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THE ROLE OF THE PRE-FRESHMAN SUMMER EXPERIENCE IN THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM DURING COVID-19: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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THE ROLE OF THE PRE-FRESHMAN SUMMER EXPERIENCE IN THE

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STUDY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF THE PRE-FRESHMAN SUMMER EXPERIENCE IN THE

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The purpose of this case-study investigated the role of the Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program used for an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) located at State University (SU) Upstate*. More specifically, this study explored how students fared during the completion of the pre-freshman summer experience program throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a single embedded case study approach, this study gathered data from the State University (SU) at Upstate Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) 2021-2022 incoming class. This study includes the following forms of data collection: institutional documents, student questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. Potential implications include possible program reform to adapt to the ever-changing needs of students.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Clara Luz Salomon, my uncle, Juan De Jesus-Salomon, and my mother, Evelyn Acosta. For my grandmother, Mama, the matriarch of our family, without her strength, courage, boldness, and persistence, my family would not be where we are today. Coming to New York City from the Dominican Republic, not knowing the language, and with very little support raising my aunt, uncle, and mother, she helped instill the importance of education, family and perseverance that has been passed down to me. Mama, the first of our family to strive for a higher education, and obtain a college degree, thank you! For my uncle, Nanu, who is the smartest person in the room, thank you for being the best role model, showing me that there is a world outside of the Bronx. For always stepping in to provide support and encouragement whenever I wanted to explore the world and all of its opportunities. Lastly, for my mother, Mami, all that I am and all that I will be is a testament to her love, compassion, and selflessness. Having raised me as a 16-year-old, single parent, not only demonstrated her strength, but made me have such admiration in her ability to be independent and overcome adversities. Anything is possible, and she has shown me this! Thank you Mami for always believing in me, encouraging me to strive for more, and sacrificing your own education and goals to support me through all the uncertainty that life has thrown at us. We've overcome so much, and my success is just as much yours!

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Students between the ages of 16- to 24-years who typically enroll in 2-or 4-year higher education institutions immediately following high school completion are part of what the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) describes as the immediate college enrollment population. The NCES (2020a) has identified an increased rate of college enrollment in two-year and four-year institutions immediately following the completion of high school, with data trends indicating a higher percentage immediately enrolling in four-year institutions than in two-year institutions (NCES, 2020a). In addition, the NCES (2019) indicates an increasing percentage of college students being of Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and/or Black background. With a growing number of students entering postsecondary education, the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded has also generally increased for each racial/ethnic group between the 2000-01 and 2015-16 academic year.

Historically, there has been a persistent achievement disparity across income levels, race, and ethnic groups, particularly between white students and students of black and/or Hispanic heritage (Dorn et al., 2020). However, and more recently, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019b) indicates:

> the number of degrees awarded to Hispanic students more than tripled (a 202% increase, from 77,700 to 235,000) …also increased by 75% for both Asian/Pacific Islander students (from 78,9000 to 138,300) and Black students (from 11,300 to 194,500), and by 29% for White students [whereas] the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to American Indian/Alaska Native students as higher in 2015-16 (9,700) than in 2000-01 (9,000) (para. 4).

The data shows that state legislative initiatives such as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which aim to close the achievement gap, have been successful by providing historically underrepresented/underserved students the opportunity to attend college (Office of Opportunity Programs, 2020). Students who otherwise would not have been granted admission into an institution, are enrolling, and becoming part of the increasing rate of immediate college enrollers.

Birthed out of the Civil Rights Movement, the EOP program provides eligible students with additional academic, financial, and personal support to address barriers and achieve academic success as an effort to "equalize the educational experience for those historically excluded from higher education" (Office of Opportunity Programs, 2020, p. 1). The EOP serves a racially diverse population of low-income, primarily first-generation college students and is highlighted by the New York State Legislature as a highly successful program. The EOP provides a holistic approach to student needs by way of a pre-freshman summer experience, extensive academic support services, financial assistance, and nurturing environment. The Office of Opportunity (2020) states that EOP "is one of the first and most historic college access programs…[with] performance outcomes placing EOP among the highest performing college access programs in the country" (p. 2). Due to EOP's successful performance rates, many institutions have now implemented EOP's best practices across their college's general programming in efforts of increasing overall retention and graduation rates.

Although efforts have been made to address the achievement disparities within higher education, the past decade has seen little progress in narrowing the racial and income differences. On average, Black, and Hispanic students remain two years behind

when compared to the average white student, while low-income students continue to be underserved within higher education (Dorn et al., 2020). Considering the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis, Ledger et al. (2020) states that generally college students have been overlooked as a priority population due to the misconception of traditional college students having privileges and resources available to them as students. Neglecting the subgroups of students such as those within the EOP program, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already existing issues within Higher Education and revealed the needs of students, specifically those entering from an economic disadvantage. The following research will explore specific elements of the EOP throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and how it has impacted student transition into college.

Purpose of the Study

This study will investigate the role of the pre-freshman summer program used for an EOP program. More specifically, the role of this program element will be explored and how students fared during the completion of the pre-freshman summer program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring the composition of EOP, specifically their early-on programming known as the pre-freshman summer experience, will bring additional insight on successful transitioning/onboarding into higher education. Beyond this study, investigating the phenomenon of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its role within the EOP pre-freshman summer experience will provide for an intrinsic case-study, understanding the inner workings of EOP and its impact on student transition. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study will explore the EOP component known as the "pre-freshman summer experience" and investigate student experiences in their transition

to college during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study will aim to develop a better understanding of student experiences regarding the services received throughout the pre-freshman summer experience and pandemic, to allow for future evaluation of services and possible restructuring or improvement of the EOP pre-freshman summer experience based on student perceptions. It is important to include the student voice within this study as it will allow researchers and educators to have a better understanding of student needs as they enter higher education. Brooman et al. (2015) discusses the importance of including student voices within higher education as it relates to the improvement of services provided by administration and staff. McLeod (2011) reinforces the inclusion of student voices within higher education and research as it provides an opportunity for higher education to listen and recognize students especially from under-represented and marginalized groups. Cook-Sather (2006) reviews how incorporating student voices can be influential and challenge long-held notions of teaching and learning practices. The study will utilize Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory as a guiding framework to address the different factors that contribute to students undergoing a transition in time and allow for consideration of the ongoing COVID-19 phenomenon which gauging how students fared, and their perceptions and experience throughout the pre-freshman summer experience program.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework through which this study will collect, analyze, and make meaning of the data is Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1998, 1984, 1985b, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Chickering and Schlossberg (2002) define transition as

an event that creates a disruption of roles, routine, and relationships for the individual experiencing the transition. In the scenario of a high school student transitioning into college, Barclay (2017) states that it may "prompt individuals to formulate new assumptions about themselves and their future" (p. 24). Schlossberg (2008) suggests that a transition can be "a major life disturbance that necessitates a tremendous amount of adaptation even when the benefits far outweigh the deficits" (p. 89). Although, the goal of experiencing a transition is positive emergent growth, Anderson et al. (2012) indicate that the process of transition occurs over a period of time rather than one point in time, comprising of a beginning and ending.

Utilizing Schlossberg's transition theory as a framework will assist in evaluating EOP students transition into college during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the role that EOP has in helping "students take charge of their transitions and benefit from the challenges" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). In order to evaluate this, Barclay (2017) states that "students need to learn how to evaluate their challenges, explore options and increase their coping strategies" (p. 24). Anderson et al. (2012) discusses the 4 S System within the transition theory that allows for this framework to examine the following components: (1) the situation, (2) the self, (3) support, (4) and strategies. This component is also referred to as *taking stock*, in which Schlossberg (2008) reinforces the process of navigating transitions successfully by having those transitioning examines their situation and coping resources for the situation.

Schlossberg's (2008) summary of the 4 S System offered nineteen questions to consider for each component and labeled it as taking stock of the situation, taking stock of the self, taking stock of the support, and taking stock of the strategies. Each component

assists with gaining a deeper understanding of the student experience as it relates to their transition. The questions will be used as a foundation for this study when developing the data collection method. The following section will review each component of this framework and the related questions which will be considered for this study.

When taking stock of the situation, the four questions to consider assist with gaining a better understanding of the student perspective. Additionally, the following four questions aid in determining the significance of the situation whether positive or negative for the student: (1) From the student's point of view, is the situation good or bad?, (2) Did the student expect the situation, or was the situation unexpected?, (3) Has the situation come at the worst possible time or the best?, and (4) Where is the situation in the transition process – at the beginning, the middle, or the end? (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 54). This component allows for an external analysis of the situation while considering the perspective of the student.

When taking stock of the self, the five questions to consider assist with gaining a better understanding of how the student is as a person, taking on a more introspective approach. The following five questions aid in reflection and having a deeper sense of a student's character traits: (1) Is the student challenged or overwhelmed by transition events or nonevents? (2) What types of stress challenge the student? Overwhelm the student? (3) Does the student face transition with a "fighting spirit," as a stoic, as a denier, as a helpless person, or as a believer in magic? (4) Does the student feel a sense of control of mastery when facing transition? And (5) Does the student face life as an optimist or as a pessimist? (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 62). This component allows for an internal analysis of the student undergoing the transition and their character traits.

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When taking stock of the support, the four questions to consider assist with analyzing the amount of support a student may be receiving throughout the transition and the student's awareness of the available support. The following four questions should be considered when evaluating student support: (1) Is the student getting what he or she needs in terms of affection, affirmation, and aid?, (2) Does the student have a wide range of types of support (e.g. significant other, family or close friends, organizations)?, (3) Does the student know how to locate and connect with other forms of support (e.g., campus resources, faculty/staff)?, and (4) How has the student's "convoy of social support" been interrupted by the transition? (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 75-76). This component reflects on the student's awareness of the support available to them throughout their transition and assess the quality/impact of it.

When taking stock of the strategies, Schlossberg (2008) refers to the coping strategies used by students during transitions. The following six questions should be considered in order to assess how the student manages transitions and develops strategies to cope with the transition: (1) Does the student in transition use a range of strategies?, (2) Is the student taking action to change the transition?, (3) Is the student attempting to change the meaning of the transition?, (4) How well does the student handle stress?, (5) How does the student decide that doing nothing is the best option?, (6) How does the student exercise flexibility in choosing various strategies depending on the challenge at hand? (p. 103). Utilizing Schlossberg's (1985) transition theory and its 4 S System as a framework allows for a guide in the development of this study, the research questions, data collection, and analysis, and provides consistency throughout the research literature and study.

Significance of the Study

The EOP has been noted as a successful program within the largest comprehensive university system in the United States known as, the State University (SU). The EOP has provided college access to the neediest population of students within New York State operating across 49 of the 64 State University (SU) campuses. On average, the EOP services 10,000 students annually and is distinguished as one of the first historic college access programs, codified in New York State Education Law §6452 in 1967 (Office of Opportunity Programs State University of New York, 2019). Utilizing a holistic approach, EOP provides a "full-service model that includes a specialized admissions process; participation in an extensive pre-freshman summer academy…individualized academic advising/counseling" (Office of Opportunity Programs State University of New York, 2019, p. 4) tutoring, skill development workshops, and an integrated team of counselors and instructors, institutions across the SUNY system has normalized EOP best practices within institutional campuses. Recent research supports EOP's overall success as their graduation and retention outcomes compare favorably to the rates of public institutions nationally. According to the Office of Opportunity Programs State University of New York (2019) and the NCES (2020a), EOP has achieved a 74.21% completion rate for six-year baccalaureate degrees and a 63.85% baccalaureate graduate rate as compared to 62% for the national public institution rate.

In addition to the completion and graduation rates, recent rates of retention have also compared favorably showing that 82% of EOP students returned for the fall 2020 semester as compared to the 81% for colleges and universities nationally (NCES, 2020a).

Recognizing the role of EOP and how it has impacted college access and achievement is a critical part of this research when exploring specific EOP program elements and the student experience as they transition into college. Focusing on the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program, this research will provide further insight on the importance of engaging historically underrepresented/underserved students upon initial entry to the institution. Research has shown that participation within orientation programming such as the EOP pre-freshman experience positively impacts college enrollment, retention, student engagement and achievement (Brawer, 1996; Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Renden, 1995; Stewart et al., 2015; Ward-Roof, 2010; Winograd et al., 2018). Although an abundance of research exists on student orientation programming, student transition, the EOP and program elements, limited research is available on the current COVID-19 pandemic and its impact within EOP and higher education. Current research on how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has impacted higher education addresses issues of inequity, reshaping educational services, technology and more. However, limited research exists that are specific to EOP and EOP students in addition to updated relevant research. This study is not only important but vital for the field as it will provide the field with relevant research on EOP and the impact of the current COVID-19.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions had to transition to a fully online, distanced learning and programming model. Many challenges arose with the need to make such immediate institutional decisions thus, not considering the impact it may have on administration, faculty, staff and most importantly students. The initial findings of COVID-19's impact within higher education indicate that student enrollment, engagement, and retention as well as institutional budgets, staffing and programming

have been affected (Hodges et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Ledger et al., 2020). With the migration to online learning and services, the structure of academia is under unprecedented changes and as stated by Hodges et al. (2020), the speed at which these changes are occurring may have a tremendous impact and sense of disruption in the lives of all stakeholders within higher education. Toquero (2020) recommends continued studies to "proliferate and document the impact of the pandemic to the educational system…to strengthen the practices in the curriculum and make it more responsive to the learning needs of the students even beyond the conventional classrooms" (p. 1). Considering this phenomenon in time, this study will have a sub focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program, as there is limited research available on EOP programming during the pandemic. Given the existing research available on successful student transition, as well as the success of the EOP and student experiences, this study will expand the knowledge and research available on student services, experiences, and transition as it relates to the ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19.

Research Questions

In developing the research questions for this study, the following three categories were identified: (1) EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program, (2) Student Transition, and (3) COVID-19 Pandemic. To assess student experiences for each category, the study will base the following research questions on the EOP student expectations vs. the EOP student experience/reality. The research questions to be used for this study are the following:

1. How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?

2. What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?

3. How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?

Definition of Terms

For this study, the following definitions of terms apply:

Access – The ability to gain college admittance, especially for minority students and students of low socioeconomic status.

COVID-19 Pandemic – The Corona-Virus Pandemic period between March 2020 until 2021.

Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) – Program focused on providing additional or supplementary support services to underserved students (Swail, 2000)

Historically Underrepresented/Underserved Student – Students who are low-income, racially/ethnically diverse, first generation, and academically underprepared. (Green, 2006)

Immediate college enrollers/enrollment - High school completers between 16- to 24-years old who have enrolled in 2-or 4-year higher education institutions in the October following high school completion (NCES, 2020).

Pre-freshman summer experience programming – Interventions performed by the university, outside of classroom experiences, intended to improve educational outcomes and/or increase retention of students.

Retention – Rate students persist in their educational program; at 4-year higher education institutions, this is the number of first-time undergraduate students from their first year to their second year (NCES, n.d.).

Transition – As described by Schlossberg, transition will be understood as an integrative process, involving moving in, moving through, and moving out of the changes one experiences throughout life.

Underserved Student – Typically, low-income students of color, who are first in their families to attend college (Green, 2006).

CHAPTER 2 Review of Related Research

The following literature will provide a comprehensive review on the student support service program known as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Since the inception of higher education in 1636 at Harvard University there has been an economic and racial disparity in college attendance and completion (Hendrickson, 2013). Research has shown that students with low socioeconomic status and backgrounds are 8x less likely than students from high socioeconomic status and background to earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). The EOP acknowledges the disadvantages faced by EOP eligible students who are typically considered low-income, first generation, academically underprepared, and underserved. The EOP has set forth a commitment to provide opportunities to those that are "capable of completing a program of higher education" by providing a multitude of support services and resources in order to increase student persistence in higher education and attain their degree. (EOP Guidelines, 1970).

The areas of literature that will be examined in this review include but are not limited to: (a) student support services, (b) Educational Opportunity Programs, (c) EOP's high school to college transition via the Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program, (d) summer bridge programming, (e) historically underrepresented/underserved students, and (c) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. The goal of this review is to provide the reader a comprehensive background of the EOP, including the unique use of summer experience programs. Moreover, this review will present current literature detailing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the postsecondary environment,

student support services, and at-risk student groups. Lastly, this chapter highlights the current gaps in the literature, providing justification for this research investigation.

Theoretical Framework

Patton et al. (2016) provides a comprehensive background on Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1989a) describing Schlossberg as an adult development theorist, and her theory as "grounded in the adult development literature…[which] includes an examination of what constitutes a transition, different forms of transitions, the transition process, and factors that influence transitions." (p. 37). Patton et al. (2016) first introduces Nancy Schlosberg with her concepts of marginality and mattering, emphasizing the importance of examining the impact of the college experience on student development. Marginality can be described as individuals taking on new roles, as well as having a sense of not fitting in due to uncertainty within the new role. Examples of marginality include minoritized groups such as first-year students. Schlossberg (1989a) indicates that feelings of not fitting in, self-consciousness, irritability, depression, and worry if they matter to anyone, may arise when feeling marginalized.

