISTC staff, and boosting morale in the dorm. Students who violate the Code of Conduct policies, whether the ISTC Student Code or ADOC policy, are written up, and each level of misconduct has a predetermined point value. Residents sign an acknowledgment of these rules when assigned to the dorm and agree to the consequences. Students may work off minor offenses in the dorm by performing extra duties such as cleaning or covering extra work shifts. This process is handled in "court" by the sergeant-at-arms. Serious violations of the ISTC Student Code of Conduct or ADOC policy are handled by the appropriate institutional administrators.

The main purpose of the educational dorm is to provide ISTC students with a positive learning environment, with like-minded individuals, free from the distractions of the general population, to create a small respite from their reality, and to provide informal peer mentor relationships to support and guide each other to completion of a degree or certificate program. The dorm also serves to mimic the support structure of a "free world" college by fostering growth, advising, tutoring, and supporting each other as would happen in a traditional institution's Student Services division.

Ingram State Technical College Programming

J. F. Ingram State Technical College is the sole correctional education provider in the State of Alabama. ISTC is an open-enrollment institution and actively recruits students who are usually within ten years of their end-of-sentence (EOS). Exceptions are granted in several cases. ISTC's Vocational Village differs from the Michigan model in that Michigan requires a high school diploma or GED, whereas ISTC does not. Since the 1960s, ISTC has offered adult education, career and technical programming, and soft skills exclusively to justice-involved individuals in Alabama. In early 2023, ISTC completed its expansion into all of the state's prisons, day reporting centers, and community work centers. Before ISTC's expansion, justice-involved educational opportunities were the responsibility of the Alabama Community College closest to the correctional facility and varied in quality concerning resource allocation, number of programs, and priority as part of the college's mission.

ISTC students have full days of work and classroom instruction. ISTC programming is designed to give intensive, hands-on job training experience in high-wage, high-demand trades. The specialized trades and national certifications at Bibb include the following:

- Carpentry
- Electrical
- Plumbing
- HVAC
- EPA Certification
- Forklift Certification
- OSHA 10 Certification
- NCCER Core Safety
- Ready-to-work
- Adult Basic Education or GED

ISTC has a unique role in providing justice-involved students with stackable credentials. After each semester, successful completion ensures the student receives a short-term certificate. As the student progresses, each short-term certificate is stacked on top of the other until he or she receives a certificate of completion. If students get paroled, reach the end of their sentence, or gets transferred, the students will have portable evidence of their level of training.

Quantitative Study

ISTC compared semester-to-semester retention rates and cohort completion rates of students who chose not to relocate to the educational dorm versus students who chose to live in the ISTC Dorm. Non-educational dorm students did not receive the same services and extra learning opportunities available in the educational dorm. ISTC conducted monthly visits with the Student Services team to inform students of the services available to them as ISTC students and for advising or tutoring sessions. The study's purpose was to compare the educational dorm students' performance, persistence, and completion rates versus their non-educational dorm counterparts.

ISTC's Institutional Effectiveness and Student Services departments tracked each cohort's progress using semester-to-semester persistence and completion data. ISTC used the Fall 2023 cohort as a baseline for this study, when all of the Vocational Village elements were in place. Students who were second-, third-, or fourth-semester students in the fall of 2023 were tracked for persistence and completion, but not by fall-to-fall comparisons, since most of ISTC's programs can be completed in three semesters (fall, spring, and summer). There were several factors outside of ISTC's control in determining this baseline. ADOC factors, such as transfers, end of sentence, or parole, were tracked to the best of ISTC's ability. Some students transferred to other facilities with the same ISTC program they were enrolled in, and they continued. Some started a new trade or added a new workplace skill at the work release centers, e.g., CDL or heavy equipment operator, just to name a few options available at these locations. ISTC continues to work closely with ADOC Classification workers to place program holds on students while they are enrolled in a trade to reduce unplanned transfers. Overcrowding, and changes to the security level of the students sometimes supersede the program holds.

