

# **Implementation of First-Year Seminars, the Summer Academy Bridge Program, and Themed Learning Communities**

By Lauren P. Chism, Sarah S. Baker,  
Michele J. Hansen, Gayle Williams

## **Abstract**

*Many colleges offer a summer bridge program and even more offer learning communities for first-year students. Few, however, link these initiatives. This article will offer brief descriptions of IUPUI's successful bridge, learning community, and themed learning community (TLC) initiatives; examine the links between them; and share assessment data, concentrating on students who are involved in all three initiatives.*

## **Introduction**

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is a large urban institution with a significant commuter population. Fostering connections between students and the campus community is, therefore, an important goal for most campus initiatives including three important programs that serve freshmen: First-Year Seminars, the Summer Academy Bridge Program, and Themed Learning Communities. Increasing numbers of students, however, are enrolling in all three initiatives. That decision helps ensure that the students will be successful, but it also makes it extremely difficult to assess the impact of an individual program. This paper will examine the development and implementation of the three programs with a focus on students who are involved in all three initiatives.

## **Institutional Context**

IUPUI is a four-year, public institution, which was formed in 1969 through a merger of Indiana University and Purdue University programs. Located in the state capital, IUPUI is the third largest university in Indiana and enrolls approximately thirty thousand students in nearly two hundred programs from the associate to doctoral and professional level. The undergraduate student population of IUPUI reaches just over twenty-one thousand. Of these students, 17,428 applied for financial assistance; 15,178 students demonstrated financial need; and over half (11,090) have unmet financial need.

## **First-Year Students at IUPUI**

Approximately twenty-six hundred beginning full-time freshmen enroll at IUPUI each year. The overwhelming majority of new students (96 percent) are residents of the state of Indiana, and 76 percent commute to campus. In 2005, 75 percent of first-year students reported needing financial aid, and 70 percent worked for pay off-campus. Fifty-nine percent of these students were first-generation college students, and one third (33 percent) were admitted conditionally based on SAT scores, high school grades, and years between high school and college.

Most IUPUI entering students need help in making a successful transition to college. Too few enroll prepared to succeed. Most struggle with finances, and many have significant personal obligations. They also commute to campus, so it is often easier for them to stay connected to their high school friends and much more difficult for them to feel connected to IUPUI or their new classmates. They become “parking lot” student, who drive to campus, talk to no one, eat their lunches in their cars, and drive home. College is viewed as a necessary burden that they must endure so that they can acquire a career and make money in the future, but they do not invest themselves in the life of the campus nor engage in its intellectual environment. The goal of the three initiatives discussed in this paper, therefore, is to promote student engagement and to help students embrace the rich academic life of the university.

## **Overview of Programs Serving First-Year Students (First-Year Seminars, Themed Learning Communities, and Summer Academy Bridge)**

### **First-Year Seminars**

This is a special course required of entering students, offered by University College and all undergraduate schools. It facilitates student transition to college by introducing key information and skills needed to succeed and by offering opportunities to connect with faculty, staff, and other students. The courses are taught by an instructional team which includes a faculty member who sets academic goals and is the team leader, a student mentor who serves as a role model and peer guide to the college experience, a librarian who introduces library resources and literacy information, and an academic advisor who provides information on academic policies and procedures and works with students to begin academic planning, major and career decision-making. First-year seminars are typically linked with other entry-level courses to form learning communities, where faculty may collaborate in creating class assignments.

### **Themed Learning Communities**

IUPUI's Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) involve two or more discipline-based courses paired with an integrative First-Year Seminar in which cohorts of twenty-five

incoming freshman students enroll. The theme of each TLC provides a foundation for curricular connections between disciplines that may otherwise appear disjointed to entering students. Program offerings range from seven to twelve credit hours, tailored to a variety of majors and interests. TLCs engage students, student mentors, faculty, librarians, advisors and others in a community of learners that explore interdisciplinary connections both in and out of the classroom. Through the use of thematically linked curricula, service-learning and co-curricular experiences, TLCs provide enriching learning experiences that foster interdisciplinary understanding.