The concepts of mattering and marginality (Schlossberg, 1989a), stems from the work of Rosenberg and his colleagues focusing on five aspects of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. Patton et al. (2016) identifies each aspect with the following definitions, stating it to be a precursor to students' involvement in academic programs that facilitate development and learning:

> Attention, the feeling an individual is noticed; importance, a belief the individual is cared about; ego-extension, the feeling that someone else will be proud of what an individual does or will sympathize with their failures; dependence, a feeling of being needed; and appreciation, the feeling that others appreciate an individual's efforts. (p. 37)

Schlossberg's (1989a) concepts of mattering and marginality allows for a foundation and closer look at Schlossberg's (2006) Transition Theory that will be used for this literature and research.

Although Schlossberg's Transition Theory was initially intended for those within the counseling profession, Schlossberg (1981) indicates that a primary goal of this theory was to develop a framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and assist with providing resources and tools to help cope with the "ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (p. vii). Lastly, it is noted that Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) is an integration and expansion of existing theories and research such as D.J. Levinson (1978), Neugarten (1979), and Lowenthal and Chiriboga (1975). Goodman et al. (2006) define a transition as "any event, or non-event, [which] results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33) also indicating the importance of self-perception and its impact on an individual's transition. It is important to consider this aspect of the theory as some individuals may not attach much significance to a change in their life, and a transition only exists if the individual perceives and considers it to be a transition.

Additional important aspects of the transition theory include considering the type, context, and impact of a transition. Goodman et al. (2006) states three types of transitions: (a) anticipated transitions, (b) unanticipated, and (c) non-event transitions. Anticipated transitions are defined as transitions that occur predictably, unanticipated transitions are defined as not predictable or scheduled, and non-event transitions are expected but do not occur. Patton et al. (2016) states that "the meaning attached to transitions by different individuals is relative, as is the way in which the transition is

categorized by type" (p. 37). Secondly, the context of a transition is associated with the relationship the individual has to the transition of which includes the setting in which the transition occurs. For example, a workplace, school, relationships, etc. Lastly, the impact that a transition has on an individual is determined by how much it alters their daily life. Goodman et al, (2006) states how transitions can have positive and/or negative impact, as perceived by the individual, and produces stress and/or compound stress in the presence of multiple transitions. Acknowledging that transitions may lead to growth, but also decline, the 4 S's of Transition, was developed within the theory to identify factors that can influence an individual's ability to cope with a transition.

As reviewed in Chapter 1, Schlossberg et al. (1995) developed the following four aspects of transition theory known as the 4 S's System: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. Patton et al. (2016) states that "the 4 S's provide a framework for the appraisal process" (p. 38) of an individual determining the importance of a transition and the coping process. The effectiveness of positively coping with a transition is also dependent on the resources, assets and liabilities that an individual possesses within each aspect at the time of the transition. Focusing on the Educational Opportunity Program and their student population, Schlossberg's (2006) Transition Theory provides a framework that supports the study of Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP) and its pre-freshman summer experience program. The EOP pre-freshman summer experience program was developed to assist marginalized high school students transition to college as a first-time, first-generation freshman.

It is important to note that this theory may not apply to all EOP students within the study but will provide a foundation for understanding student experiences throughout

the transition from high school to college. Students within higher education will ultimately face all three non-discrete types of transitions within their academic career. As stated, Patton et al. (2016) highlight how "transitions may lead to growth, but decline is also a possible outcome" (p. 38). Thus, the importance of student support services such as EOP, on campus to assist with the process of transition that students face upon entering the institution. Additionally, Stewart et al., (2015) state "if students do not resolve transition issues in the first year…the likelihood of persisting at the same institution is diminished" (p. 12). The results of Hurtado and Carters' (1997) study show that "greater attention needs to be paid to minority students' subjective sense of integration in campus life, temporal sequencing of college experiences, and new avenues for understanding students' adjustment to college" (p. 324).

Tovar and Simon (2007) emphasize the importance of using Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical framework as it "addresses the individuality of each student" (p. 550) and "is directly applicable to the first generation and minority population" (p. 550). Tovar and Simon's (2007) study indicated that minority students "tend to enter college with less academic focus and preparation, and thereby experience greater challenges in order to successfully adapt to their new environments" (p. 550). The literature expresses the ability to coexist within two worlds, developing the necessary skills to transition between environments as well as incorporating culture and familial responsibilities. Schlossberg's transition theory provides a relevant foundation within the study to assess student perceptions of the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program, and the impact COVID-19 has had on their experience transitioning into college. In addition, Schlossberg's transition theory will assist with the development of

methods and data collection within this study as it provides a series of questions that can be used to guide student questionnaires as well as assessment of data.

Related Literature

History of Student Support Service Programs

      The history of student support service programs began during President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration in the late 1960s. According to McElroy and Armesto (1998), President Johnson's focus on the "War on Poverty…gave rise to the Office of Economic Opportunity and its Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds…commonly known as TRIO" (p. 373). Throughout the signing of the Higher Education Act (1965) and the reauthorizations that led to additional funding, programming, services and changes within TRIO, the key goal was "to aid students of disadvantaged backgrounds…preparing students for successful entry, retention and completion of postsecondary education" (Eksterowicz & Gartner, 1990, p. 234). Hendrickson (2013) discusses the historical impact higher education has had on students from underrepresented/underserved economic and racial backgrounds and the disparity that exists with college attendance and completion. Cahalan and Perna (2015) demonstrate that students are far less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years when identified as having low socioeconomic status. Additionally, Cahalan and Perna (2015) show the gaps in attainment of bachelor's degrees increasing and students from underrepresented/underserved groups are obtaining the fewest college degrees. Kendricks et al. (2013) further reinforce the need for support services for students, in particular underrepresented/underserved students, as they tend to be more academically successful when provided with adequate support, tools and resources.

Examples of Student Support Service Programs. Several student support service programs have been implemented targeting underrepresented/underserved students in high school and college within the United States and have proven success with student transition and achievement. The importance of student support service programs is evident as state, federal, and private organizations have continued to fund programs such as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), College Discovery (CD), Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK), Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services (SSS), and GEAR UP (City University of New York, 2021; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2020; State University of New York, 2021). Such programs aim to dismantle barriers faced by underrepresented/underserved groups in efforts of increasing degree attainment and break the existing poverty cycle. Baum et al., (2010) indicate that people who are able to obtain a higher education tend to earn higher incomes and live healthier lifestyles thus, improving society. Providing underrepresented/underserved populations with the opportunity to attend higher education along with the necessary support, tools and resources is essential in increasing degree attainment and maintain the economic stability of the United States (Calahan & Perna, 2015).

Reviewing programs such as Upward Bound, SSS, and GEAR UP is essential in my research as it assists with exploring different programs that offer similar services to support underrepresented students. Many of these programs fall under the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, in which the eligibility for participation was determined based on students' status as the first in their families to pursue higher education and students' prior academic performance (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Researchers state that

such programming are integral parts of student aid with evidence of their effectiveness in closing educational opportunity gaps in the U.S. society. (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Though much controversy exists on the definition and criteria of educational disadvantages among the students within these support programs, the first group to be evaluated by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) was Upward Bound. McElroy & Armesto (1998) indicate that Upward Bound selected the term underrepresented, as it describes their students with disadvantages in higher education who are below national averages on educational indices. Indicators such as lack of home and community resources, poverty, racial/ethnic and cultural distinctions, or linguistic abilities, low academic achievement and/or to drop out of the educational pipeline at high rates and at early stages would fall under the underrepresented student group.

Upward Bound targets students between grades 9 through 12 who are underrepresented in efforts of increasing postsecondary graduation and transition into higher education. Offering a multitude of services such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, workshops, and college preparatory summer programming, it has shown academic success with underrepresented students (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The literature suggests that participation in Upward Bound has assisted with underrepresented students educational progress having a positive effect on students' college enrollment. Steel and Schubert (1983) indicate that students participating in Upward Bound are more likely to take college preparatory courses, have higher expectations and plans to attend college, and are more likely to be encouraged by their teachers and counselors to attend college.

History of the Educational Opportunity Program

Although the EOP emerged in 1967, shortly after the Higher Education Act in 1965, it is noted that the EOP was modeled after the City University of New York (CUNY) SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Program developed in 1966 for public state universities (Hannah, 1996), and subsequently the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) was established at independent colleges and universities in New York State. The SUNY College at Buffalo was the first institution to implement EOP by way of Assemblyman Arthur O. Eve, enrolling 249 students (State University of New York, 2021). By 1970-1971, 30 campuses had the implementation of EOP with over 4,600 students enrolled. As stated by SUNY, the Education La 6452 formally established the provisions of SEEK at CUNY, EOP at SUNY and HEOP (Higher Education Opportunity Program) at the independent colleges and universities in New York. Currently, there are 49 SUNY campuses with the EOP, now having graduated over 70,000 students. Due to limited research on EOP, there were historical discrepancies on which administration assisted in the development of EOP. Additionally, factors contributing to the limited amount of research on EOP include lack of consistency with terminology used for the program as there are similar programs throughout the United States that are considered support service programs, opportunity programs and of the like.

Student Profile. Relevant to this research, as of the Academic Year 2019-2020, eligible EOP students must have New York State residency for 12 months prior to enrollment as well as require special admissions considerations based on grade point average (State University of New York, 2020). Additionally, it is important to note the qualifications regarding income as you can only be considered EOP eligible based on an

economic disadvantage/income guideline. As per the Educational Opportunity Program Information Summary (2020) "academic eligibility will vary by campus" (p. 2) and income guidelines will vary by household size. Exceptions to the income guideline include receiving Family Assistance or Safety Net payments through the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance; or through a county Department of Social Services; or Family Day Care payments through the New York State Office of Children and Family Assistance. Such assistance is provided to families living at or below the poverty line average. Additional considerations to the income guidelines include students in foster care and/or a ward of the court or county.

The EOP Freshmen Profile for 2019-20 reviews the following for each EOP offering institution: (1) Undergraduate Enrollment Fall 2019, (2) EOP Freshman Enrollment, (3) 2020 Planned Total EOP Enrollment, (4) SAT Scores, (5) ACT Scores, (6) High School Grade Point Average (GPA), (7) Accepts SUNY EOP Fin Info Form, and (8) Summer Programming. Currently, there are forty-nine EOP offering institutions across the State University (SU) higher education system. According to the Office of Opportunity Programs that oversees university-wide programs such as EOP, it is indicated that the EOP has graduated over 75,0000 students "as a result of the access and support provided" (p. 2). On average, EOP serves more than 10,000 students across the forty-nine SUNY campuses, including twenty community colleges (Office of Opportunity Programs, 2020). The 2019-20 EOP Enrollment Report indicates that the average high school GPA for first-time, full-time pre-freshman is 82.13% with an average SAT Math Score of 495.99 and Reading/Writing Score of 498.79. The 2019-20 Student Financial Profile indicates that 99.79% of EOP students received a grant or other

non-loan aid to assist with the financial barriers EOP students face. The average family income for an EOP student is $21,300, which is no more than 185% of the federal poverty standard. Considering the increasing costs for college attendance and tuition, the financial burdens faced by EOP students may result in departure before graduation.

Part of the 2019-20 EOP Student Profile includes age, first-time students, race, gender, dependency status, housing and enrollment. Due to the eligibility required for students to be enrolled in EOP based on income and academic guidelines, the EOP Data Facts (2020) states that "the student demographics reflect the cultural, racial, religious, gender and geographic mosaic of New York State" (p. 8). Although enrollment numbers decreased from the previous academic year from 11,112 to 9,740 students for the fall 2018 semester, the enrollment status of full-time status students remain in the majority accounting for 96% across university wide EOP programs. Students between the ages of 18-21 account for 74.9% of enrollment, with a majority being of Black or African background (38.9%) and Hispanic or Latino background (37.7%). Lastly, an overwhelming majority of students are considered dependent (85.2%) which contributes to the overall financial aid package received.

EOP's Pre-Freshman Summer Experience

The EOP acknowledges the disadvantages faced by EOP eligible students and set for a commitment to provide opportunities to those that are "capable of completing a program of higher education" (EOP Guidelines, 1970). Although there is no standardized approach to what EOP offers across institutions, the EOP Guidelines Policy Report (1970) states the intent of EOP as the following: (1) Provision of access to the University for disadvantaged students who show the potential to succeed, despite poor preparation

and limited financial resources; (2) Orientation and preparation of students prior to the freshman year; (3) Provision of a structured support and enrichment program, including counseling and tutoring throughout students 'enrollment; (4) Provision of financial aid to students; (5) Collection, analysis and reporting of data pertaining to enrollment and performance; and (6) Development of a body of research and publication that documents successful approaches. The following research will focus specifically intent #2, gathering further data on orientation programming and preparation of students prior to their freshman year. Limited research exists on EOP orientation/pre-freshman summer experience program however, there is plenty of literature supporting persistence and retention rates as it relates to orientation/summer programming services.

Summer Bridge Programming

Chaney et al. (1998) examined the impact of Federal Student Support Services (SSS) within higher education and its effects on retention, specifically with students that are at an educational or economic disadvantage. Participation within SSS had a significant impact on student retention, however, services consistent with impact on retention included continuous participation in blended programing/instructional courses, peer tutoring and workshops. Pitre and Pitre (2009) explain the need for programs such as EOP by placing emphasis on its effectiveness in college readiness and transition as well as overall educational aspirations, postsecondary progress, and persistence. Pitre and Pitre (2009) stated "that literature shows clear evidence of higher rates of entry into higher education institutions and higher levels of postsecondary educational attainment" (p. 103) of students who participated in support service programs. In comparing students who did not participate in a support service program to those that did, researchers noted

that over 30% of participants received a baccalaureate degree within 10 years compared to the 13% non-participants. Evidence from the Upward Bound Program shows that participants are more likely to attend a 4-year higher educational education than a 2-year community college. Lastly, Pitre and Pitre (2009) analyzed Balz and Esten (1998) study, showing that 68.4% of participants compared to the 41.0% of non- participants enrolled within 4-year colleges compared to 2-year colleges.

Stewart et al. (2015) "suggest that support services such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling services, early intervention systems, and financial aid assistance will improve participants' academic deficiencies and increase persistence beyond the first year" (p. 12). Winograd et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal evaluation study of the EOP, student outcomes and possible contributions to student achievement, persistence, and retention. The study found that students who were provisionally admitted into EOP earned first-semester grades and had continuous enrollment rates comparable to traditional, higher ranking admission score students. Through the use of support services provided by the EOP such as "extended summer orientation program, regular meetings with advisors, seminar events, study groups, and academic monitoring, the study demonstrates outcomes that provide "solid quantitative evidence that the program is working" (p. 77). Additionally, two distinct outcomes suggest that the EOP provides an opportunity for higher educational institutions to "close the gap" (p. 77) in disparities of bachelor's degree attainment with specific populations of students and allow for students to obtain academic status on campus such as "Dean's list and lowered academic probation status" (p. 77).

It is important to note that Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) "observed direct associations between cultural diversity, more welcoming climates, and improved intergroup relations on campus" via the EOP. Implementing such programming, resources and services would benefit institutions and their access to higher education and degree attainment for underrepresented/underserved backgrounds. Limitations within this study included insufficient power to detect difference in specific outcomes regarding African American students from Latino/a students. Additionally, data and assessment between genders, withdrawal patterns and first-semester courses. Incorporating an assessment and evaluation that shed light on these variables and possible factors that contribute to student success and transition may provide evidence for stronger program effectiveness.

Incorporating orientation programming specifically within EOP services is detrimental to student development and success. Research has shown that EOP students are underserved and more often first of their generation to attend college. The purpose of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience program is to acclimate students to the campus environment and prepare them to transition into higher education. Orientation programming assist in the development of a learning community and safe space targeting students' academic and social needs. Ward-Roof (2010) further warrants the need for orientation as its purposes are to disseminate information, reduce costly errors, build a framework for academic success, build community, and define campus culture.

Within Ward-Roof's (2010) guide, Cuevas and Timmerman discussed "Summer Bridge Programs" which offer at-risk students the opportunity to get a jump start on the fall semester by establishing learning communities and providing academic support, social connections, and supplemental student support services (p. 72). Of the 49

campuses that offer EOP, 95.5% of those offer an extended summer orientation program including 2-year and 4-year institutions (State University of New York, 2021). This intervention is a commonly used as research has shown that it has impacted student retention, engagement, and success regardless of gender, age, academic major, placement scores and employment status (Brawer, 1996). Furthermore, Rendon (1995) indicated that student enrollment and degree attainment is influenced by the transition into college through orientation and the use of academic support programs. Lastly, Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007) research the effect of the summer programming its students and conducted a pre/post-test measuring resilience, social support and counselor impact. Findings indicate that such programming assisted in the formation of peer cohort however, the researcher's limitations included the failure to explore how the summer programming prepared students academically for their first semester.