Preliminary Data

ISTC tracked the data of each trade area program, with numbers from the Fall 2023 semester being the baseline. Carpentry and HVAC are four-semester programs, while Electrical is a three-semester program. Two of the biggest challenges facing retention were the number of transfers and the disciplinary violations by the students affecting their eligibility status with the school and with ADOC. The table below (Table 1) has been updated since May 2024. The data for the Fall 2024 cohort is in progress, with a scheduled graduation date of May 2025.

Table 1. Bibb cohort data.

Carpentry: (4 semester program)	# in Cohort	Semester to semester	Graduated	Grad rate
Fall 2023	4	4	4	100.00%
Spring 2024	8	8	7	87.50%
Summer 2024	5	5	5	100.00%
Electrical (3 semester program)				
Fall 2023	3	3	3	100.00%
Spring 2024	14	12	12	85.71%
Summer 2024	11	9	8	72.73%
HVAC (4 semester program)				
Fall 2023	6	6	6	100.00%
Spring 2024	7	6	6	85.71%
Summer 2024	6	5	5	83.33%

Project Timeline

Fall 2023: Establish a data baseline with assistance from ISTC Bibb Faculty and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

Spring 2024: Begin tracking semester-to-semester retention data.

Summer 2024: Calculate graduation rates for Electrical Cohort.

Fall 2024: Calculate graduation rates for Carpentry and HVAC.

Monthly: Coordinate student services info and tutoring sessions. Student-Leadership Progress meetings

End of each semester: ISTC faculty and staff strategize with Student Services staff to reduce drops and increase persistence. Examples: academic early alerts, increase tutoring, and identify service gaps.

Building upon the success observed in the Michigan Model of the Vocational Village concept and the educational dorms at Bibb Correctional Facility, this initiative holds promise in providing inmates with a conducive environment for learning, skill development, and rehabilitation. Monitoring retention rates and degree completion of students in the educational dorms compared to their counterparts, ISTC seeks to validate and strengthen the qualitative findings and offer empirical evidence of the program's effectiveness.

Despite overcrowding and disciplinary issues, ISTC's commitment to providing a supportive educational environment remains unwavering. Through structured programming, stackable credentials, and personalized support services, ISTC aims to empower justice-involved individuals with the skills and qualifications necessary for successful reintegration into society.

References

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MDOC Vocational Villages. (2025). Retrieved from www.michigan.gov/msi/about/vocational-villages.

Appendix: Trends and Themes from Round One Stakeholder Interviews

Nicholas Derzis, PhD, CRC

Peggy Shippen, PhD

The first group of interviews was with the Vocational Village students. Overall, students were positive about the experience and the support from the ISTC staff. Students like the fact that they are housed in the same dorm with other students who have the common goal of pursuing education at Ingram. They feel that being in the same dorm provides a level of accountability. The setting in the dorm is better than in the general population.

> Student quote: "It has helped me tremendously, and I find myself doing work for myself."
>
> Student quote: "The dorm is cleaner and there is less riffraff, that's why everybody needs the dorm before they get the job."
>
> Student quote: "Any laws and bills you can pass for ADOC, and education would be a plus because y'all educating us let's further know we won't be back to prison, come and see how things went."

The second interviews were conducted with the ISTC Instructors. Overall, all (MDOC Vocational Villages, 2025) Instructors' interviews were positive about their interaction with students. Instructors did not focus on the prison aspect as much as they did on the educational aspect of their jobs. Their perceptions seem to be that the vocational village is a better dorm as there are supports available for students.

> Instructor quote: "You have to gain their respect; you also have to be clear that they are notyour friends, to keep a professional student relationship."
>
> Instructor quote: "I enjoy the guys and look forward to working with them daily. I do feel some of the guys are dragging it out so they can continue to participate."
>
> Instructor quote: "There was always a lot of stuff going on in the dorm and whatnot. But now, the guys tell me the living environment's great. They have open classrooms where they can participate. If they are struggling with anything, they can go into the classroom and do some work and what not. It's been beneficial, most definitely, I believe."

Officers were the last group of interviews conducted. We interviewed ADOC officers at Bibb County Correctional Facility. Officers at Bibb do not work exclusively with the ISTC program and the vocational village dorm. Therefore, they have experience working with all inmates and dorms. Overall, the officers agree that the environment in the Vocational Village dorm and the student inmates who live there have fewer disciplinary issues than general population inmates.