### **Summer Academy Bridge Program**

This is a two-week program for incoming freshmen held in August before fall classes begin. Students are divided into groups of twenty-five based on their interest in pursuing a particular major or in exploring various major options. Bridge participants establish networks for success with faculty, advisors, student mentors and librarians; make friends with other freshmen; learn to handle college-level expectations for reading and writing; receive individualized support for math; begin connecting with a school and major; become acquainted with the campus; and gain experience in using instructional technology.

## **History and Development of First-Year Seminars, Themed Learning Communities, and the Summer Academy Bridge Program**

In 1995, IUPUI initiated a First-Year Seminar program in an effort to support beginning students and help them make a successful transition to college. Under the direction of a campus template outlining common learning objectives, First-Year Seminars in several academic units began to emerge. The seminars often paired with another introductory course to form a small community of twenty-five learners co-enrolled in the same two classes. Central to each First-Year Seminar is the instructional team model in which a faculty member, an academic advisor, a librarian and a student mentor collaborate in the course development and instruction. First-Year Seminars have been successful in achieving a 6 percent gain in retention when controlling for significant background characteristics. Because of the success of First-Year Seminars, enrollment in them has become a requirement for entering students who enroll in at least seven credit hours (Hansen 2005). In 2006, this represented 89 percent of the entering freshmen population.

Despite the success of First-Year Seminars, an external team of reviewers encouraged IUPUI to extend learning communities beyond linking two courses. Block scheduling piloted in 2001. In 2002, a faculty study strongly recommended the move to Themed Learning Communities, which were piloted in the fall semester of 2003 (Haas and Sutton 2004). IUPUI's Themed Learning Communities began with seven sets of linked courses sponsored in four academic schools and have grown considerably. Through partnerships with the Kelley School of Business, University College, Herron School of

Art and Design, and the Schools of Liberal Arts, Engineering, Nursing, Education, Social Work, Physical Education and Public and Environmental Affairs, the number of Themed Learning Communities has drastically increased over the years from seven in 2003 to thirty in 2008.

In the fall of 1999, a summer bridge initiative was piloted. The program was built on a model developed by Martha Bell for the SEEK program at Brooklyn College in New York. The pilot was successful, and the program has grown significantly over the intervening years. Approximately five hundred students will participate in summer 2008. Despite the significant change in scope, the program has continued to follow most of the founding characteristics including the following: it is free for students; each section is limited to twenty-five participants; all sections are linked to a First-Year Seminar; and like First-Year Seminars, every Summer Academy Bridge section is taught by an instructional team which includes a faculty member as the leader, an academic advisor, a student mentor, and a librarian.

## **Assessment Looking at Programs Separately**

The Summer Academy Bridge Program and Themed Learning Communities have expanded dramatically, and increasingly students enroll in all three initiatives. For example, all Themed Learning Community and Summer Academy Bridge students participate in a First-Year Seminar. Around a quarter of the students participating in the Themed Learning Communities also enroll in the Summer Academy Bridge Program (25% in 2005, 28% in 2006). Similarly, over half of the Summer Academy Bridge students were enrolled in a Themed Learning Community (55% in 2005; 56% in 2006). This overlap in programs serving entering students must be considered when assessing the impact of each intervention. Furthermore, as the First-Year Seminar is now required for most students, it would be inequitable to compare participating students to the minority of students who did not participate in a seminar. After all, the seminar has consistently demonstrated a positive impact on student academic performance and GPA. Thus, participants in both the Summer Academy Bridge Program and Themed Learning Communities are routinely compared to students enrolled in a First-Year Seminar, while controlling for significant background characteristics revealed through a multivariate analysis of covariance. These covariates include course load, age, gender, ethnicity, high school SAT scores, high school percentile, first-generation status and units of high school math. The tables below illustrate the impact of the Summer Academy Bridge Program and Themed Learning Communities on first-semester grades and first-year retention when controlling for covariates and participation in each initiative.