Challenges in developing a comprehensive orientation program include funding, institutional support and student engagement. Although EOP Orientation Programming across SUNY is mandatory, areas to consider would be student flexibility and obligations. Mandatory orientation programming, although shown to be effective with disadvantaged students (Grubb, 2006) does have criticism. Ward-Roof (2010) poses addressed the following concerns:

> 1) For whom should orientation mandatory be? 2) How will the mandatory requirements be enforced? 3) How will the requirement be communicated to the students impacted by the policy? 4) Is the institution prepared to commit more staff time to planning and programming activities? 5) Can the college's facilities support a mandatory program? 6) Can the college support a mandatory program with limited funding? 7) Is there a sincere, campus-wide commitment to instituting a mandatory orientation program?

Creating partnerships and allies to support the need for orientation as well as developing assessment and evaluation surveys to demonstrate effectiveness is a possible solution to the concerns.

The Role of Transition

Yosso et al. (2009) describes the student transition into higher education as a period of "unbridled optimism, exciting challenges, and myriad opportunities" (p. 659) where developmental growth occurs. Researchers believe the transition into college is a time of not only gaining academic skills, but interpersonal life skills in how to make choices, manage finances, manage time, manage relationships, and develop a personal identity in a new, more complex environment (Paulsen, ed.). Goldrick-Rab et al., (2007) discusses the role of transition into higher education and the significance of college entry and completion. While recognizing the inequities in college participation, Goldrick-Rab et al., (2007) discusses the importance of high school preparation in areas of academic, social, and financial knowledge. Extensive research demonstrates greater levels of access and transition to higher education when students are provided with advanced level academic courses and financial preparation (Adelman, 1999; Hossler & Vesper, 1993; St. John, 1991). Yet, inequities exist in academic, social, and financial preparation for students from disadvantaged and minority high school backgrounds.

Research shows that students from disadvantaged, underrepresented backgrounds are often discouraged from attending college by as early as the eighth grade and are more likely to receive vocational schooling due to the lack of information and resources provided to them during the K-12 school period (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). Lacking pre-college preparation programs and counseling, Goldrick-Rab et al.,

(2007) discusses the quality of information students receive regarding college attendance, academic preparation, and financial aid to successfully transition into higher education. Although lacking knowledge in these areas places students from underrepresented backgrounds at a disadvantage, research shows that it does not reflect in students' aspirations to earn a college degree (Carter, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna & Swail, 2001). However, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) indicate that a mismatch in the information provided, and the expectations students have about college preparation and entry may lead to a complicated transition from high school to college.

Researchers such as Fitzsimmons (1999), Gardner (2001), McDonough (1994), Perna and Swail (2001), Rosenbaum and Pearson (2003), Schneider and Stevenson (1999), and Tierney and Jun (2001) discuss the importance of educational policies, practices and programs that advocate for early college opportunities that educate students on college preparation. With specific focus on the first-year experience of college students, initial entry to higher education can be complex and affect student transition leading to either college completion or college stop out (Goldrich-Rab, 2007). Giddan (1988) argues that the first year of college is the most difficult adjustment and transition period for a college student and the importance of developing preventative and intervention methods to produce a smooth transition. Similarly, Paulsen (ed) acknowledges how critical it is to address the needs of students transitioning into higher education as there is a large proportion of baccalaureate aspirants who drop out of college. Paulsen (ed) states that "there has been significant growth of first-year transition programs and initiatives designed to improve student experience and the persistence toward 4-year degrees" (p. 94). Researchers such as Gardner (2001), examined factors

that have contributed to positive student integration into higher education of which included participation in student seminars, learning communities and service-learning. Researchers have indicated that the following areas of support have also contributed to a positive transition into higher education: first-year experience programming, peer support, family and community support, adequate financial aid, positive racial climate, and academic support/assistance.

COVID-19 Impact on Higher Education

Given the current climate of higher education during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to fully online distanced learning has been a learning and growing process for all constituents including faculty, staff and most importantly students. Researching existing data on how the current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted higher education as well as its impact on student services such as orientation and/or summer bridge programming may provide further insight on how to improve such services throughout this transition. Hodges et al. (2020) acknowledge the unique challenges presented within higher education due to COVID-19 and discuss institutional issues on "how to continue teaching and learning while keeping their faculty, staff, and students safe from a public health emergency that is moving fast and not well understood" (p.2). Such considerations have led to institutions of all sizes and types to cancel all face-to-face classes, including labs and other learning experiences and opt for online instruction and services.

With the unexpected migration to online learning, Hodges et al. (2020) highlight the flexibility that online teaching and learning may provide yet consider the implications of "the speed with which this move to online instruction is expected to happen [being]

unprecedented and staggering" (p. 2). Additionally, Hodges et al. (2020) recognize that a crises/disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic not only impacts the structure of higher education but also creates a disruption in the lives of students, staff, and faculty outside of academia and their respective institution. Student access to online learning, services, and the resources and tools needed to continue their college education and experience are important factor and must be considered by administration, faculty and staff. Furthermore, special consideration for students from already disadvantaged backgrounds including non-traditional students, first-time students, first-generation students, minority students and students from low-income backgrounds, are critical factors and must be at the forefront of institutional concerns when discussing the impact of COVID-19. Lederer et al. (2020) indicate that a return to normalcy is unlikely for the foreseeable future due to the rising number of COVID-19 cases on college campuses and encourage all constituents to consider steps to better address students' needs during this time.

Impact on Students. According to Kim et al. (2020) "a college's first-year class helps define the student experience and heavily influences the institutions finances" (p. 1) when considering enrollment numbers. One of the many challenge's institutions are facing is developing a learning model that engages students with the capability to "serve and educate all students and create the sense of community and vibrancy typically found on campuses" (p. 2). Kim et al. (2020) conducted an online survey to have a better understanding of student perspectives and concerns about enrollment during the height of the pandemic in the fall 2020 semester. The survey consisted of 2,094 U.S. high school seniors, of which 1,459 are considering a full-time bachelor's degree program. One of the main themes found within the survey is a sense of uncertainty. Many students have

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not declared their enrollment status and/or finalized school choice. According to Kim et al. (2020), "just over one-fifth of students have changed their first-choice school, citing cost and location as their top reasons for doing so" (p. 4). Additionally, the survey indicated an impact on students' sense of readiness, willingness, and/or ability to attend a higher education institution throughout the pandemic. An extremely strong/strong impact on student emotional and mental preparedness was found in 45% of students as well as a third of students having shared concerns about their academic preparedness for school due to the unforeseen disruption in learning.

Lederer et al. (2020) support the above findings when reviewing U.S. college students and the unique needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information provided by Lederer et al. (2020) is a collective viewpoint by experienced college health researchers who manage two long-standing national college health surveys. Lederer et al. (2020) address already existing issues and the impact that COVID has had in exacerbating issues such as mental health, housing, food insecurity and academic performance. Findings show that students' college experience in and outside of the classroom are fundamental factors to their overall well-being and success (Peltier et al., 2000). As a result of COVID-19 many institutions reduced services including on-campus housing and access to campus-based food pantries (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). According to the American College Health Association (2020b), 45% of students reported being food insecure with heightened financial hardship due to campus/community-based job loss.

Impact on Historically Underrepresented Students. Dorn et al. (2020) discusses the significance of the US academic-achievement gap which was first identified

in 1966 and its persistent growth throughout time. The achievement gap within education has costed the United States hundreds of billions of dollars with the possibility of COVID-19 making it worse. In addressing the needs of students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a closer look at students who are underrepresented highlights the lack of access and resources available of which worsened during the pandemic. Jackson (2021) discusses the inequity of educational opportunity specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the preexisting inequities that has exacerbated the gap between social differences and access to resources. Considerations to economic, cultural, and political justice concerns impacted the educational opportunities available for underrepresented groups in society (Jackson, 2021). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused major changes within higher education and how it functions in an effort of controlling the spread of the disease while proceeding with the semester. Such changes include the shutdown of in-person learning at institutions and utilizing technology to continue instruction and services. Although this approach was thought to be a solution, Jackson (2021) states that how the assumption "that there is universal access to the technologies needed to partake in on-line learning" (p. 321) is fraught with problems of inequity.

In researching universities located in urban areas of the United States, data shows that students often relied on free WIFI/Internet offered at the university as well as surrounding commercial establishments such as coffee shops, public libraries, etc. - many of which were closed due to the pandemic (Jackson, 2021). In Jackson's (2021) findings, only 72% of students in one developmental English writing, university program, had daily access to the internet. Considering financial barriers, Jackson (2021) found that the

poorest of students were at a greater disadvantage as they relied on use of computers through the university. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) also discuss the aspect of support at home, in which there is a presumption that students not only have easy access to high-speed internet but adequate support at home to complete their studies (Knox, 2013; Jackson, 2021). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) state that access without support is not opportunity and causes further disparities to students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Dorn et al. (2020) indicates that the shutdowns caused by COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate the already existing achievement gaps and will likely affect low-income, black, and Hispanic students the most. Additionally, Dorn et al. (2020) states that "in 2009, we estimated that the gap between white students and black and Hispanic ones deprived the US economy of $310 billion to $525 billion a year in productivity" (p. 2) and "the gap between high- and low-income students was even larger, at $400 billion to $670 billion" (p.2). These findings show that students of black and Hispanic background are more likely to live in poverty and have disproportionate learning losses, failure and drop out status. On average black or Hispanic students remain approximately two years behind the average white student, along with low-income students who are continuously underrepresented when compared to top performing students.

Gaps in Literature

EOP Literature Gaps. As mentioned, there are several limitations to the research provided on EOP which include the various terms and descriptions used for EOP, limited documentation of assessment and evaluation on EOP and overall limited published research articles on EOP. Research on EOP began and increased throughout the late

1960s due to the government enactments within higher education. With each reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, there were small amounts of research conducted on EOP. The most recent authorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act occurred during the Bush Administration in 2008 which sparked further research on EOP. The trend of EOP research shows an increase throughout times of uncertainty and recession where focus is placed on underserved communities and students' access to college and degree attainment. The need to expand on EOP research is detrimental as there is a lack of assessment and evaluation of programmatic effectiveness to ensure longevity and funding.

Gaps within the research include qualitative studies gauging student experiences that can be used to understand the needs of students as well as faculty and staff perspectives. Gathering such research would allow for evaluation of strengths and weaknesses within the program that could potentially help support EOP administration and institutions with program improvement and changes. Research on specific services and its effects on graduation, retention and persistence is most common and generalizable among many different support service programs like EOP, however, the main gaps within literature for EOP are qualitative with evaluation research (summative/formative) and/or action research approach. Ward-Roof (2010) reinforce the need for assessment and evaluation of orientation program services provided by support programs like EOP, in which such research and data are vital contributions demonstrating success to students, the institution and internal/external shareholders. Lastly, the assessment and evaluation of such programming while gauging student perception and experience has the ability to lead towards political changes as well as programmatic improvement and development.

COVID 19 Impact on EOP. Limited research exists on the impact that COVID-19 has had on the Educational Opportunity Program. Collecting anecdotal data from the State University of New York website, a Fall 2020 newsletter distributed by SUNY indicates that due to the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, the EOP Summer Program opted to provide the experience remotely. The SUNY Impact Foundation provided the incoming fall 2020 class of EOP freshman with free DELL laptops in an effort to assist with the shift to online-remote learning. SUNY and EOP has acknowledged that students from low-income households may not have the access to the needed technology to effectively transition into remote learning. As indicated by Cheryl Hamilton, Associate Provost and Office of Opportunity Programs Director, "these laptops provide a lifeline to distance learning for our students" (Educational Opportunity Program, 2020, p. 3). The newsletter also addressed EOP's 2020 Pre-Freshman Sumer Program which also shifted to remote service.

During the summer of 2020, EOP opted to utilize programs such as Moodle, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout, and other online platforms to stay connected with their students during the COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected shift to virtual learning. Areas of consideration include the abrupt shift from "a highly structured, personalized face-to-face format to a more flexible online/remote experience" (Educational Opportunity Program, 2020, p. 4). Although the format of services changed during the pandemic, EOP has strived to continue to provide intrusive advising and counseling services along with social activities to promote a sense of belonging and community. Working alongside SUNY Open Educational Resources (OER) and SUNY Online Services (SOS), EOP was able to provide customizable courses and learning

materials to be used during the summer to assist with college readiness and enrichment activities such as virtual dances, socials, cultural tours, and field trips. Although limited, peer-reviewed, research exists on the impact of COVID-19 on the EOP program, it provides a unique opportunity for researchers to further explore and study this program during this phenomenon in time. Expanding on existing research on the EOP, this opportunity will allow for further development and growth on the services provided to underrepresented students seeking to attend college.

Conclusion

The gaps within literature on EOP Summer Programming are evident as many researchers have focused on different areas of EOP such as academic outcomes and achievement. Minimum research exists and includes the voices of students and their experiences which may impact program services. Including the phenomenon in time of the COVID-19 pandemic further adds to the need of this research as gathering and exploring student experiences within EOP's Summer Program will allow researchers and educators to adapt to the ever-changing needs of students. The following chapter will review the methodology of a proposed research study exploring the role of the pre-freshman summer program and how students fared during the completion and transition during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER 3 Method Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology used for this qualitative single embedded case study that investigated the role of the pre-freshman summer program used for an EOP program. The single embedded case study approach allowed the researcher to explore how students fared during the completion of the summer program and transition into their freshman year of college during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using this methodological approach, the research studied "a real-life, contemporary context or setting" (Yin, 2014) of EOP students and their experiences within the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) Pre-Freshman Summer Program at the State University (SU) at Upstate*. Yin (2009) indicates that a single embedded case study "captures the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation" (p. 41) and the results of such research should provide informative data about the experiences of the average person or institution. This single case study is considered embedded as it involved more than one unit of analysis as the researcher investigated not only the student experience within the Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program, but how the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic affected student transition and experience, making this a revelatory case. Yin (2009) encourages the use of a single-case study when it is a revelatory case as it provides an opportunity within research to investigate a unique, previously inaccessible, phenomenon occurring even though the issue is common across the country.

As described by Creswell and Poth (2018), a case study allows for a qualitative approach by the researcher to explore "a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, observations, and interviews" (p. 147). The defining features of a case study further

support the use of this methodological approach as this study collected data through multiple forms, including but not limited to interviews, focus groups, and collection of documents. Stake (1995) further supports this approach as it is described as a naturalistic approach which considers the complexities and interactions within the study and its setting. The case study was bounded by the COVID-19 time from summer 2021 to fall 2021, collecting documents, interviews and focus group data regarding the student experience of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program.

This study utilized Schlossberg's (2008) Transition Theory as a guiding theoretical framework as well as Schlossberg's (2008) 4 S System within the framework that aided with the design of the study and its data collection and analysis. Lastly, this chapter is organized into the following sections (a) research questions; (b) setting of the study; (c) participants; (d) data collection procedures; (e) trustworthiness of the design; (f) research ethics; (g) data analysis approach; (h) researcher role; and (i) conclusion, to aid in providing a rigorous and transparent description of the study to establish trustworthiness.

Methods and Procedures

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the research and data collection for this study:

1. How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?

2. What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?

3. How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?

Setting

The setting for this study took place at the State University (SU) at Upstate, specifically within the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). This site was selected due to familiarity with the EOP and immediate access to a sample population. The SU Upstate is a degree-granting institution, primarily granting baccalaureate or above degrees. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the institution enrolls approximately 13,508 undergraduate students. The enrollment by race/ethnicity indicates a 47% enrollment of white students, 16% African American, 14% Hispanic, 7% Asian and less than 9% for nonresident alien, unknown and two or more races. According to the EOP Information Summary (2020), SU Upstate enrolls approximately 200 students. Enrollment data by race/ethnicity was not provided however, the EOP Information Summary (2020) indicated purposeful recruitment based on the following 3 criteria's:

1. New York State Residency for 12 months prior to enrollment

2. Require alternate admission consideration

3. Qualify as economically disadvantaged according to EOP Income Guidelines

It is important to note that priority is given to applicants from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and admission is subject to program capacity.