> Officer quote: "80-90% do what they should in E3, and the dorm rep does a great job."
>
> Officer quote: "I would tell prospective students that this program is a good opportunity to provide for the family when released"
>
> Officer quote: "To free-world and legislators, come see what we are doing, come see for yourself, folks need opportunities in the camp and more educational programming."

Round Two Stakeholder Interviews: The first group of interviews was with the Vocational Village students. Overall, students continued to be positive about the experience and the support from the ISTC staff. Students like that they are housed in the same dorm with other students who have the common goal of pursuing education at Ingram. They feel that being in the same dorm provides a sense of community.

> Student quote "Living in the education dorm lets us do some class work together as a community and being around people who want to better themselves"
>
> Student quote: "Living in a place with people with the same goals and the same mindset."
>
> Student quote: "When I was out there, I didn't get to go to college, but now that I am here, I can go to college"
>
> Student quote: "ADOC does not make dorm placements in a meaningful way, and we get non-school guys living in our dorm"

The second interviews were conducted with the ISTC Instructors. Overall, all instructors' interviews were positive about their interaction with students. Instructors noted that ADOC restrains the educational program from working in a traditional college schedule. It was recommended that Ingram work with ADOC to bring lunch to ISTC for students to promote continued participation each day and prevent students from going on break and not returning.

> Instructor quote: "I ask my students to recruit other like-minded students."
>
> Instructor quote: "The dorm and school program hold students to a standard."
>
> Instructor quote: "Peer tutoring can help students with similar personalities, and they get along well."

The available officer was the final interview for the second round.

> Officer quote: "Better communication between Ingram and ADOC about which inmates are chosen to be in the program would help."
>
> Officer quote: "Not all students in the program are there for the right reasons; some are just trying to beat the system"
>
> Officer quote: "Compared to the other dorms, this dorm is about 50/50 compared to the other dorms, they are about the same."

Summary

The following suggestions are based on the data analyzed as part of the Vocational Village project. We offer five observations from the trends and themes found in these data:

1. As it relates to student placement in the Vocational Village dorm and enrollment in technical education program, ADOC, and ISTC should have improved communication between stakeholders. This could include a liaison between the two entities and a formalized process in which correctional officers, instructors, and others can give feedback about the student inmate's probability of success.
2. Nearly all stakeholders were positive about the model. Some stakeholders were more specific about the features, such as the opportunity to peer tutor, study in the dorm, share ideas, and support each other.
3. Dorm representatives appear to play a vital role that contributes to the success of the model. At some point, all stakeholders noted that having a point of contact for the dorms was a strength.
4. Incentives could be more defined and more systematic (end-of-semester ice cream social, academic celebrations, movie night, popcorn, etc.). These types of activities may improve the structure and underscore the value of the program.
5. In both the first and second rounds of interviews, stakeholders were not completely familiar with the term Vocational Village. The education dorm model was noted, but may not reflect the intent of this project. Formalizing the Vocational Village model through branding, advertising, and graduating high-quality students who are prepared to enter the world of work with all the skills needed to be successful.

BCLI Chatter:

National Association of Branch Campus Administrators

Branch Campus Leadership Institute VII 2025-2026

The Branch Campus Leadership Institute (BCLI) VII 2025-2026 cohort was comprised of the following people:

- **Dr. Kristen Brookover**, Executive Campus Dean, West Des Moines Campus, Des Moines Area Community College.
- **Dr. Mark Dochterman**, Deputy Director, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Campus East St. Louis.
- **Lisa Gallo Swan**, Director of Fallon Campus and Rural Outreach and Interim Coordinator for Liberal Arts and Sciences, Western Nevada College.
- **Jamica Hines**, Campus Director/Associate Dean, the Southeast Campus Nashville State Community College.
- **Dr. April Holyfield-Scott**, Director, DeSoto and Grenada Campuses, University of Mississippi.
- **Augustine Iacopelli**, WSU West Director, Wichita State University.
- **Dr. Shawntain Jenkins**, Director, Central-West Michigan Region, Grand Valley State University.
- **Corina Morales**, Program Manager, University of Houston-Clearlake Pearland.
- **Dr. Leigh Anne Newton**, Director, Tupelo and Booneville Campuses, University of Mississippi.
- **Bill Peters**, Executive Campus Dean, Newton Campus, Des Moines Area Community College.
- **Dr. Stefani Schuette**, Campus Director, Pounce Health Sciences University.
- **Dr. Sarah M. Sweitzer**, Dean, Stanislaus State University, Stockton Campus.
- **Jen Wollesen**, Executive Campus Dean, Carroll Campus and Templeton Regional Center, Des Moines Area Community College.
- **Susanna Zambrano**, Associate Dean, South Yuma County Services, Arizona Western College.
- **Abby Zegers**, Executive Campus Dean, Urban Campus, Des Moines Area Community College.

This collection features comments and reflections from participants in NABCA's Branch Campus Leadership Institute (BCLI). Designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, BCLI equips attendees with the leadership insights, knowledge, and practical skills necessary to make a meaningful impact in higher education. These excerpts from participant assignments reflect the personal and professional growth experienced throughout their BCLI journey.

Session 1: Welcome to BCLI

Dr. Cyndee Perdue Moore, Director of Operations, NABCA

Dr. J. Gary Adcox, Vice President, Research at Pathways 2 Careers & NABCA President

Mandy Bezeredi, Fairhope Campus Director, Coastal Alabama Community College and NABCA Vice President

Jen: I welcomed the opportunity in the breakouts to learn a tiny bit more about some of the other BCLI participants and from that short interaction believe we all will have a lot to contribute to this experience. I am looking forward to the opportunity to make more professional connections with leaders in higher education and draw from their expertise and experiences to further myself.

Lisa: I found the breakout sessions to be invaluable, as our discussions highlighted the essential balance between tradition and innovation in achieving our mission to serve our communities. They also emphasized the pressing need to develop sustainable solutions that can support our campus and students in the long run.

Shawntain: Until reading this book (*The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future* by Arthur Levine & Scott Van Pelt, 2021), I was not aware of how far we come within higher education, and how far we have not come within higher education. This was a sobering moment, yet a moment that also produced the reality that in leadership we must continue to embrace being radical and being change agents. It was a moment in seeing my own leadership and asking myself the question of "Where do I aspire to lead?"

Stefani: I look forward to learning from my colleagues, hearing new perspectives, and getting a better understanding of the industry's history. Many of these questions will remain unanswered, but I hope to come away with a stronger understanding and maybe a twist on my leadership style that will help guide my campus, its students and employees, to a better future.

Session 2: Institutional Overview from the Presidential Perspective

Dr. Susan Elkins, Palmetto College Chancellor, University of South Carolina

Kristin: Explaining to people that I lead with curiosity and care and expect them to serve students with curiosity and care seems to be straight forward (curiosity and care are both concepts most people can understand) but also adaptable to different functions and needs...These conversations and readings helped give me the space to clarify my own philosophy and the courage to talk explicitly about how that philosophy informs our branch campus's operations under new leadership.

Bill: The session yesterday was very beneficial. The presentation was very good, and I gleaned a great deal from her work and experiences. Equally if not even more advantageous was the dialogue with my classmates. I learned many things about staff assignments, how to make staff feel welcomed, who to gain influence with and who to seek for advice. I feel like I am gaining decades of experience by connecting with my classmates.

Mark: From my perspective, leadership is a series of relationships between leaders and followers, within a context, to serve an intentional goal. However, spotting good leadership is much more difficult. I have seen beloved leaders that were ineffective, and I have seen overly firm leaders that got a lot done but were less than loved. One of the barometers I use to consider another person's leadership is the way people talk about facing challenges. When you start to hear regular speak (largely from followers) that puts the intention (the goal or vision serves as a clear answer to the "why" we would face a challenge in a certain way) ahead of the action (the "what" we are doing now), then you are starting to get a sniff of good leadership.