Students participating in a 2005 TLC had a fall GPA, grade point average, of 2.70 (SD = .932) compared to non-participants who earned a fall GPA of 2.44 (SD = 1.10). Students participating in a 2006 TLC had a fall grade point average of 2.78 (SD = .927) compared to non-participants [M= 2.54, N= 1414, SD = 1.10 (Tables 1 and 2)]. Once the high school percentile rank or high school grade point average, SAT score, course load, ethnicity, age, and gender were controlled for, separate ANCOVA results

for fall 2005 and 2006 revealed a significant difference between the GPAs of students participating in TLCs compared to non-participants [ $F = 18.39$  (1, 1509),  $p < .0001$  and  $F = 10.99$  (1, 1726),  $p < .001$ , respectively].

**Table 1. The Impacts of Themed Learning Community on Average First-Semester GPA for the Fall 2005 Cohort**

	n	Average Fall GPA	Adjusted Fall GPA
TLC	331	2.70	2.68**
Seminar	1186	2.44	2.45**

Note: Adjusted controlling for the following: course load, age, ethnicity, gender, high school percentile ranks, SAT scores, units of high school math, and Summer Academy Bridge participation. Supplemental analyses were conducted to validate findings using samples with equal numbers ( $p < .001$ ).

**Table 2. The Impacts of Themed Learning Community on Average First-Semester GPA for the Fall 2006 Cohort**

	N	Average Fall GPA	Adjusted Fall GPA
TLC	312	2.74	2.75**
Seminar	1324	2.53	2.53**

Note: Adjusted controlling for the following: course load, age, ethnicity, gender, first generation college student, high school percentile ranks, SAT scores, units of high school math, and Summer Academy Bridge participation. Supplemental analyses were conducted to validate findings using samples with equal numbers ( $p < .001$ ).

Students participating in fall 2005 Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) were retained at a significantly higher rate compared to non-participants (while controlling for all significant background characteristics, First-Year Seminar, and Summer Academy Bridge participation). The TLC students had an adjusted retention rate of 70% compared to an adjusted rate of 65% for non-participants.

Bridge students in general performed significantly better academically (fall semester cumulative grade point average) compared to non-participants (while controlling for all significant background characteristics, First-Year Seminar participation, and Themed Learning Community (TLC) participation). The Summer Academy Bridge students had an adjusted fall grade point average of 2.67, compared to an adjusted fall grade point average of 2.47 for non-participants (Table 3).

**Table 3. Impact of Participation in 2005 Summer Academy Bridge Program for All Students: Average First-Semester Grade Point Average**

	N	Average Fall GPA	Adjusted Fall GPA
Summer Academy Bridge Participants	153	2.87	2.67
Non-Participants	1318	2.45	2.47
Overall	1471	2.49	

Note 1: Adjusted controlling for significant predictors of GPA in terms of demographics, enrollment, academic preparation, TLC participation, and First-Year Seminar participation.

Note 2: Differences in GPA among participants and non-participants are significant ( $p < .05$ ) (based on an analysis of covariance).

Note 3: The non-participant group includes students who enrolled in First-Year Seminars, but did not participate in Summer Academy Bridge.

Results also suggest that the Summer Academy Bridge students were retained at a significantly higher level compared to non-participants; they had an adjusted one-year retention rate of 73%, compared to an adjusted one-year retention rate of 65% for non-participants (Table 4).

**Table 4. Impact of Participation in 2005 Summer Academy Bridge for All Students: One-Year Retention**

Summer Academy Bridge	N	Retn Rate	Adjusted Retn Rate
Participants	159	78%	73%
Non-Participants	1416	64%	65%
Overall	1575	66%	

Note 1: Adjusted controlling for all significant predictors of retention (course load, high school percentile rank, units of high school math, First-Year Seminar participation, and TLC participation).