To gain access to the research site, the researcher submitted the research proposal to the Institutional Review Board for SU Upstate. After gaining approval, the next step involved contacting the EOP Program Director and providing details regarding the study

to gain access to the student participants. Due to the researcher's personal experience as an EOP student, an existing relationship with the campus and staff allowed for easier communication and access to the research site. The researcher acknowledges that biases related to the setting may exists due to the personal relationship, background, and experience. To address any biases, the researcher has established specific protocols within the study that formalized all interactions and forms of communication. Lastly, the researcher documented each interaction to allow for reflection and consideration of biases related to the setting and participants of the study.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected from the EOP 2021-2022 incoming class. The selection of participants is considered purposeful/convenient sampling as the research required EOP students that participated in the 2021 pre-freshman summer experience. Etikan (2016) indicates that purposeful sampling is a "deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses" (p. 2). Additionally, Etikan (2016) mentions that convenient sampling is a "nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate" (p. 2). Given the deliberate choice of EOP participants as well as the researchers access to the site as a former EOP student, the approach of selecting participants was a combination of purposeful and convenient sampling. According to the Educational Opportunity Program Information Summary (2021), EOP enrolled 163 freshmen with an average SAT score between 990-1070, an average ACT score between 18-20, and an average

high school grade point average between 83-89. Demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, and background were not provided yet recent research shows women at 52.2% undergraduate enrollment compared to 47.8% men at SU Upstate, (NCES, 2021). Being cognizant of the gender split in enrollment, I expected to yield higher data from students who identified as female within this study.

The researcher requested access to the EOP listserv for outreach and invited the 2021-2022 EOP class via email, telephone, and mail to participate within the study. The invitation consisted of a flyer attached to the email with a brief introduction to the study, purpose and contact information for interested students. The email script utilized to contact students is provided within the appendix section of this dissertation. A similar script was used when contacting students by telephone, with a follow up email sent containing further details. The email invitation provided a link to the student questionnaire consent form and student questionnaire to collect background and demographic information needed for the study. The questionnaire allowed the researcher to gather a sample size for the study and pertinent demographic characteristics. The researcher aimed to obtain a minimum of 30 participants for this study, which would have been divided among individual interviews and focus groups. Of the initial goal, 23 students expressed initial interest in the study, yet only 15 students proceeded with participation. Upon identifying the 15 participants for this study, a letter of consent detailing the study, purpose, and procedures was provided to ensure transparency, confidentiality and develop trust and rapport with participants. Each student received the respective consent form based on the data collection method prior to conducting the method. Below you will find a

descriptive analysis for participants based on ethnicity, mode of participation preference, age, race, and gender.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Descriptive	
	n	*%*
Age		
18 years old	8	53
19 years old	6	40
20 years old	1	7
Race		
Pacific Islander	1	7
Asian	1	7
Mixed	1	7
Latino(s)/Hispanic	2	13
Black/African American	10	66
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	6	40
Hispanic	2	13
American	2	13
Other	5	33
Gender		
Non-binary	1	7
Female	6	40
Male	8	53
Preferred Mode of Participation		
Individual Interview	12	80

Characteristic	Descriptive	
Preferred Mode of Participation		
Focus Group	1	7
Both Individual Interview/Focus Group	2	13

Note. $N = 15$. Demographic characteristics were collected from the Student Questionnaire Survey provided to students who volunteered to participate within the study.

Data Collection Procedures

For this study, four forms of data source collections were used to investigate the role of the EOP pre-freshman summer program and how EOP students fared during the completion of the program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yin (2014) emphasizes the use of multiple sources and methods of data collection as it provides a higher quality of findings promotes triangulation. The sources of data collection that were used for this study consists of documents, student questionnaires, interviews (student and program director), and student focus groups.

Documents. The first form of data collection consisted of public information and documents gathered from the institutional website, program site, students, and The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Yanow (2007) states that "documents can provide background information prior to designing the research project, for example prior to conducting interviews" (p. 411). Gathering data and documents from the institution, the EOP, and EOP students allowed the researcher to familiarize themselves with the site and what the program offers to students. In addition, documents were collected throughout the research process when identifying research for the literature review and/or analyzing data. Documents to be used in the study included

letters, notes, brochures, agendas, flyers, websites, college newsletters, and evaluations. The purpose of these data sources was to provide context for the researcher when interacting with the program site, staff, and students. Having a general understanding of the program structure and what is offered allowed for opportunities and points of discussion to corroborate collected data.

  Student Questionnaires. The second form of data collection consisted of an electronic student questionnaire gathering background/demographic information from EOP students who were willing to participate in the study. The questionnaire provided helpful demographic information for subsequent data sources. Lefever et al. (2007) discuss the advantages as well as limitations of online data collection in which access to a larger sample and quick returns makes this the best approach for the study. Roopa and Rani (2012) state how "a questionnaire is a series of questions asked to individuals to obtain statistically useful information about a given topic" (p. 273) and is noted as a "vital instrument by which statements can be made about specific groups or people or entire populations" (p. 273). Prior to distributing the questionnaire, access to the participants was granted by the IRB and Program Director. Additionally, a letter of consent was provided to the site and all participants detailing the studies purpose, protocols, and goal. The goal of the questionnaire was to identify a sample size for the study and gather background information of participants to proceed with further data collection with willing participants who completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was created utilizing google forms and all information collected remained confidential, and password protected for the study. The goal was to obtain a minimum of 30 student

questionnaires, in which 23 completed questionnaires was collected, and 15 were used as the sample size for this study.

Focus Groups. The third form of data collection consisted of a student focus group discussion. There are many definitions of a focus group that contain similar features such as organized discussion (Kitzinger, 1994) and collective activity (Powell et al., 1996). For this research we will be utilizing the following two definitions: (1) "a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299, (2) "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research" (Powell et al., 1996, p. 499). The purpose of utilizing this method of data collection was to encourage participants to discuss their experiences with not only the researcher but one another, creating a safe environment for open dialogue to ask questions, exchange narratives and comment on similar and/or different experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). Furthermore, Kitzinger (1994) suggests that incorporating a focus group as a method of data collection provides sampling advantages such as minimizing discrimination against participants who cannot read or write and encourages participants who are reluctant to be interviewed one on one. The goal was to host 4 focus groups containing 5 participants each, however, due to the sample size the study conducted 1 focus group with 3 students.

Kreuger (1988) advocates the use of focus groups at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study. For this study, utilizing this method alongside three others aided in triangulation and validity checking (Morgan, 1988). Gibbs (1997) indicate that "focus groups can help to explore or generate hypotheses and develop questions or

concepts for questionnaires and interview guides" (p. 2-3). Although there are many benefits to utilizing focus groups within a study, the following limitations should be considered when implementing this method within a study. According to Gibbs (1997), one of the main limitations to utilizing a focus group is having less control over the data that is produced as the moderator or research of the focus group guides the conversation but does not control it. Utilizing open ended questions and encouraging participants to explore and generate their own questions leaves little room for control and predetermined outcomes (Gibbs, 1997; Kitzinger, 1995). Lastly, given the group setting, participants may not feel comfortable or trusting to share thoughts and opinions as the group is not fully confidential or anonymous (Gibbs, 1997). With careful planning and moderating of focus groups, some of these limitations can be overcome by providing participants with a letter of consent detailing the purpose, expectation, and confidentiality agreement.

Interviews. The fourth and main form of data collection consisted of individual student interviews. In addition to student interviews, the researcher interviewed the EOP Director for further context on how the program has serviced students throughout the ongoing pandemic, including but not limited to reviewing programmatic decisions, budget, COVID-related funding, etc. Including an interview with the Director of EOP within this study provided further triangulation of the data. This study originally aimed to collect a total of 10 individual interviews, in which we were able to obtain 12 participants for interviews. The use of interviews within qualitative research is a commonly used method as it provides a unique perspective full of rich descriptions from the interviewee's experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Yin, 2014). Developing a semi-structured interview allowed for a non-standardized approach where key themes and issues were

incorporated within the interview to gain knowledge and personalized experiences. Patton (2002) recommended to "explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject…to build a conversation…and establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined" (p. 343). The interview protocol was developed based on the study's research questions and Schlossberg's (2008) 4 S System. In addition, utilizing Castillo-Montoya's (2016) Four-Phase Process to Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) aided in strengthening the reliability and congruency of the interview protocol questions as it relates to the research and purpose of study. Developing an interview protocol matrix to align intended interview questions with the research questions as well as organizing questions "so they are clear, short, understandable, and in a conversational order" (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 826) ensured congruency with the study (Appendix X). Lastly, seeking feedback and piloting the interview protocol with a similar sample population allowed the researcher to fine-tune and modify questions before proceeding with the study. In taking these steps, the researcher increased the reliability of the interview protocol as a research instrument.

The researcher hoped to conduct interviews in person as Lichtman (2013) explains the importance of developing rapport with interviewees however, considering the COVID-19 pandemic and possible restrictions all interviews and focus groups were conducted through virtual video conferences via Zoom. The purpose of conducting individual interviews allowed the researcher to gather more intimate responses from students and their experiences. The estimated duration of the interview was forty-five

minutes to one hour, allowing time for follow up questions and/or extended conversation that were beneficial for the study.

Trustworthiness of the Design

Campbell and Fiske (1959) indicate that using more than one method ensures validation in the design and avoids results being a methodological artifact. Denzin (1978) support this use of triangulation as cross validation is possible when two or more of the methods used are yielding comparable data and congruent. To ensure trustworthiness within the study, four approaches of data collection were used to triangulate the data: interviews, documents/reports from the institution and program, questionnaires and focus groups. Johnson (1997) identifies strategies used to promote qualitative research validity and defines data triangulation as utilizing multiple data sources helps with understanding and corroborating a phenomenon. In analyzing the multiple data collected, it is important to address interpretive validity as Johnson (1997) emphasizes the importance of accurately portraying the meaning behind the collected data from participants. Strategies to establish interpretive validity include "member checking" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which allows the researcher to share the interpretations with the participants/group to allow for clarity and clear up any miscommunication. Lastly, utilizing low inference descriptors and/or verbatim, direct quotes, when developing the research report assists with the validity of the data as the terminology and dialect coincide with the participants own language and personal meanings.

Developing a case study protocol as well as case study database further assisted with the study and its reliability. Yin (2014) describes the case study protocol as a written procedure for the instrument(s)/questionnaire(s) used for the study which increases the

"reliability of a case study research and is intended to guide the researcher in carry out the data collection from a single case" (Yin, 2014, p. 84). Lastly, to enhance the credibility of this study, peer debriefing was used as a strategy, in which one or more neutral, independent peers reviewed the protocols and report.

Research Ethics

To gain access to the site, a formal email was sent to the Director of the SU at Upstate EOP, carbon copying all necessary constituents such as the Dean of Academic Affairs, Student Support Services and point of contact for the institutions research review board. The email included a description of the study, its purpose, ethical guidelines, protocols, confidentiality agreement, and informed consent forms needed to establish transparency, trust, and rapport. To ensure voluntary participation, a request to the participants via the EOP Email listserv was made to allow for students to be informed of the study and voluntarily decide to participate in the questionnaire based on voluntary interest in the study. A letter of consent was provided to participants highlighting the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, and benefits, as well as confidentiality agreement. In gaining approval from the Director and institution's research board, the overarching goal of this dissertation study was communicated as reciprocity between the researcher, the site, participants, and institutions to allow the opportunity for student participants voices to be heard, as well as providing insightful on the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience while assisting the researcher, a former EOP student, with their doctoral study.

Data Analysis Approach

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, Krueger's (1994) framework analysis was used along with a combination of Creswell (2009) and Glesne (2011) organizational approach. This combination approach of data analysis provides clear guidance and instructions for first-time researchers (Rabiee, 2004). Qualitative research typically collects a large amount of complex data that needs to be unfolded and interpreted. Rabiee (2004) indicates that the approach of data analysis is not linear and may require a continuum approach, often overlapping between the accumulation of raw data and interpretation of data. As described by Ritchie and Spencer (1994), the five key stages of 'framework analysis' are: familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation.

Upon gathering all the data from multiple different sources, it is critical for the researcher to review and familiarize themselves to be fully immersed and get a sense of the whole before breaking it into parts (Rabiee, 2004). This included listening to recorded audio, reviewing transcripts and note taking during the interviews, as well as journaling as a form of reflection. During the familiarization stage, themes begin to emerge leading into the second key stage, identifying a thematic framework. Creswell (2009) states that "researchers build their patterns, categories and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information" (p. 175). Using the recorded audio from interviews and the transcription service provided by Rev, themes were determined based on repeated language and terminology. Similarly, with the documents, reports and information gathered from the institution, SUNY website and IPEDS, the collected data was reviewed to determine congruency, trends, and patterns. Glesne (2011)

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states "thematic analysis involves coding and segregating data for further analysis and description" (p. 184). Rabiee (2004) describes this as the development of descriptive statements that leads to the third key stage, indexing, which allows the researcher to sift "the data, highlighting and sorting out quotes and making comparisons both within and between cases" (p. 657). In this third stage, the determined themes and subthemes were assigned a code that allowed for categorizing the data collected by code. This is defined as inductive coding, in which a ground-up approach was used to derive codes from the data.

Manning (2017) indicates that having codes or coding can be extremely beneficial for research as it places an emphasis on the participants and their voices. Saldana (2009) further supports the structure of coding in research as is provides a more systematic and rigorous process to organize data. Benefits of coding include increased validity and decreased bias, along with accurate representation of the participants and transparency throughout the research (Saldana, 2009). For this study, *in vivo coding*, was utilized during the first found of coding to "help highlight how participants use specific words or phrases in their interactions that might not otherwise be understood when using other forms of coding" (Manning, 2017, p. 1). Although in vivo coding was initially used in the development of grounded theory, utilizing this form of coding within a case study has become more common as it allows for the researcher to have a better understanding of "the slang, jargon, or other specialized vernacular used in a particular culture" (Manning, 2017, p. 1). To assist with accurately coding and organizing data, Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was utilized to facilitate data analysis.

Utilizing Dedoose allowed for the data collection process to be more efficient during the indexing stage of data analysis. During the indexing stage, all data was uploaded in Dedoose and organized into their respective coding categories to proceed with the data analysis framework that led to charting. To further ensure the validity of the data analysis process, a second round of coding ensued. For the second round of coding, a thematic analysis approach was taken as it provided the opportunity to code and categorize data into themes (Miles and Huberman 1994; Creswell 2009; Hayes 1997). Additionally, the thematic analysis approach is suggested to be the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations (Ibrahim, 2012). For this study, the Miles and Huberman (1994) model for the thematic analysis process was utilized as it consists of three link stages as illustrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1

Thematic Analysis Process
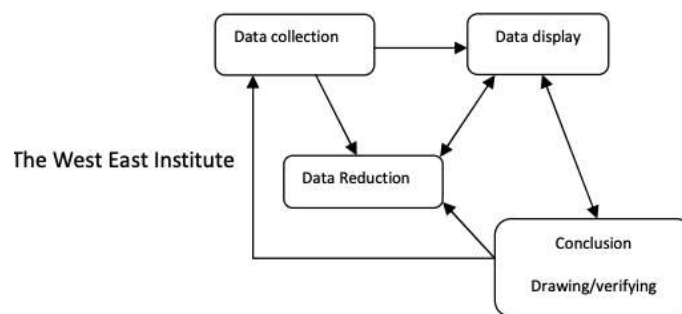
Note. The figure demonstrates the thematic analysis process model used for data analysis. Adapted from Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook by M.B. Miles & A.M, Huberman, 1994, Sage Publications.

During the charting stage, Rabiee (2004) indicates that re-examining the data along with re-arranging, merging, and reducing the number of codes to best categorize and develop concepts. Additionally, Rabiee (2004) further suggests the reduction of data by "comparing and contrasting data and cutting and pasting similar quotes together" (p. 658). Creswell (2015) suggests working with 30 to 50 codes and reducing it to 20 codes that then collapse into five to seven themes. Researchers emphasize the importance of placing the original textual context in visual charts to clearly identify and represent the data analyzed. Advantages to utilizing different display techniques such as charts, quotations, narrative text, figures, etc. allows for the comparison and similarities to be presented while increasing the overall reliability of the research as it provides evidence, support and validates interpretations. (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Gibbs, 2002; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2010)

Lastly, the interpretation stage allowed the researcher to "make sense of the individual quotes, but also to be imaginative and analytical enough to see the relationship between the quotes, and the links between the data as a whole" (Rabiee, 2004, p. 658). During this final stage it was important to develop an explanation for the analyzed data which is a more descriptive approach providing overarching themes and findings (Rabiee, 2004). Krueger (1994) provided an initial framework for interpreting coded data by way of seven established headings/criteria's including but not limited to: words; context; internal consistency; frequency and extensiveness of comments; specificity of comments; intensity of comments; big ideas. For this study, the interpretation of coded data will utilize the updated framework of Krueger and Casey (2000) with the following five headings: frequency; specificity; emotions; extensiveness; big picture. This approach

assisted with organizing the finalized set of data and interpretation to develop findings for the study.