Stefani: I have to think about what my vision is for my campus. I want our students to feel supported, have access to appropriate resources and to be successful. From admissions to graduation and beyond, I want people to have an extraordinary experience. I have thought about this for a long time, but never thought it counted as a vision. As we continue our work, I realize that this is the vision I want my team to embrace.

Sarah: The presentation on the South Carolina branch campuses was a great case study of the importance of strong leadership traits, the use of data to inform decision making, and how branch campuses can function in different ways depending upon the local community needs in both time and place. It was great to hear of the different ways in which the USC branch campuses have developed their individuality and their special place in the different communities that they serve.

Session 3: Community Engagement and Service Learning

Dr. Vicki Baker, Professor, Economics and Management, and Director, Albion College Community Collaborative (AC3), Albion College

Augustine: My focus coming into BCLI was laser-focused on the "big goal," but I'm starting to realize that I'm not going to be able to get the support for the big things without getting control of and righting the path of our smaller items and programs.

As I mull over these possibilities, I'm reminded of something I've been wrestling with for a while: How do you lead effectively when you're not the one holding the purse strings? It's a question that keeps coming up in my personal self-reflections, and this session provided some valuable insights. Leadership, as it turns out, isn't just about making decisions. It's about influencing the decision-makers, building coalitions, and creating a vision so compelling that others can't help but get on board.

Leigh Anne: At times, this community outreach task has been overwhelming to me because there is so much to be done and there are only so many hours in the day. After this session, however, I was reassured that each outreach effort, when put together as a whole, will begin to result in positive strides with the community after given some time.

I had a misconception that I needed to have a future partnership figured out, but after the session, I realized that just reaching out to our community to offer any service we could provide is the catalyst for a conversation, which would take the course of action the community needs, not something I have to have completed planned from the beginning. That realization took a load off me and gave me optimism that the task was not too big for us to handle. It truly consists of consistent, small steps which will add up to a positive community impact.

Susanna: Dr. Baker's emphasis on reimagining partnerships inspired me to view community collaboration not just as a task but as a transformational opportunity to enhance student learning and address community needs. By aligning goals with high-impact practices and evaluating partnerships rigorously, I believe tangible outcomes are within reach.

Jen: Being visible in the community as a positive member is good, but being engaged in the community events is where the real relationships come. Volunteering at events, bringing community members to campus for events, serving on local boards, are some examples of how visibility and involvement are achieved.

Lisa: The idea of establishing a board of advisors is a turning point for our campus. While we have operated without one in the past, this reflection highlights how invaluable such a group could be in addressing our challenges and achieving our goals. By creating a formal network of advisors with diverse expertise, we can better serve our students, strengthen our community partnerships, and ensure our campus continues to grow and thrive.

Session 4: Government and Community Politics and Policies

Dr. Josh Duplantis, Dean of Workforce and Economic Development, Coastal Alabama Community College

Dr. Gary Adcox, Vice President of Research at Pathways 2 Careers and NABCA President

April: Without direct access to state legislators or a robust government relations team, I must rely on indirect methods of influence, such as amplifying the voices of students, faculty, and community leaders. Their stories and successes provide powerful evidence of our campuses' impact.

Augustine: This session wasn't just about learning strategies or swapping ideas; it was about confronting my own leadership style and how I can better articulate and inspire a shared vision—not just for my team, but for all the stakeholders invested in WSU West and its potential…This session reminded me that bold ideas often start as whispers, gaining momentum only when they are repeated and amplified." The road ahead won't be easy, but as I've learned through this program, the most rewarding journeys rarely are. And if I'm feeling a little uncomfortable, it probably means I'm exactly where I need to be.

Shawntain: This session showed me that lobbying is merely about establishing a relationship. During this presentation, I thought about who my legislatures are at the local and national levels and asked myself, "Am I doing enough?" This was a thought-provoking session that challenged me to look at ways to expand the areas of work that I am doing.

Susanna: The session reinforced that leadership isn't about being the fastest or the smartest but about building relationships, understanding systems, and

persisting with purpose…This session reminded me that leadership is a marathon, not a sprint. And while I may not always feel fast or efficient, I know I'm moving forward with purpose and passion.