Note 2: Logistic regression procedures were employed for all retention analyses. Results are displayed in the above format to enhance understanding for most audiences.

Note 3: Differences in retention rates among participants and non-participants are significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Assessment results suggest that students who participated in Summer Academy Bridge and Themed Learning Community had better academic success levels in comparison to students who participated in Summer Academy Bridge and not a TLC [higher first-semester grade point averages, lower “DFW” rates, and higher fall-to-spring retention rates (Table 5)].

**Table 5. Comparison of Fall 2006 Summer Academy Bridge and Bridge-Themed Learning Community**

	N	Avg. Fall GPA	% below a 2.0 GPA	DFW Rate	Fall to Spring Retention Rate	Fall to Fall (One-Year) Retention Rate	Avg. H.S. GPA	Avg. H.S. Pctile Rank*	Avg. SAT Score*
Fall 2006 (Summer Academy Bridge and TLC)	39	<b>2.71</b>	21%	<b>15.97%</b>	<b>87%</b>	n/a	3.16	72	1036
Fall 2006 (Summer Academy Bridge Only)	23	<b>2.21</b>	30%	<b>33.72%</b>	<b>70%</b>	n/a	3.22	70	1017

  

	% Female	% Afrn Amer	Average Age	Units of HS Math	Avg. Course Load	% Seminar Participants	% Campus Housing
First-Generation Scholar							
Fall 2006 (Summer Academy Bridge and TLC)	<b>64%</b>	5%	<b>18.72</b>	8.03	13.82	100%	23%
Fall 2006 (Summer Academy Bridge Only)	<b>52%</b>	5%	<b>18.80</b>	8.26	14.26	100%	26%

\* excludes missing data.

Note: Bolded items are significantly different based either on a Chi-Square Test or an Independent Samples t-test (p<.10).

## A Combination of Interventions

Since an increase in first-semester GPAs and first-year retention statistics are evident in Themed Learning Communities and the Summer Academy Bridge Program, what happens when students participate in both initiatives? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the demographic information of participating students. Surprisingly, the characteristics of students participating in either program or both programs are remarkably similar to their First-Year Seminar peers. The average age, course load, high school GPA, and SAT scores for each group is comparable. Approximately the same proportion of students in each group resides on campus, and there are no glaringly different statistics in regard to representation of ethnicities. The groups of students do appear to differ in gender composition. Notably more female students participate in the Summer Academy Bridge Program and/or Themed Learning Communities in comparison to the First-Year Seminars. Additionally, a substantially higher percentage of first-generation students participate in the Summer Academy Bridge Program (88%) than the Themed Learning Communities (68%) or First-Year Seminars (55%). This discrepancy can be explained through the connection between the program and the first-generation scholarship.

Another disparity may be found in looking at conditional admittance. Thirty-seven percent of students participating in a First-Year Seminar have been conditionally admitted. This proportion is slightly higher than in Themed Learning Communities (26%) and substantially higher than the Summer Academy Bridge participants (8%). Without taking into account the differences in student populations, the average first-semester grade point average increases successively as students participate in more initiatives. Students only participating in a First-Year Seminar have an average GPA of 2.52; students only participating in the Summer Academy Bridge Program or a Themed Learning Community have an average GPA of 2.70 and 2.74 respectively. Students participating in a First-Year Seminar and both programs have a mean grade point average of 2.89.