Researcher Role

Prior experiences that the researcher has had that are most relevant to this study would be previous participation within the EOP. The EOP allowed students like the researcher, to attend a higher education institution who may not have otherwise been admitted. As stated by Winograd and Rust (2014), the programs goal is to recruit students who are at an economic disadvantage and lack adequate resources in efforts to propel them into higher education and in obtaining a degree. As a participant within the program, the researcher was provided with access to academic/social resources, support, and supplemental financial assistance, but also given insight on the tools and policies needed to promote and support student achievement as well as maintain longevity of such a successful student support service program. Lastly, the researcher identifies as a marginalized minority student and thus, relevant to the research topic on EOP and student experiences within the program. Given the researchers experience, there may be research bias on the EOP. However, acknowledging these biases provide advantages to the study and increased trustworthiness. The advantage that the researchers' personal experiences will offer to the study is the prior knowledge on EOP programming and services. Having prior knowledge on services allowed the researcher to identify areas of the program that need further exploration and research.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the EOP student experience of the Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon approval

from St. John's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and SU Upstate IRB, the

researcher was able to proceed with the methodology discussed. The following chapter

will provide relevant findings from the data analysis conducted for this study.

CHAPTER 4 Results Introduction

As noted in chapter three, this qualitative single embedded case study investigates the role of the pre-freshman summer experience program used for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) within a public 4-year institution in New York State. Utilizing documents, individual interviews, and a focus group, this study explores the EOP student experience during their 2021 pre-freshman summer experience program, as well as their transition into the institution for the first semester. The study also explored the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on the student experience. Given the success that the EOP has had with retention and graduation, the findings from this study serve to highlight the EOP student experience during unprecedented times. This chapter will discuss how EOP developed a community for their students during the 2021 pre-freshman summer experience program, provided resources to assist with transitioning into college, and the efforts of EOP to continue serving students during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The following three research questions guided this study, its data collection and analysis:

1) How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?

2) What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?

3) How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?

The following section will review the common themes that emerged from the data and how it relates to the overall EOP student experience.

Findings/Themes

Four data sources were collected for this study including documents, student interviews, student focus group, and staff interview. For this study, four documents were collected, twelve individual interviews were conducted, one focus group interview was conducted, and lastly, one staff interview was conducted. In analyzing the data, the following themes emerged: students developing a sense of belonging among peers, familial comfort provided by the EOP, a positive college readiness and transition experience, and dissonance regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the student experience, specifically focusing on the pre-freshman summer experience program. To understand how students fared during the pre-freshman summer experience program it is important to review participant background to have a better understanding of the sample group for this study.

The results for the student questionnaires collected for this study indicate twenty-three student participants, of which eleven identified as female, eleven identified as male, and one identified as non-binary (she/they). Of the twenty-three participants who expressed initial interest in the study, fifteen proceeded with participation in either an individual interview or focus group interview. Although there were limited findings within the student questionnaire, the data shows an equal ratio of 1:1 between male and female participants with an average age of 19 years old. The majority of student participants identified as African American/Black, however, the data shows a diverse participant pool including Latino/Hispanic, Asian and, mixed ethnic/racial backgrounds. As noted in Table #2, 80% of the participants opted for individual interviews, which provided the study with comprehensive data to develop our findings. The following

section will review major themes that emerged from the data collected within documents, interviews, and focus groups.

Sense of Belonging and Familial Comfort

The data collected from student interviews and documents reveal that most, if not, all students shared a sense of belonging that was attributed to the EOP summer program. Although the summer program was conducted virtually, students expressed gratitude for the efforts that the EOP staff put forth in trying to ensure that peers connected and developed rapport. Students shared their fear of anxiety, shyness, and difficulty as it related to making friends, especially since their senior year in high school was conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A common term used throughout the interview responses was "family" in which participants described EOP as family, feeling comforted and supported not only by the program but also by their peers within EOP. Jacob*, an 18-year-old male participant, expressed that "EOP is like a family you know, the sense of community is, you know, we're all, we're all brothers and sisters, you know". Coming from a catholic, private school background, Jacob described himself as being familiar with having a sense of community and indicated that EOP allowed him to experience firsthand the closeness, and welcoming nature that EOP provided increasing his level of comfort within the program.

Similarly, Katherine*, a 19-year-old female participant, stated how she instantly felt that EOP was family as they were "very welcoming and heartwarming…made sure we felt connected and comfortable and they made sure to hear our thoughts on how we felt throughout the program." Katherine shared her personal experiences within education stating how most of her life was spent alongside her siblings who attended the same

public schools in the Bronx area, and how it became a tradition within her family. Coincidently, Katherine's older sister attended SU Upstate, and was part of the EOP program. In visiting and experiencing the institution as well as the EOP program through her sister, Katherine was very familiar with the EOP, EOP services, as well as EOP's mission, vision, and values. Katherine shared her excitement upon receiving her acceptance letter to EOP, as attending SU Upstate by way of EOP was a primary goal, describing EOP as "an amazing program…praying that I get into EOP". Although Katherine's initial interactions with EOP differed from her sisters by participating virtually, gratitude and appreciation towards EOP was conveyed in her interview. Katherine acknowledged EOP's efforts in trying to connect and engage EOP students online, and making it a fun experience.

The findings indicate a developed sense of community during the EOP summer program, of which was sustained as students transitioned into their first semester by way of a credited EOP course titled "UNI". Findings from the student interviews indicate that EOP provided a multitude of services for students to transition out of the EOP summer program and into their first semester on campus. Students mentioned services such as campus move-in assistance, EOP gatherings and student activities, as well as registration within an EOP credited course known as "UNI". Such services allowed students to feel welcomed on campus as well as comfortable with the transition from online to in-person. Eli*, an 18-year-old female participant, shared her experiences with EOP and her personal struggles with opening up to others and developing friendships. Eli stated the following as it relates to EOP:

> Very welcoming like I was surprised, I felt like they knew us, even though we were all meeting for the first time, they made sure that they tried to make

everybody feel comfortable and tried to have everybody connect or come together in some sort, even though it wasn't in person, it still felt like it was in a way.

Upon transitioning out of the EOP summer program and into her first semester in-person, Eli described her first-time meeting with EOP staff, faculty, and peers in person. Eli mentioned feelings of familiarity describing the interaction as though she had already known them and stating that "when I did meet them in person, it felt a lot better because you're actually seeing them one on one and speaking to them, not through a phone or like a computer." Heather* expressed similar sentiments when prompted about her experience as she transitioned out of the EOP summer program and into her first semester in-person with EOP.

Heather, an 18-year-old female participant, describes herself as an immigrant student with a language barrier, who moved to the United States at the age of eight. Heather shared her struggles with transition and lack of confidence specifically in high school and while applying for colleges. Heather was informed of the EOP and expressed her eagerness stating, "I was very excited when I did get into EOP because I felt like I had an opportunity to actually succeed and go somewhere and do something with my life" after initially receiving a rejection letter. Findings indicate a level of uncertainty among students when prompted to reflect on their online summer experience and their in-person experience. However, many expressed positive interactions as they transitioned to in person learning due to EOP and their efforts in community building. Heather stated that meeting the EOP and peers for the first time in person was nerve wrecking but nice as they provided social events such as a museum tour and an ice cream social. Heather stated how the efforts of EOP "[were] pretty cool". Heather also reiterated previous

participant sentiments on EOP treating participants as family, encouraging success, and taking time to engage, connect and interact to have positive experiences.

Lastly, in interviewing Maria*, the previous Director of EOP, findings parallel the sentiments of students as Maria discusses the purpose and goals of the EOP and its pre-freshman summer experience program. Maria states the importance of establishing a relationship with EOP students prior to their first semester and providing a level of care and support that is "intrusive, comprehensive, we don't just talk about academics, we talk about life, career". Part of creating a sense of belonging and community within EOP is the involvement of not just the students, but their parents and family members from home. Maria explained that prior to the start of the pre-freshman summer program, EOP prepares students and their family by providing meetings for the family to review the nature of the EOP and its requirements, echoing the sentiments of EOP being family. Maria states that "when we bring these students in, they became family to us and we're not going to let anybody throw them off the cliff because they're putting them in this unrealistic set of coursework", as it relates to preparing for their first semester in college.

Due to the unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic, Maria expressed the challenges faced with remote learning and having a virtual summer program. Maria stated how she was "genuinely surprised that they bonded…afraid that a virtual summer program would impact students not knowing each other. And making a great effort of bonding experiences" such as the EOP Talent Show, and ice cream social. It is important to note that within the interview process, a common response revealed amongst several students regarding their most memorable experience during the summer program was the EOP talent show with reference to an "EOP Rap" video submitted for this study.

In reviewing the "EOP Rap" video, it provided a clear indication on how several participants experienced the pre-freshman summer experience program. Justin*, an 18-year-old male participant, describes the "EOP Rap" video as something that contributed to his most memorable experience during the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program. Justin had an opportunity to display his talents by participating in the EOP talent show conducted at the end of the pre-freshman summer experience program. EOP students were invited to celebrate and highlight their talent(s) with EOP peers, faculty, and staff by way of zoom. Justin's recorded video demonstrates a sense of belonging that was developed amongst the students throughout the time spent together over the summer program. Observations noted students encouraging and supporting one another throughout the 5-week program. In addition, the data indicated active participation within the talent show from students, staff and faculty. Lastly, the video discusses aspects of the summer program such as having to wake up early to participate within summer classes all while developing a sense of comradery stating, "we are here for each other" and "building my brother" throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recorded video demonstrates the level of comradery and support among EOP students as the zoom chat filled with encouraging words such as "I can't wait to say I went to school with him", "someone get him a record deal", and "this is valid". Justin's "EOP Rap" also described how difficult the summer program was due to the COVID-19 pandemic and sacrificing personal time to participate within the EOP summer program. Although Justin shared feelings of nerves and unpreparedness, the data indicates that the talent show and "EOP Rap" "was probably one of the best experiences" as he felt a sense of pride in sharing his talents and receiving positive feedback from his peers allowed him

to feel good, reminiscing on the 80 comments made. Justin also expressed how the "EOP Rap" and EOP Talent Show provide a sense of accomplishment, not only finishing the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program, but also acknowledging all the hard work and efforts made to finish and celebrate together.

Overall, the findings indicate a positive impact on the lives of EOP students who participated in the pre-freshman summer experience program. Developing a sense of belonging and community allowed students to feel confident entering a new and unknown environment. Students' awareness of the support systems available to them, development of friendships, and the security in knowing that they are not alone, has alleviated one aspect of the college process for incoming freshman. Findings indicate that The EOP Pre-freshman Summer Experience Program alleviates many of the socio-emotional challenges students encounter when transitioning to a new environment by providing them a safe space to feel welcomed, loved, and belonged.

College Readiness and Transition

Data collected from documents, student interviews and staff interviews indicate that the EOP program dedicates itself to providing students with the resources and tools needed to prepare and transition into college as a first-generation student. In analyzing the "College Survival Guide", a 40-page document provided to EOP students during their pre-freshman summer experience program, findings indicate that students found this guide extremely beneficial as they transitioned into the summer program as well as their first semester in college. Of the fifteen participants, three referenced the "College Survival Guide" within their individual interviews. Don*, a 19-year-old male student, was one of the initial participants to mention the guide and provided an original copy of

the document for this study. As a high school student, Don, mentioned having a sense of awareness regarding his need for support as he transitioned to college. Coming from a very supportive and dependent family, Don opted to attend college away from his home to strengthen his independence however, acknowledged his need for support and sought out the EOP. Don described seeking a school and program that "cared for their students, not just their education, but support them as a family." Additionally, Don, described how the "College Survival Guide" allowed him to have a smooth transition as it provided useful information. Don indicated that the guide provided instructions on "how to look up your classes, how to find out to look up your major, like where to go if you need something around campus who to call so it was, it was like they gave you all the tools that you needed." Similarly, Marco*, a 20-year-old male participant, indicated the use of the "College Survival Guide" provided by his counselor and the feeling of comfort knowing that he has support from EOP.

Marco, describes himself as bright kid who is talented and has the ability to understand academic classes easily however, believes his upbringing and environment affected his confidence as it relates to academia and attending college. However, his experience within the EOP pre-freshman program and the resources provided such as the "College Survival Guide" allowed him to feel comfort stating,

> My advisor, he made it very comfortable for me to like email him about anything. So if I needed help with anything, he would really help me. He gave us a class survival guide. So anytime we needed help with, for example, adding classes or just needed help with financial aid, what to do.

As a student who expected EOP to provide a "safe haven…to go and talk to them when anytime I needed help", the findings indicate that EOP provides a supportive and resourceful environment to meet student needs.

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The importance of this document is evident within the interviews as it provided students with fundamental information related to the academic process at the institution. In assessing the document, findings show that college readiness and transitioning is its main purpose. The "College Survival Guide" document reviewed academic areas such as how to find classes, how to add/schedule classes, understanding the undergraduate bulletin, finding the degree audit, opting for pass/fail grades, understanding academic pathways, requesting unofficial transcript, utilizing schedule planner, finding registration dates, understanding the grade point average predictor, and related key terms/letters. The findings indicate that the "College Survival Guide" along with supplemental support from advisors, student assistants, and professors during the pre-freshman summer experience program allowed students to experience a sense of readiness as they transitioned into their first semester.

Marco, further supports the findings of this study regarding EOP and their efforts to transition students by sharing that EOP provides an "energetic belonging…it's almost like you belong you know, like you're more comfortable, you know everybody." In addition, Marco states how the EOP services allowed for him to "go into the building, you know everybody…you know, the staff members, they are always positive if we need anything they got you. So, it's more of a belonging feeling". Thus, demonstrating familiarity and comfortability with the campus, staff, and peers. Justin also discussed navigating campus resources and attributes his knowledge and awareness to the EOP summer program. The EOP not only provided students with information to navigate the world of academia, but they also provided students with an entry level English and Math course during the summer that prepared students for similar undergraduate coursework.

Although these courses were non-credited, students were able to recognize the differences in expectations and level of coursework between high school and college. Eli discusses these differences stating

> The summer program did impact my readiness and I would say it did because we're all coming from high school. College and high school are too different. And I say that because the teachers are not going to baby you, you can come to them for help, but you also have to push yourself more than you would have to in high school. So during the summer, especially since I wasn't in person, I had to sit there and do a lot of stuff myself. And then if I did need help, I would go ask. But the summer program helped me gather my thoughts together and focus more on my schoolwork because the hours were very long

Similarly, Marcos discusses how critical the summer courses were as he believed that the "EOP program made us understand what it takes to be a college student, the curriculum during the summer was very critical…the teachers were just getting us ready, mentally ready for college." Bianca*, one of the youngest participants in the study, expressed how the summer program made her first semester easy as she viewed her first semester as "an extension of the work [from summer] …it just helped me like shift into the fall semester and get through my work a lot easier. The fall semester was great." Participants also discussed the adjustments endured as they transitioned into their first semester in person, as there was less structure and more autonomy and freedom as compared to the summer program.

Students described how the summer program provided them with not only academic support, but personal support in managing time, utilizing available resources, and implementing self-care. Nicole* discussed how EOP implemented study hours and workshops that focused on time management and mental health, that aided with developing a routine and structure upon entering her first semester. Eli, an 18-year-old female participant, stated how "the process during the summer was different because we

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had to wake up earlier than usual…so when we had class, it wasn't that long, or we didn't

have to wake up that early, but I feel like I got used to it after a while." Jerimiah* stated

how the EOP Motto of "early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable" was

instilled in students and assisted with college preparation and accountability as "it helped

me academically because now I show up to class early, allowing me to just get prepared

so that as soon as the class starts, you know, I'm ready. I'm ready to go." Don touches

upon this idea of accountability and how EOP "gave me a level of accountability. I know

what I had to do, if I didn't do it, then that was on me. EOP gave me confidence in

knowing that I was going to do good in the fall semester." Justin expressed how the

summer program was challenging at first due to the expectations of EOP, sacrificing his

summer and participating in long-hour structured days. However, the guiding support

received from EOP allowed him to thrive during his transition to the first semester stating

> the five weeks for me was like I said, the pre-trial, the free trial, if that makes
> sense. And you know, coming onto campus for some people or the general public
> while paying, you know, their full tuition out of pocket, it was sort of a lot more
> expectations, a lot more responsibilities that they have to overcome themselves.
> And I sort of had a lot of help [from EOP]. watching them like sort of like have to
> overcome these responsibilities, gave me this like sense of, you know, like I can
> help, you know what I mean? I know these things and they don't, so I could tell
> them where to go and I can give them assistance on a database finder, something
> like that. EOP literally like walked us through the steps of this college process.
> Gave us an idea of how the workload would be presented to me. We started on
> Blackboard the summer and we took like zoom, zoom calls, we were all like, I
> don't know, zoom classes, if that makes sense. I kind of had experience in that and
> coming onto campus, it was pretty similar the essays were, you know, verbatim,
> like literally I'm doing the same thing in classes and, yeah, I mean, just
> academically they prepare me

Students who participated in the focus group stated feeling confusion and challenged with

their sense of autonomy and freedom as they transitioned out of the summer program

however adjusted smoothly due to the ongoing support received from EOP. One student

stated, "I thought it was going to be harder by the way they made it seem during the summer, but it was actually easier once I came in, I adjusted pretty well the first semester". The focus group expressed feelings of accomplishment stating "I felt more accomplished, the summer program is really over, I did it, I am happy and ready to start my first semester" with the rest of the participants in agreement. In addition, stating the efforts made by the counselors and "SA's" (Student Assistants), by answering questions regarding class scheduling and credits, it allowed for a supportive environment that aided in a "smooth transition". As students transitioned out of the summer program, and into their first semester, an additional theme emerged regarding on-going support during their first semester by way of a course titled "UNI" and financial assistance.