Leigh Anne: Every day we see students supported, connections being made, and challenges overcome, but if we do not tell those stories regularly, our main campus does not know or understand the work we do.

Session 5: Leader Conversations and Capstone Case Study

Dr. Cyndee Perdue Moore, Director of Operations, NABCA

Abby: It is essential to recognize that different institutions may require varied leadership styles to thrive, and finding the right fit is crucial for maintaining harmony and effectiveness.

April: The concept of followership isn't something we talk about a lot, but this exercise made me realize how important it is. It's easy to focus solely on leadership, but being a good follower plays a huge role in team success. Strong followers support the leader's vision, offer honest feedback, and actively contribute to achieving goals. It's a balance of being engaged and independent while also being collaborative and supportive.

Corina: Through my eight years in higher education, some of the peak lessons learned from leaders are when we have faced difficult situations or had to make challenging decisions. She mentioned how it is easy to be a leader on a good day, but your true leadership shows during those challenging times. Another point we discussed was how we can approach things with a mindset of yes, but also understanding our capacity.

Jen: Leaders who connect institutional goals to the personal values of their teams—such as promoting equity, improving retention, or closing achievement gaps—can inspire greater motivation and collective action. In my practice, aligning these goals with the broader mission of community empowerment has been a powerful way to unite stakeholders around shared challenges.

Session 6 Strategic Enrollment Management and Admissions Policies

Dr. Neil Scott, Vice Chancellor for Student Success at the Alabama Community College System

Jamica: His clarification that small goals do not equate to lowering expectations was empowering. Often, in environments that are results-driven, there can be pressure to achieve lofty objectives without considering the incremental steps necessary to reach them. By focusing on smaller, manageable goals, we can build momentum and ensure that we are not overwhelmed by the magnitude of our aspirations. This perspective encourages a more sustainable approach to leadership and success.

Augustine: This session reinforced my belief that while external pressures, whether political, financial, or technological, will always exist, strong leadership rooted in ethical decision-making, strategic planning, and team development will be the key to navigating them successfully.

Corina: Dr. Neil Scott [presenter] stated, "As we celebrate this milestone [highest enrollment in a decade], we remain focused on our mission to empower students, strengthen communities, and drive economic prosperity across the state." The two major points in this statement that resonated with me and his presentation were his commitment to empowering students and strengthening communities through enrollment and student success. We all play a critical role in a student's experience from meeting prospect students in the community to working with existing students at your location, you are making an impression and impact on their experience.

Bill: Dr. Scott was very informative. He was able to break down enrollment into small pockets of populations and stages I had not yet considered. I have a better understanding of how to quantify enrollment trends and data analysis.

Susanna: Dr. Scott cautioned against simply aiming to surpass the previous year's numbers without a clear plan, something that I take seriously as I continue to push my team to level up their efforts. This is part of the reason why I signed up for the Branch Campus Leadership Institute."

Session 7: Ethical and Legal Issues

William Adcox, Vice President, Chief of Police, and Chief Security Officer, University of Texas Police at Houston

Shawntain: While I did get something from the presentation, the ability to hear what is going on with our branch campuses is very valuable to me. I always gain new knowledge from my peers…It never ceases to amaze me when I attend sessions with like-minded colleagues that we all walk away with renewed energy as we all speak the same language.

Jamica: As leaders, it is essential that we not only address the immediate concerns of our campuses but also maintain a long-term vision that prioritizes ethics and legality in our decision-making processes. The conversation around these topics served as a reminder that ethical implications must not be an afterthought; they need to be integrated into the core of our institutional frameworks.

Kristin: My breakout groups were really good this session for the four questions at the end of our meeting. I love professional development so this is a favorite topic of mine, and I imagine others too. It was interesting to hear what people do on their campuses, and what challenges and opportunities exist.

Mark: There is this idea among many campus community members that we can ensure campus safety, and in those conversations, safety is always described a state to be achieved. I hadn't really considered it in these terms before. It has interesting implications. The truth of the matter is that safety is really a relative thing. If we do X or fail to do Y we will enter a state that is relatively safter or more unsafe. This also ties directly into Dan's notion that campus safety is a series of balancing acts.