Ongoing Support. Although this study focused primarily on the student experience during the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program, findings indicate that the transition out of the summer program and into the first semester was a positive experience due to the ongoing and consistent support students received by the EOP. Findings indicate that financial assistance for textbooks, placement in a work-study site, as well as registration in a credited EOP freshman year seminar course aided transition to the first semester for EOP students. Eli describes her transition into the first semester and the continued support provided by EOP stating

> They provided work study, one-on-one time meeting with our advisors to just talk and catch up about how we are feeling about the semester…I had an EOP teacher, which I was also able to connect with. I feel like on a different level than I would with any of my other professors. So, it was really just a comfortable environment, just being able to go back to anybody from the program and just speak to them. They gave us money for our personal and then for books and the school, the EOP program also made sure that if we didn't have computers coming to school, they, they provided that for us.

Similarly, Justin mentioned the ongoing support received throughout the first semester, focusing on the UNI course stating "the class consisted of career options, and we built our resumes, did things that were necessary as a student, necessary to our everyday lives. And that class was very useful." Bianca elaborated on the UNI course stating projects done on topics such as "being a freshman in college, making friends, the freshman 15 [weight] gain, and networking." Findings indicate that incorporating a course like UNI is an essential factor to effectively transition students into college. As Katherine stated, the UNI course was "the backbone I needed coming fresh into college, fresh out of COVID. Like that was really the backbone I needed. So that's the main service that I am grateful for." The findings from the data reveal that the tools and resources provided by EOP throughout the summer program as well as during the first semester, allowed students to mature, adapt, and be well equipped and prepared to transition into higher education.

Although the findings reveal much success with the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program and transition to college, a critical area of concern was the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on EOP programming. Throughout the study, every method of data collection offered insight on the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on EOP programming. Findings indicate that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic affected the overall EOP student transitional experience in which its impact vastly varied with each participant in the study.

Dissonance with COVID-19 Impact

Findings revealed mixed sentiments from students on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their experiences within the EOP pre-freshman summer program. Results show that COVID-19 had both positive and negative impacts to the EOP pre-

freshman summer experience program. Findings indicate that students appreciated the level of flexibility and safety measures provided by EOP however, expressed issues such as difficulty building deeper connections, technological challenges and overall expectations of college were raised within the study. Due to the unexpected shift to remote learning in the spring of 2020, students were aware that their EOP summer experience during summer 2021 would differ from previous EOP students by having to participate virtually/remotely as compared to in-person. Although many students expressed the benefits and flexibility of having a virtual EOP summer program, a common finding indicates how the COVID-19 affected their ability to build deeper connections with their peers due to limited communication via a computer screen. Don supports this finding by stating

> Being virtual, I was able to gain information that they was giving me. But at the same time, I wasn't enjoying like the social aspect of being one on one with the counselors or being one on one with my peers. So for example, I know I would have more connections with my peers if I was in person versus it being online. So I guess that was one of the drawbacks of it being online. But I see it was a benefit though, because I enjoyed having time like at home or having time on vacation at the same time.

Similarly, within the focus group students discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted their perspective on the college experience stating how "sometimes being online was kind of boring and I kind of just wanted to do it in person just to see what it was like…it kind of took like a little bit of the interactive part of the program away." Heather expressed her struggles with developing friendships and stated

> I was really desperate to make friends. If I had an opportunity to do the summer program in person I would have met genuine, real friends. I wish I had an opportunity to meet all these people and experience things firsthand, kind of hard to know what a person is about behind the screen.

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While some students struggled with this aspect of virtual learning, other students appreciated the safety measures taken by EOP due to the COVID-19 health concerns.

Jerimiah stated, "it being during COVID, you know, it mattered more to me because I have a rare health condition that my immune system is very weak… EOP wanted to go the safe route…I see that's the smartest decision…it was good." The findings also indicate an opportunity for students to address personal issues during the COVID-19 pandemic such as work responsibilities and an obligation to contribute financially to the family household. Students such as Nelly* shared her appreciation of the adjustments made to the EOP summer program being done virtually due to COVID-19 stating, "I'm actually very appreciative that it was via zoom because I was able to still work". It is important to note that to qualify for EOP, you must demonstrate an economic disadvantage and/or meet income guidelines. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economy, and job market, the ability to work while virtually completing the EOP summer program provided students with the flexibility and opportunity to obtain income. Cognitive dissonance occurred for many as they openly preferred an in-person summer program but recognized how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted not only the EOP program but also their peers. Heather expressed her desire for an in-person summer program but also understood that this was also an opportunity to spend time with family, seek employment, and better prepare financially for college.

Students also expressed difficulties with managing their time and experiencing fatigue as it related to the EOP structure throughout the summer program such as waking up early and remaining on a computer daily for an extended period. Additionally, issues of engagement, technological difficulties, and obligations outside of the EOP summer

program were also mentioned as a factor of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the student experience. Findings from the focus group interview indicate that developing a hybrid model for the EOP summer program would allow for accommodations to meet the needs of students. Providing students with the opportunity to attend virtually for a portion of the summer allows for growth and learning in a virtual/remote environment as well as catering to the needs of students who prefer in-person. This suggestion was made with the intentions of accommodating students based on their learning needs, location or financial needs.

Findings also indicate students' acknowledgement of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their summer experience, as well as appreciation for the EOP and its faculty and staff in their efforts of minimizing associated negative impacts. To provide students with the necessary resources for online learning, EOP students received laptops to combat the issue of access to technology. Abner*, a 19-year-old male participant, expressed gratitude and understanding of the adjustments made by EOP during the pandemic stating:

> I know because of COVID we had to do everything online and we didn't get to have the full experience of being on campus and going to going through those classes during the summer program. But I still feel like they made everything that was needed to be known known, even though we wasn't there they made us feel like we were still on campus, you know, doing every single thing that we was doing basically also I forgot to say it was very, it was also very helpful by getting us laptops too.

Although Abner initially expressed dislike due to the summer program overlapping and inconveniencing his birthday in August, findings reveal an overall appreciation and positive impact across EOP participants when sacrificing their personal time during the summer to participate in the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program.

Given the COVID-19 restrictions, students also expressed issues with the online

modality, Katherine stating, "Zoom all day is kind of not engaging." Although there

were some hesitancies to participating in an online summer program, Katherine

reinforced the efforts of EOP stating:

> they made sure to have workshops activities made sure that our classes were very
> engaging. The professors too were very understanding as well. They didn't put
> that much pressure on us because they knew what was happening all outside in
> the world that we have our own lives, especially being home. There's a lot of
> distractions at home. So they very much understood that as well. And they have
> their own stuff going on. So overall it was very understanding, which I appreciate
> because not all professors and not all programs are like that.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the circumstances that transpired resulted in both

positive and negative experiences during the EOP summer program. However, students

overall, demonstrated an ability to persevere by developing a support system among

EOP, faculty, staff, and peers, acknowledging that it was a shared experience together.

The final document reviewed sheds light on the EOP summer program going

remote due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The EOP Newsletter highlights the

EOP across all State Universities of New York (SUNY), sharing updates within each

institution and overall programmatic efforts made in previous and upcoming semesters.

This study specifically focuses on page three and four of the newsletter indicating efforts

made for EOP pre-freshman summer experience program during the ongoing COVID-19

pandemic. The students interviewed for this study triangulate the information provided

within the newsletter as they discuss services throughout the pandemic such as the

opportunity to receive a free laptop upon identified as an admitted participant in the 2021

EOP pre-freshman summer program. The newsletter acknowledges how the COVID-19

pandemic caused a shift to online-remote learning and the need for students to have

personal computers. As stated, "access to the needed technology can be problematic for students who come from low-income households who don't own a laptop or who have to share a device" (p.3). The funding provided for these laptops were in an effort to engage students in their studies at home. It is important to note that the newsletter shared student's excitement over this gift, thrilled to be joining EOP.

Strategies used to adjust to remote learning were reviewed on page 4 of this document. The implementation of software programs such as Moodle, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangout allowed EOP to connect with their students during the unexpected shift to remote learning. Findings reinforce students' experiences with the summer program as it transitioned "from a highly structured, personalized face-to-face format to a more flexible online/remote experience" (p.4). Services such as intrusive advising and counseling were provided remotely, and activities intended for students to foster a sense of belonging and community were adjusted by way of hosting virtual dances, virtual tours, and other similar enrichment activities. According to the document, findings from a survey given to the entire SUNY population of students who participated in the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program show that there was an overall satisfaction with the summer program and a sense of readiness for their transition to the fall semester.

Although students had differing views regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, findings indicate that there was in fact an impact to the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program in a multitude of ways. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed for students to experience more flexibility and freedom while engaging in the summer program, while limiting their ability to fully interact in-person and develop friendships

early on. Additionally, students were able to receive additional services such as access to laptops and internet, something that was not previously provided to EOP students before the onset of COVID-19. Lastly, findings indicate that students choose to be more accepting of the COVID-19 pandemic as they recognized EOP's efforts in continuing the summer program to the best of their abilities and found gratitude regardless of the negative impact COVID-19 caused. Possible solutions include developing a hybrid model of the pre-freshman summer experience program to allow for student accommodations should health, location, and finances be a concern.

Conclusion

In considering the population of students that EOP caters to, issues of academic preparedness and finances are prominent as well as exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. All EOP participants in this study are first generation, low-income, disadvantaged minority students, who otherwise would not have been granted admission to the university. By way of the EOP program, these students were provided the opportunity to pursue a college degree with an agreement and commitment to attend a 5-week EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program. Although students sacrificed their summer, findings indicate an overwhelming expression of appreciation and gratitude towards the EOP program due to how beneficial the summer programming was in preparing student transition into college during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

As the COVID-19 pandemic persists, the experiences of EOP students during the 2021 EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program serve as a guiding point for researchers, educators, and future programming surrounding student support services. The findings of this study demonstrate that incorporating intrusive advisement services,

socioemotional curriculum, and an extended summer program/orientation, allows for students to develop a sense of belonging, transition into higher education, and adapt under the circumstances of the COVID-19 phenomenon. Although the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to institutions of higher education, findings indicate that the support services provided by EOP not only encouraged their students to pursue their education but enter with confidence and reassurance of the support system, community, and knowledge made available to them.

The findings indicate that addressing issues outside of academia made a much more profound impact on students and their lives within EOP and the institution. Building a community for students to feel accepted, understood, welcomed, and cared for is essential in maintaining their engagement and participation. To provide students with the fundamental resources and tools needed to succeed academically, a commitment and willingness to participate is crucial. EOP prioritizes building distinct relationships with their students and establishing good rapport so that EOP students are more receptive to the services and support being offered. Findings from this study demonstrate the importance of EOP in the lives of EOP students, and how transformational the pre-freshman summer experience program can be. As students express their advocacy, support, and love for the EOP program, it is evident how effective EOP has been in catering to their student needs.

CHAPTER 5 Introduction

This dissertation study explored the experiences of 15 Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students during their 2021 EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program. Furthermore, this study investigated how students fared throughout their transition into the EOP program, as well as their transition out of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous chapter discussed findings from this study indicating the impact that EOP has had in the development of student sense of belonging, college readiness and transition, and their efforts in minimizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing an intrusive advisement model, EOP has established norms and expectations with their students prior to the start of the Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program that has contributed to an overall positive student experience. As students transitioned into the EOP summer program, EOP ensured that students along with their family/legal guardian(s) are provided with extensive information on program structure, policies, and procedures. This level of transparency allowed for relationship building and trust between EOP staff, students, and family members.

The EOP prides itself on the support services provided to students not only addressing academic needs, but socioemotional needs. Focusing on factors such as financial barriers, community building, mental health, access to academic resources and technology, as well as building self-esteem and readiness for college are fundamental aspects as first-generation students transition into college. EOP has developed a summer program curriculum that expands beyond the scope of academia allowing students to build connections among their peers, address barriers as a collective, and feel safety and

security within the program, confident of the support provided by EOP. The findings of this study indicate that that the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program has impacted students' lives by creating a safe space for students to interact and bond, thus developing a sense of community. Additionally, findings indicate that the student experience with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program increased levels of confidence and college preparedness in EOP students.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic that has transformed higher education across the United States, the EOP recognized its impact in exacerbating prominent issues among historically underrepresented/underserved students from low-income, racially/ethnically diverse, and first-generation backgrounds. Access to technological resources such as internet/wi-fi, a laptop, as well as transitioning to a remote learning/virtual environment were additional barriers EOP students faced. Limiting in-person activities and resorting to virtual talent shows, EOP made great efforts in conducting the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program as similar as possible to pre-COVID-19 era. Findings from this study indicate mixed sentiments from students when discussing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their Pre-Freshman Summer Program experience. Students experienced positive and negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as it forced students to attend the mandatory EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program virtually. Findings indicate that students appreciated the flexibility obtained by virtual participation but yearned for an in-person connection and bond. Recognizing the efforts made by EOP, students expressed gratitude and understanding.

Having provided an overview of this study, this chapter begins with a discussion on the implications of findings from this study and how it relates to the theoretical

framework presented in chapter two. This chapter will then discuss the relationship of this study to prior research indicating how the findings either supports, extend, question, or refute prior research and review its relationship to the research questions and framework. Lastly, this chapter will focus on the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, recommendations for future practice and conclusion.

Implications of Findings

Chapter two of this dissertation study discussed the use of Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Goodman et al., 2006: Schlossberg, 1998, 1984, 1985b, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995) as the theoretical framework to collect, analyze, and make meaning of the data. In reviewing the major findings in chapter four of this study, this section relates the findings to Schlossberg's transition theory. As previously discussed, Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on 4 areas known as the "4 S System" (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg (2008) identifies this framework as *taking stock*, which analyzes a situation and how participants navigate transitions while examining their coping mechanisms, resources, and strategies to overcome the transitional situation. The 4 S System has been utilized as the framework to examine the EOP student experience during the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as they transitioned into and out of the summer program.

According to the 4 S System, the following components must be assessed: (1) the situation, (2) the self, (3) support, (4) and strategies. For this study, the following were identified as "the situation" component: (1) transition into the pre-freshman summer

experience program, (2) transition out of the pre-freshman summer experience program, (3) and the COVID-19 pandemic. The 4 S System framework allowed for a deeper understanding of each situation assessing whether students considered the situation as a good or bad experience, determining if the student expected the situation to occur, assessing if the situation occurred at the best/worst time, and lastly understanding if the situation is at the beginning, middle, or end process of transition.

The Situation(s)

The findings from this study imply that the student experience transitioning into the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience program was positive. Although students expected to participate in the summer program virtually, the resulting experience was unexpected as they expressed uncertainty with the rollout of EOP's first virtual summer program. Students shared their reservations and concerns such as online structure, developing friendships, and technology fatigue. The EOP tried to mitigate this by preparing EOP students and family in advance for the summer program. Providing laptops, hot-spots devices for internet/Wi-Fi, and orientation sessions to meet EOP faculty and staff assisted with rapport, community building, and comfortability. Determining if the transition into the summer program was done at the best or worst possible time fluctuated per student. Findings indicate that students perceived participation in the summer program as a sacrifice to better prepare for college yet, the duration was something they did not look forward to. One student implied that the summer program was at the worst time due to a birthday celebration. Given that the summer program is at the beginning of students transition process to college, the findings

indicate that overall, the transition into the summer program was done at the best possible time.

In reviewing the transition out of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program, overall findings imply that students perceived the transition to have been a positive experience as the EOP faculty and staff provided students with additional resources at the conclusion of the summer program. Although a sense of relief was expressed in regards to the summer program ending, transitioning into a new environment with self-autonomy and freedom was met with excitement and preparedness. The EOP provided students with resources and support, and an extended version of the summer program known as the "UNI" course as students transition out of the summer program and into the first semester. From the student point of view, this transition is implied to be good as students expressed a level of accomplishment in completing the summer program successfully. Similar to transitioning into the summer program, the transition out of the summer program was expected and the framework analysis surrounding timing suggests that it was the best possible time for this transition to have occurred. Students were appreciative of the break held between the end of the summer program and the start of their first semester in college. Lastly, in identifying the transition process, findings imply that the transition out of the summer program is in the middle of the student process of transitioning into college. To conclude the external analysis of the different situations implied within this study, the following will review the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to the 4 S System in Schlossberg's Transition Theory.