Abby: Prior to the presentation a great discussion was had regarding top ethical and legal issues that we are dealing with these days. It was interesting to hear from other leaders but also intriguing that the majority of us brought up the same 5-10 topics thus proving that no matter the size of the college, or whether it is a 2 or 4 year, we are all dealing with many of the same issues and that brings us together in some ways which is nice.

Session 8: Higher Education Finance

Russell VanZomeren, Senior Director of Fiscal Policy, Tennessee Higher Education Commission

Corina: During the past four years of operating a branch campus, I felt as though I was the only one in this unique setting, dealing with the distinct issues and growing pains of a branch campus. After my experience with NABCA and BCLI, I now know I'm not alone and that I have an incredible network of branch campus leaders, mentors, and colleagues to reach out to—a new community that I will always be a part of.

Stefani: These reflections over the past few months have been an excellent way for me to express some feelings about this job that I do not really have the ability to do anywhere else.

Lisa: Chapters 6 and 7 of *Leadership in Higher Education: Practices That Make a Difference* complemented the financial discussions with a focus on leadership traits that resonate deeply with my daily experience. These chapters emphasized adaptive leadership, sensemaking, distributed authority, and the importance of narrative and visibility. As someone leading without full autonomy, I often operate at the intersection of institutional policy and local need. The chapters validated the idea that effective leadership doesn't always require positional power, it requires clarity of purpose, emotional intelligence, and strategic communication.

Jamica: Overall, BCLI Session 8 highlighted the intricate relationship between funding structures in higher education and their impact on student outcomes. VanZomeren's insights, coupled with the reflective discussions prompted by the chapter on leadership, have encouraged me to think critically about how we can enhance our practices at Nashville State Community College. Moving forward, I am inspired to engage more deeply with my colleagues and stakeholders to build a cohesive approach to supporting our students' success in an outcomes-based funding environment. I truly believe that by adopting collaborative strategies and maintaining open communication, we can not only navigate the challenges ahead but also lead our institution to greater achievements.

Sarah: The conversation about moving to outcomes-based models was definitely super timely and very important. There is so much wrapped up in that conversation and it is so important that we don't take a "one size fits all" approach as we all serve very different population, especially on branch campuses.

Takeaways from Interviews with Leaders

Abby: His advice to others is to invest in self-development continuously, as staying stagnant is akin to moving backward in one's career… He advises younger professionals to embrace career shifts and seek mentors early on.

April: He admires transformational and servant leadership styles. He appreciates leaders who focus on driving innovation while remaining committed to the well-being of their teams. He emphasized that successful leadership often involves a mix of inspiring others, leading by example, and creating a culture of trust…One of his insights was, "Great hires don't just fit in—they elevate the whole team."

Kristin: An important piece of leadership advice that she wanted to share was that "clear is kind."

Mark: She tries to model a no gossip approach to information sharing and relationship building. She works hard to model the message she wants other to share and repeatedly uses the language she hopes others will adopt when describing the institution, divisions, and initiatives.

Stefani: She did leave me with two pieces of advice. The first was to be agile, to never approach the day (especially in operations) with a list of priorities and expect to achieve them all. Being able to jump from one topic to another, and then back to the beginning is crucial, especially with the number of "fires" that come up daily. She also talked about the importance of composure. Whether a small challenge or a crisis, leaders need to be able to stay calm and composed. She emphasized that because we are all human and meltdowns happen, but they should not occur in the middle of a crisis.

Leigh Anne: I specifically asked him about motivation and how he feels motivating players and/or employees has changed during his 44 years of service. He had a surprising answer. He said that he has never felt he had to motivate players to play well or employees to do their job well. I asked him the reason for this and he simply said, "The players were motivated by playing time, so I did not have to give external motivation. In turn, when employees have a winning culture, they do not have to be externally motivated."

Bill: His best advice is to get out and make contacts. He emphasizes the need to be part of the community on multiple levels. He wants us to join civic organizations and be visible at community events. He feels the more embedded we are in the community the more valuable the college becomes.