As a critical component within this study, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during students transition into college highlighted student needs in a unique way. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the needs of students in academia vary and are dependent on preferences for learning. Findings indicate that there was no general consensus among the students' point of view of the pandemic being good or bad. Although students recognized the negative implications of the COVID-19 pandemic which caused financial hardships, adjustments within mode of instruction, as well as limiting autonomy – students merely accepted the reality of society and adjusted. Findings indicate that some students appreciated the flexibility of a remote summer program, while others would have preferred to participate in-person. To define the COVID-19 pandemic as good or bad is equivocal as the study implies that there was a positive and negative impact. Similarly, in student's acceptance of the COVID-19 pandemic, to define it as the best or worst possible time to occur is impractical as students implied that this was something out of their control. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unexpected, the study implies that students expected the adjustments made due to state regulations and safety measures taken by the EOP. As students transitioned out of the summer program during the COVID-19 pandemic and, regulations were slowly lifted, the study implies that the transition process for this situation was approaching the end as students transitioned to on-campus and in-person activities and learning.

Implications of this study as it relates to the three transitional situations identified indicate that overall, students had a positive perspective and experience as they transitioned into and out of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each identified situation occurred at a different stage of the

transition process, and were expected to occur by students. The remaining subsections will further review implications of this study and its framework by analyzing the self, the support, and the strategies.

The Self

Throughout the collection of data for this study, the "self" component was assessed by way of student interviews and document collection. Assessing the EOP student experience by inquiring on challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, findings indicated that although students were familiar with remote learning, the situation of transitioning to a college environment was faced with fear, insecurity, and uncertainty. The 4 S System framework as it relates to "the self" analyzes the following: (1) Is the student challenged or overwhelmed by transition events or nonevents? (2) What types of stress challenge the student? Overwhelm the student? (3) Does the student face transition with a "fighting spirit," as a stoic, as a denier, as a helpless person, or as a believer in magic? (4) Does the student feel a sense of control of mastery when facing transition? And (5) Does the student face life as an optimist or as a pessimist? (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 62). The following will review each and its implications for this study.

Implications from this study demonstrate that students were limited in challenges by the physical transition into the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer program, but faced overwhelming emotional challenges. The study indicates that students had prior experience with a virtual environment throughout their senior year of high school and were able to transition into EOP's summer program seamlessly with limited challenges. EOP resolved these limited challenges by providing students with laptops and Wi-Fi/hotspots for internet access and a structured schedule for engagement. However,

students faced an overwhelming amount of emotional challenges as they entered the world of college, as the first in their family to do so, with little familiarity and, security. Implications from this study indicate that the stressors that challenged students include but are not limited to: (1) making friends, (2) developing trust, (3) fear of failure, and (4) fear of the unknown. Although students expressed these stressors, the findings from this study imply that students faced these challenges with a "fighting spirit" and curiosity. Having gained insightful information on what the EOP provides, students were optimistic during this transitional phase of their life with expectations of the EOP and their guidance and support that was promoted.

The efforts made by the EOP to address student needs holistically alleviated many of the student's stressors and challenges. The findings from this study imply that students felt a sense of control of mastery when facing transition out of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program, as EOP provided the tools and resources necessary to build confidence among their students. The EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program as a pre-cursor to students entering their first semester in college provided students with the opportunity to meet faculty, staff, and peers and the advantage of prepping for college courses, and gaining knowledge that the typical college student would not receive. The EOP takes on a more introspective and intrusive approach when servicing students in order to have a better understanding of how they are as individuals. Implications from this study suggest that the approach of meeting students where they are, and providing necessary resources, allows for the development of rapport, trust, and confidence among students.

The Support

Findings from this study imply that students received above average support from the EOP in a multitude of ways addressing academic and socioemotional needs. The framework to assess support utilized the following questions that assisted with our implications for this study: (1) Is the student getting what he or she needs in terms of affection, affirmation, and aid?, (2) Does the student have a wide range of types of support (e.g. significant other, family or close friends, organizations)?, (3) Does the student know how to locate and connect with other forms of support (e.g., campus resources, faculty/staff)?, and (4) How has the student's "convoy of social support" been interrupted by the transition?. The study made an effort to differentiate student's perception on the support received from the EOP, as compared to the support provided by the institution. Implications from this study indicate that by EOP established a level of support that is unique to EOP students.

By offering students a centralized EOP center to receive the support they are seeking further assisted with transitioning students into the EOP program and institution. Students developed feelings of comfort, trust, and security in the EOP and expressed a level of reliability and reassurance provided by the EOP. The framework implies that student needs were met and supported in areas of affection, affirmation, and aid as EOP aided by way of academic advisement, counseling, financial literacy, financial assistance, social engagement, and additional resources. Additionally, areas of support that the EOP were not able to provide, allowed for referrals and external support from family, organizations, and the institution, indicating that EOP students have a wide range of types of support and know how to locate and connect with other forms of support. Lastly,

implications from this study demonstrate that the transition into the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program did not interrupt the convoy of social support for students' however, the COVID-19 pandemic did impact it negatively. Findings indicate that although the EOP provided opportunities for students to develop friendship, many would have opted for an in-person summer experience to assist with social support as they transitioned into college.

Strategies

In assessing how students coped with their transition into and out of the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following questions from the 4 S System framework assisted with implications for this study: (1) Does the student in transition use a range of strategies?, (2) Is the student taking action to change the transition?, (3) Is the student attempting to change the meaning of the transition?, (4) How well does the student handle stress?, (5) How does the student decide that doing nothing is the best option?, (6) How does the student exercise flexibility in choosing various strategies depending on the challenge at hand? Implications from this study demonstrate that the EOP provided students with the necessary resources and tools to assist with strategies for coping as students transitioned into college. Providing workshops, instructional guides, campus tours, social activities, and more, EOP ensured that students were knowledgeable of the support made available to them should they need it.

Implications from this study indicate that students used a range of strategies to cope with their transition as they relied on their EOP advisor, EOP faculty, and EOP staff to assist with unexpected challenges. Additionally, students developed comradery among

EOP peers who were experiencing the transition together. Findings from this study imply that students leaned on each other for support and understanding as a way to manage their stress and fears. Moreover, taking advantage of the financial assistance provided by EOP, tutoring, study hours, and more, EOP students willingly participated in the EOP summer program and did not take action to change the process or meaning of transition that EOP structured. Implications from the study reveal that in doing nothing to change the process or meaning of the transition, students developed a high level of trust and confidence with the EOP, accepting program rules, structure, and expectations.

The EOP adamantly communicates the expectations they have of EOP students throughout the summer program which assists with student transition out of the summer program. As students transition out of the summer program, they are faced with autonomy, freedom, and flexibility that can be difficult to navigate independently. Utilizing the resources provided to them and knowledge gained from the EOP summer program, implications from this study reveal that students acknowledge their responsibilities and hold themselves accountable for their decisions and behavior as it relates to their academic success. Students did in fact exercise their flexibility in choosing various strategies to combat any difficulties or challenges faced by reaching out to EOP faculty, EOP staff, EOP peers, tutoring, counseling, financial aid department, and family. The EOP has established a community that promotes perseverance among their students by addressing any barriers and needs they may have. In addition, they equip students with the ability to make informed decisions to overcome any challenges that may arise.

Relationship to Prior Research

The findings from this study support and extend existing research literature addressing student support services, student transition, college readiness, and the impact of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Additionally, findings from this study expand on the limited research literature available on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the student experience. In chapter two of this study, researchers including Winograd et al. (2018), Hutarado and Ruiz (2012), Ward-Roof (2010), Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007), Goldrick-Rab et al., (2007), Adelman (1999), Hossler and Vesper (1993), St. John (1991) , Gardner (2001), Hodges et al. (2020), Kim et al. (2020), and Jackson (2021), discussed the implications of summer bridge programming, orientation sessions, academic support, financial support, and socioemotional support specific to first-generation, underrepresented, underserved, and low-income students. In this section you will find a comprehensive review on the findings of this study and its relationship to prior research. This review will indicate how the findings from this study support, extend, and question prior research.

One of the main findings from this study discussed the impact that the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program had on the student experience and the development of student sense of belonging and familial comfort. Findings indicate that students were able to make connections and friendships prior to the start of their freshman year despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The EOP summer program provided a safe space for students to feel welcomed and supported. Similar to prior research, Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) as well as Ward-Roof (2010) emphasize the importance of orientation programs developing a culturally diverse and welcoming environment while

addressing student social needs to improve intergroup relations. Upon developing this learning community, the EOP is able to distribute necessary information regarding academia and finances to better prepare and transition students to be college ready.

Chapter two highlighted Winograd et al. (2018) research that identified unique services provided by the EOP in which findings deemed the program as successful. The findings from chapter four of this study reinforce and extend Winograd et al. (2018) research as services such as the summer programming, frequent advisor meetings, social events, study sessions, and academic review were present in the data collection and impacted students positively. A second theme that emerged from the study was college readiness and transition, in which findings indicated that students felt academically prepared to transition into their first semester, and credited this to the EOP summer program. Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007) researched the effect of summer programming and determined that community building was present in their findings, but were unable to explore how/if students were prepared academically. Chapter four of this study fills this gap in literature by providing insight on the EOP summer program structure. Utilizing manuals such as the "College Survival Guide", as well as implementing summer courses to review English and math, providing study hours and tutoring, collaborating with counseling, financial aid and other departments, all contributed to students increased self-esteem and readiness for college.

Furthermore, findings from this study reinforce Gardner's (2001) research on the factors that contribute to positive student transitions into college. Gardner (2001), similar to this study, states that first-year experience programming, peer support, family and community support, adequate financial aid, positive racial climate, participation in

student seminars, the development of learning communities, and academic support/assistance are all factors that contribute to a successful student transition. Chapter four identifies similar factors such aside from the summer programming, services such as the EOP "UNI" course, as well as financial stipends for textbooks and technology, were highlighted by students as substantial factors to their growth and preparedness.

Given the historical pattern of which research on EOP emerges, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the EOP was detrimental to include within this study as it is an unfulfilled area with limited research. Prior research on EOP shows that in times of uncertainty, recession, or political involvement, an increase of research on underserved communities and students like EOP occurs. Exploring and researching EOP further as it relates to COVID-19 pandemic was necessary as it highlighted the student experience and needs to effectively transition students during a time of uncertainty. Chapter two highlights research stating challenges higher education faced such as transitioning to an online learning environment, however, the findings from this study demonstrate how the EOP at SU Upstate combatted these challenges to sustain EOP students by providing them with technological resources and aid. Kim et al. (2020) further indicated challenges that incoming college students had regarding feelings of uncertainty and concerns about academic preparedness due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although findings from this study also indicated socioemotional challenges, implications show that the EOP was able to cultivate an environment to ease these concerns and develop student sense of self, worth, and confidence.

Findings from this study as it relates to prior research indicate consistency among student support services and its impact on student success, transition, and college

readiness. This study was able to fulfill gaps in literature providing a qualitative approach with insight on the EOP student experience and need. Additionally, with the unexpected phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provided further insight on best practices that can be utilized in education while in crisis/disaster. The following section will review the research questions utilized for this study and how the findings relate.

Relationship to Research Questions

In this section, the following three research questions will be reviewed as it relates to the findings of this study:

1. How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?

2. What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?

3. How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?

Research Question 1

The findings from this study reveal that the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program positively impacted students' lives in a multitude of ways. Findings indicate that student lives were impacted academically, socially, financially, and emotionally. Students expressed that the efforts made by the EOP and the summer program provided necessary resources to assist with their academic success including an assigned advisor, EOP specific tutoring, EOP specific faculty/professors, and instructional guides. Additionally, students were provided a safe space to develop friendships, network, and build confidence and self-esteem. Targeting issues of fear and

sense of belong, the EOP summer program provided students an advantage prior to entering college. Lastly, students were provided with financial assistance in the form of book stipends, tuition assistance, and access to technology including laptops and wi-fi/internet. In fulfilling the purpose of EOP, the EOP at SU Upstate impacted student lives' by granting them the opportunity to pursue a college degree and receive additional support services to sustain and retain students into their first semester in college.

Research Question 2

Findings from this study reveal that the student experience as it relates to transitioning into the pre-freshman summer experience program was multifaceted and complex. Due to the characteristics of the average EOP student, many entered the summer program unaware of college policies and procedures. Although students were comforted by the support provided by EOP, many expressed fears as it related to developing friendships, navigating higher education, and being academically prepared. Additionally, students were not thrilled to participate in a 5-week summer program as they viewed this as a sacrifice of their summer after recently having graduated from high school. The structured services of the summer program were not something students were fond of however, the benefits received outweighed the initial transition and sentiments. As students transitioned out of the summer program, many acknowledged the advantages they obtained through participation.

In reflecting on the student transition into and out of the EOP summer program, students expressed feelings of accomplishment and readiness for college. Findings indicate that the overall student experience was positive as increased levels of confidence, self-esteem, and college readiness were evident from this study. Participation

in community building exercises, and social activities such as the EOP Talent show provided a unique experience for EOP students that allowed them to feel welcomed, seen, and heard. The EOP at SU Upstate provided students with a summer experience that allowed for a smoother transition into their first semester as college students. Lastly, as students began to transition out of the summer program, COVID-19 restrictions were lifted allowing for more in-person activities and community building among EOP.

Research Question 3

In assessing the role of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience, findings indicate that the adaptations made to the summer program were in the best interests of faculty, staff, and students. Although students expressed disappointment in not having received the full summer program experience that EOP at SU Upstate is recognized for, they approached the situation with acceptance, gratitude. and understanding. The COVID-19 pandemic caused transformational changes within higher education and the EOP summer program. Shifting ways in which students receive instruction and support services, caused a disconnect within the world of education. However, the EOP at SU Upstate maintained student engagement and involvement by way of an intrusive advisement model. Although COVID-19 reformed education to a virtual space, students participated daily for the 5-week EOP summer program, developing skills and obtaining resources to successfully transition into college.

Although there were limitations to the virtual learning space, students expressed appreciation towards the EOP for their efforts in maintaining a sense of normalcy for students and providing them with resources such as laptops to actively participate. As

previously discussed, organizing student talent shows and developmental workshops allowed for students to not only experience EOP differently, but focus on areas of interests outside of academia which allowed for students to develop a sense of self, community, and belonging. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted student lives in their ability to adapt to everchanging policies and regulations, as well as granting them the flexibility and freedom to balance their responsibilities to EOP, as well as external responsibilities at home.

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative, single embedded, case study investigated the role of the EOP pre-freshman summer program used at SU Upstate and provided insightful information on the transition of EOP students and their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although findings indicate that the EOP summer program allowed for students to develop a sense of belonging and community, academically prepare for college, and navigate the COVID-19 pandemic to the best of their abilities, the following limitations of this study should be considered to assist with future research and practice. Due to a limited sample size, findings from this study cannot be generalizable to EOP students across different institutions. Additionally, this study focused specifically on the EOP located at SU Upstate, in which programmatic structure and implementation may differ across institutions offering EOP and findings cannot be generalizable. While the sample size was limited, findings from this study can assist in the expansion of future research on the EOP, the EOP summer program, and student transition.

An additional limitation to consider for this study is researcher bias towards the EOP. This limitation can be considered a threat to the trustworthiness of this study due to

the background of the researcher as a previous EOP participant. It is important to acknowledge that the researcher obtained their undergraduate degree by way of EOP and was an active participant from 2009 to 2012. Although the researcher is familiar with the EOP, to combat these limitations, multiple data sources were utilized to validate and triangulate findings. With limited research available on the EOP, the implications from this study provide awareness on best practices, suggestions and recommendations for future research and practice.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings yielded from this study filled a missing gap within literature and research as it pertains to the EOP, student transition, and onboarding services. Findings revealed that the EOP at SU Upstate provided a unique set of services to incoming EOP students throughout their 5-week Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program. The support services provided by the EOP are not typically offered to students entering the institution and proved to be beneficial for EOP students as they transitioned into college with an increased sense of belonging, self-esteem, and academic preparedness. Addressing barriers for students who are the minority and considered first-generation, low-income, and underserved require further research to aid in the success and transition into college for this population. Recommendations for future research include but are not limited to: (1) hybrid model of summer programming, (2) mixed-method research approach, and (3) cross-comparison approach.

Conducting future research on hybrid summer program models will allow for further insight on best practices and consideration of student needs. The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth transformational change within higher education and encouraged

educators to adapt and modify their practices. As the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, collecting research on alternative practices may benefit institutions in being prepared for an unexpected phenomenon such as COVID-19. Additionally, incorporating a mixed-method approach, collecting qualitative and quantitative data, can provide further evidence on best practices. Collecting data such as student grade point average, credits obtained, attendance, and retention beyond the EOP summer program can provide a well-rounded perspective on the impact of EOP and their services. Lastly, future research should consider a cross-comparison study among EOP in differing institutions as EOP programming, structure, students, and services vary.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Findings from this study demonstrate SU Upstate EOP's ability to orient and transition students successfully by way of their Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program. Additionally, results indicate that incorporating a credited course that extends summer program services into a student's first semester in college contributed to the transition and success of the 2021-2022 EOP cohort. Utilizing an intrusive advisement model as well as catering to students socioemotional and financial needs are best practices for the EOP at SU Upstate. Recommendations for future practice as it relates to orientation, onboarding, and transitioning students include extending the duration of summer program activities, reiterating student best practices in a credited course following the summer program, collaborating among departments, and involving all stakeholders including parental guardians and high school counselors. The EOP at SU Upstate require students to participate in a 5-week summer program that dedicates itself to onboarding, orienting, and transitioning students. Utilizing this time to address

institutional policies and procedures, as well as EOP policies and procedures, student best practices, socioemotional needs, academic resources, and more. This extended version of an orientation by way of a 5-week summer program allows for students to be better equipped as first-time freshmen entering college. The EOP at SU Upstate also collaborate often with departments such as counseling and financial aid, to provide students with further resources in areas of expertise.

Additional recommendations stem from the EOP at SU Upstate demonstrating that on-going services year-round is detrimental in retaining and engaging students. Future practice recommendations include the development of a credited course that can be offered after orientation sessions and during the semester. Incorporating this practice will allow students to engage with peers and remain connected to the program, its resources, and support. Lastly, involving all stakeholders for your students is critical in obtaining a student's commitment to the program, its activities, and the institution. The EOP at SU Upstate provides orientation sessions specific to parental guardians and high school counselors in an effort to inform all participants of the benefits, support services, and resources provided. Extending information, resources, and support to the parents/legal guardians of students who are underserved, first-generation, and low-income assists with gaining trust, alleviating barriers, and ridding any hesitancies or reservations they may have regarding their child(ren) entering college.

Conclusion

The foundation of EOP at its core is rooted in alleviating barriers for underserved students to pursue a college degree. During a national pandemic, the EOP at SU Upstate persevered and instilled that same perseverance in their students to not only participate in

a modified version of their Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program, but commit to the standards and expectations held in order to proceed forward in transitioning to their first semester in college. This study identified student support services provided by the EOP at SU Upstate that were instrumental to their student success and can be used as an exemplar for higher education. Highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and reinforcing support services that positively influenced students, this study contributed to the existing literature on EOP and provides unique understanding on the EOP student experience and needs. It also emphasizes the importance of research on underserved students, as they are indicators for areas in which higher education can and should improve in.

APPENDIX A IRB Approval Memo

IRB #: IRB-FY2022-171

Title: THE ROLE OF THE PRE-FRESHMAN SUMMER EXPERIENCE IN THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY
PROGRAM DURING COVID-19: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

Creation Date: 11-15-2021

End Date: 12-20-2022

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Mayulie Luciano

Review Board: St John's University Institutional
Review Board Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member Katherine Aquino	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact czadoaqk@stjohns.edu
Member Mayulie Luciano	Role Principal Investigator	Contact mayulie.luciano17@stjohns.edu
Member Mayulie Luciano	Role Primary Contact	Contact mayulie.luciano17@stjohns.edu

APPENDIX B Interview Protocol

Researcher:_____
Date:_____
Time_____
Participant #_____

Introduction Statement:
Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is Mayulie Luciano, thank you for volunteering your participation to be interviewed for my study. The interview will consist of questions related to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at the State University at Upstate (SU Upstate). I will ask you about your experiences as a student and participant within the pre-freshman summer experience program and university. If it is okay with you, I will be tape-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can assess our conversation post-interview and develop a report for the study. All comments will remain confidential.

Interview Questions:
1. Can you briefly describe yourself and provide information on your educational background?

2. How would you describe your experience upon receiving your acceptance letter to SU Upstate EOP?

3. What were your initial expectations as an incoming student to EOP at SU Upstate?

4. How would you describe your experience when first meeting with EOP faculty and staff?

5. How would you describe your initial welcoming onto the university's campus?

6. In what ways did EOP assist in transitioning you to the SU Upstate campus?

7. What services, if any, did EOP provide prior to enrolling at SU Upstate?

8. What services, if any, did EOP provide throughout your duration at SU Upstate?

9. What are your thoughts on the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program and how did this contribute to your experience?

10. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted your college experience academically?

11. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted your college experience socially?

12. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted your first semester?

13. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted your readiness for college at SU Upstate?

14. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program services impacted your overall experience at SU Upstate?

15. In what ways does EOP services differ from the general SU Upstate campus services?

16. What was one of the most memorable experiences for you as a participant in the pre-freshman summer experience program and why?

17. How was your experience with the pre-freshman summer experience program during the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic?

18. In what ways did EOP navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic with the pre-freshman summer experience program?

Conclusion Statement:
Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. Once again, your answers will be included within the study and will remain confidential.

APPENDIX C Focus Group Protocol

Researcher:_____
Date:_____
Time_____
Participant Group #_____

Introduction Statement:

Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is Mayulie Luciano, thank you for volunteering your participation in this focus group discussion for my study. The focus group will consist of guided questions related to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at the State University at Upstate (SU Upstate). I will ask you about your experiences as a student and participant within the pre-freshman summer experience program and university. If it is okay with you, I will be tape-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can assess our conversation post-interview and develop a report for the study. All comments will remain confidential.

Interview Questions:

1. What were your initial expectations entering the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program?

2. What were your expectations exiting the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program and entering your first semester?

3. How was your experience entering the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program?

4. How was your experience exiting the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program?

5. How has the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic impacted your experience of the EOP pre-freshman summer experience program?

Conclusion Statement:

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. Once again, your answers will be included within the study and will remain confidential.

APPENDIX D Consent Form Audiotape

ST. JOHN'S
UNIVERSITY
THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Letter of Consent for Audiotape Recording

Introduction:
You have agreed to participate in a research study entitled: The Role of The Pre-Freshman Summer Experience in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study Approach by Mayulie Luciano. I am asking for your permission to allow me to audiotape as part of that research study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the researcher. The recording will not include any identifiable information. The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet with no link to subjects' identity and will be stored for a minimum of five years following project completion.

Your signature on this form grants Mayulie Luciano permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Procedures:
By agreeing to participate in this study, you acknowledge that an interview will take place at your earliest convenience and will be audio recorded. The interview will consist of a series of short, open-ended questions and should take approximately 45 minutes. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion.

Possible risks or benefits:
There are no risks involved with participation in this study. Your participation will be beneficial towards the research study and research experience. This research may help with improving programming and services based on your perceptions. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and if at any point you are uncomfortable with a question and choose not to answer, you may do so. Additionally, you may withdraw participation at any point in time.

Confidentiality:
As a participant in this study, your will remain anonymous and confidential. Your name will not be included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or summary reports. This consent form is the only identified document that will include your identity as a participant.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact me at 917-415-1028, mayulie.luciano27@my.stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine C. Aquino at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, St. John's University Sullivan Hall 522, 8000 Utopia Parkway Queens, NY 11439.

Statement of Consent:
By signing below, I agree to participate in this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date

APPENDIX E Document Review Protocol

Title of Research Project:

_____

Researcher:

_____

Date:

_____

Participant #:

_____

Manner of Submission:

_____
_____

What is the purpose of this document?

_____
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Researcher's Reflection:

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Other Considerations:

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APPENDIX F Student Questionnaire Protocol

Google Forms Questionnaire

Introduction Statement:
My name is Mayulie Luciano, a doctoral candidate at St. John's University. I am conducting a study in hopes of your participation for one or more future interviews. The interview(s) will consist of questions related to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at the State University at Upstate (SU Upstate). I will ask you about your experiences as a student and participant within the pre-freshman summer experience program and university. If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the following student questionnaire.
Questionnaire

Questions included within the questionnaire:

1. Date questionnaire
2. Time
3. Participant Name
4. Participant Email
5. Participant Phone Number
6. Age
7. Gender
8. Ethnicity
9. Race
10. Preferred language
11. Did you participate in the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program?
12. What year did you participate in the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program? (Select from summer 2020 or summer 2021)
13. Preferred form of participation? (Select from one-on-one interview, focus groups, both)
14. Are you willing to provide documentation such as pictures, assignments, etc. of your pre-freshman summer experience program? (yes/no)
15. Additional questions/comments/concerns to be entered here.

Conclusion Statement:
Thank you for completing the student questionnaire. Upon participation selection you will be contacted via email to complete a letter of consent.

APPENDIX G Email/Telephone Script

Invitation Email Script

Hello EOP Students!

My name is Mayulie Luciano, a doctoral candidate at St. John's University. As an EOP
Alum, I am interested in learning about your experience within the pre-freshman summer
experience program during the covid-19 pandemic. You are invited to take part in this
research study conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation, sponsored by Dr. Katherine
C. Aquino, St. John's University. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do
the following:

1) Complete a student questionnaire
2) Participate in either an individual interview or focus group interview.

Below you will find additional information on participation, confidentiality, risks,
benefits, and contact information.

If you are interested in participating within this study, please complete the following
student questionnaire: [[INSERT GOOGLE FORM LINK]] and a follow up email will be
sent to schedule either an individual interview/focus group.

Participation & Confidentiality:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will
involve no penalty or loss to you. You may terminate participation at any time. Your
participation and interview responses will be confirmation. Only I will have access to the
information you provide. Any information obtained from this study can be used for
educational or reporting purposes but will not identify the participants in any way and no
identifiable information will be used.

Risks:
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. However, if you feel
uncomfortable answering any questions, we can skip any questions during the process.

Benefits:
Your decision to participate within this study will provide useful information for college
readiness programming and the student body experience.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please
contact me at 917-415-1028, mayulie.luciano27@my.stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor,
Dr. Katherine C. Aquino at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, St. John's University Sullivan Hall
522, 8000 Utopia Parkway Queens, NY 11439.

APPENDIX H Consent Form Interview

ST. JOHN'S
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Letter of Consent for Interview

Introduction:
You have agreed to participate in a research study entitled: The Role of The Pre-Freshman Summer Experience in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study Approach by Mayulie Luciano. Participation is through the completion of an interview. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 60 minutes. The interview will be audiotaped recorded.

Participation & Confidentiality:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss to you. You may terminate participation at any time. Your participation and interview responses will be confidential. Only I will have access to the information you provide. Any information obtained from this study can be used for educational or reporting purposes but will not identify the participants in any way and no identifiable information will be used.

Risks:
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, we can skip any questions during the process.

Benefits:
Your decision to participate within this study will provide useful information for college readiness programming and the student body experience.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact me at 917-415-1028, mayulie.luciano27@my.stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine C. Aquino at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, St. John's University Sullivan Hall 522, 8000 Utopia Parkway Queens, NY 11439.

Statement of Consent:
By signing below, I agree to participate in the interview for this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date

APPENDIX I Consent Form Focus Group

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Letter of Consent for Focus Group

Introduction:
You have agreed to participate in a research study entitled: The Role of The Pre-Freshman Summer Experience in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study Approach by Mayulie Luciano. Participation is through the completion of a focus group interview. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 60 minutes alongside 4 additional participants. The interview will be audiotaped recorded.

Participation & Confidentiality:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss to you. You may terminate participation at any time. Your participation and interview responses will be confidential. Only I will have access to the information you provide. Any information obtained from this study can be used for educational or reporting purposes but will not identify the participants in any way and no identifiable information will be used.

Risks:
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, we can skip any questions during the process.

Benefits:
Your decision to participate within this study will provide useful information for college readiness programming and the student body experience.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact me at 917-415-1028, mayulie.luciano27@my.stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine C. Aquino at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, St. John's University Sullivan Hall 522, 8000 Utopia Parkway Queens, NY 11439.

Statement of Consent:
By signing below, I agree to participate in the focus group for this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date

APPENDIX J Consent Form Questionnaire

Letter of Consent for Student Questionnaire

Introduction:
You have agreed to participate in a research study entitled: The Role of The Pre-Freshman Summer Experience in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study Approach by Mayulie Luciano. Participation is through the completion of the following student questionnaire. The questionnaire will take approximately 10 to 20 minutes.

Participation & Confidentiality:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss to you. You may terminate participation at any time. Your participation and interview responses will be confidential. Only I will have access to the information you provide. Any information obtained from this study can be used for educational or reporting purposes but will not identify the participants in any way and no identifiable information will be used.

Risks:
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, we can skip any questions during the process.

Benefits:
Your decision to participate within this study will provide useful information for college readiness programming and the student body experience.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact me at 917-415-1028, mayulie.luciano27@my.stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine C. Aquino at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, St. John's University Sullivan Hall 522, 8000 Utopia Parkway Queens, NY 11439.

Statement of Consent:
By signing below, I agree to participate in the student questionnaire for this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date

APPENDIX K Interview Protocol Matrix

	Background Information	Research Question 1: How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?	Research Question 2: What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?	Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?
Interview Q 1	X			
Interview Q 2			X	
Interview Q 3			X	
Interview Q 4			X	
Interview Q 5			X	
Interview Q 6			X	
Interview Q 7			X	
Interview Q 8			X	
Interview Q 9		X		
Interview Q 10		X	X	
Interview Q 11		X	X	
Interview Q 12		X	X	
Interview Q 13		X	X	
Interview Q 14		X	X	
Interview Q 15	X			

	Background Information	Research Question 1: How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?	Research Question 2: What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?	Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?
Interview Q 16			X	
Interview Q 17				X
Interview Q18				X
Focus Group Q 1			X	
Focus Group Q 2			X	
Focus Group Q 3			X	
Focus Group Q 4			X	
Focus Group Q 5				X
Questionnaire Q 1	X			

	Background Information	Research Question 1: How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?	Research Question 2: What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?	Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?
Questionnaire Q 2	X			
Questionnaire Q 3	X			
Questionnaire Q 4	X			
Questionnaire Q 5	X			
Questionnaire Q 6	X			
Questionnaire Q 7	X			
Questionnaire Q 8	X			
Questionnaire Q 9	X			

	Background Information	Research Question 1: How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?	Research Question 2: What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?	Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?
Questionnaire Q 10	X			
Questionnaire Q 11	X			
Questionnaire Q 12	X			
Questionnaire Q 13	X			
Questionnaire Q 14	X			
Questionnaire Q 15	X			
Director Q 1	X			
Director Q 2	X			
Director Q 3			X	
Director Q 4			X	

	Background Information	Research Question 1: How does the role of the EOP Summer Freshman Experience Program impact the EOP students' lives?	Research Question 2: What are the student experiences with transition into and out of the pre-freshman summer experience program?	Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program student experience?
Director Q 5			X	
Director Q 6			X	
Director Q 7			X	
Director Q 8			X	
Director Q 9		X	X	
Director Q 10		X	X	
Director Q 11		X	X	
Director Q 12		X	X	
Director Q 13		X	X	
Director Q 14	X			
Director Q 15	X			
Director Q 16				X
Director Q 17				X

APPENDIX L Director Interview Protocol

Researcher:_____
Date:_____
Time_____
Participant #_____

Introduction Statement:
Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is Mayulie Luciano, thank you for volunteering your participation to be interviewed for my study. The interview will consist of questions related to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at the State University at Upstate (SU Upstate). I will ask you about your experiences as a director for the pre-freshman summer experience program. If it is okay with you, I will be tape-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can assess our conversation post-interview and develop a report for the study. All comments will remain confidential.

Interview Questions:
1. Can you briefly describe yourself and provide information on your educational background?

2. How would you describe your experience as an EOP Director?

3. How would you describe your experience when first meeting with EOP students for the 2021-2022 academic year?

4. How would you describe your initial welcoming of students onto the university's campus?

5. In what ways did EOP assist in transitioning students to the SU Upstate campus?

6. What services, if any, did EOP provide prior to students enrolling at SU Upstate?

7. What services, if any, did EOP provide throughout student's duration at SU Upstate?

8. What are your thoughts on the EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Experience Program and how it contributes to the student experience?

9. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted student's college experience academically?

10. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted student's college experience socially?

11. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted student's first semester?

12. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program contributed to/impacted student's readiness for college at SU Upstate?

13. How has the pre-freshman summer experience program services impacted student's overall experience at SU Upstate?

14. In what ways does EOP services differ from the general SU Upstate campus services?

15. What was one of the most memorable experiences for you as the director for the pre-freshman summer experience program and why?

16. How was your experience with the pre-freshman summer experience program during the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic?

17. In what ways did EOP navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic with the pre-freshman summer experience program?

Conclusion Statement:
Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. Once again, your answers will be included within the study and will remain confidential.

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