2006	BRIDGE	TLC	BOTH	FYS ONLY
N	188	377	104	1404
Age (mean)	18.8	19.0	18.8	19.4
Female	75%	74%	76%	57%
Ethnicity				
White	81%	84%	81%	77%
<i>African American</i>	8%	8%	6%	9%
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	7%	6%	9%	4%
<i>Asian American</i>	3%	1%	1%	4%
<i>American Indian</i>	1%	1%	1%	1%
Non-Resident	0%	0%	0%	2%
Course load (mean)	13.7	13.8	13.7	13.3
Conditional Admit	8%	26%	8%	37%
First Generation	88%	68%	88%	55%
Living on Campus	27%	27%	27%	25%
HS GPA (mean)	3.21	3.16	3.33	3.11
SAT/ACT (mean)	999.57	991.81	1004	1000
Fall GPA no controls (mean)	2.70	2.74	2.89	2.52

If we begin to take into account differences in background characteristics, specifically controlling for covariates including gender, ethnicity, conditional admittance, first-generation status and high school GPA and SAT scores, it appears that students participating in both initiatives performed significantly better than students participating in either the Themed Learning Communities or Summer Academy Bridge Program in fall of 2005. In 2006, this significant difference is only apparent in Summer Academy Bridge students who also participated in a Themed Learning Community.

In 2005, participation in the **both initiatives** appeared to significantly increase students' GPA and first-year retention.

	N	Adjusted GPA	Adjusted First-Year Retention
Bridge +TLC	97	3.16*	90%*
TLC	294	2.70*	72%*
Bridge +TLC	97	3.33*	91%**
Bridge	78	2.74*	79%**

In 2006, participation in the TLCs appeared to significantly increase Summer Academy Bridge students' GPA.

	N	Adjusted GPA
Bridge +TLC	89	2.90*
Bridge	80	2.44*

\* p<.05

\*\*p<.10

## Conclusion

The assessment results indicate that IUPUI freshmen benefit from enrolling in all the initiatives designed to enhance academic success, and the data have been used to glean support for fostering the growth of those programs. The Summer Academy Bridge Program, for example, has greatly expanded in the six years of its existence from eighteen students to approximately five hundred this year, representing about one-fifth of IUPUI's entering class. The TLC program has also greatly expanded, but the growth of that program is much more complicated and depends on the support of many faculty members representing a variety of schools. In a dwindling economy, IUPUI, like so many other public institutions, needs more financial resources to support programs that enhance student success. Nevertheless, the campus is committed to the programs, and plans are already underway to expand their capacity so that many more students will enjoy the benefits of participation.

## References

Haas, L., and S. Sutton. 2004. Evaluation of the fall 2002 pilot of "schedule blocks" at IUPUI. Report summarizing work as part of a University College Faculty Fellowship.

Hansen, M. 2005. Summer Academy Bridge evaluation. Unpublished report, University College, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

## Author Information

Lauren P. Chism is the Director of the Themed Learning Community program at IUPUI. Lauren has served on over twenty learning community instructional teams and is currently teaching in a Themed Learning Community in the School of Liberal Arts.

Sarah S. Baker, Ed.D., is an associate professor of radiologic sciences at Indiana University School of Medicine with over thirty years of experience in radiologic and health sciences education. Dr. Baker was a founding faculty member of University College and developed the Summer Academy Bridge Program and themed learning community for health professions majors. In May of 2007, Dr. Baker was appointed as Interim Associate Dean for Academic Programs in University College.

Michele J. Hansen, Ph.D., is the Director of Assessment for University College at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis where she coordinates the outcomes assessment for all first-year programs including learning communities.

Gayle Williams, Assistant Dean of University College at Indiana University-Purdue Indianapolis (IUPUI), has participated in the development, management, and assessment of academic support programs for entering students, including First-Year Seminars, Themed Learning Communities, Structured Learning Assistance, Critical Inquiry, and the Summer Academy Bridge Program. In addition, she oversees the campus orientation program and manages the Bepko Learning Center which houses support initiatives including Supplemental Instruction, athletic mentoring, Structured Learning Assistance, and a resource desk.

Lauren P. Chism  
Director of Themed Learning Communities  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
University Library – UL 1140  
755 W. Michigan Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
E-mail: lchism@iupui.edu  
Telephone: 317-278-4604

Sarah S. Baker  
Interim Associate Dean, University College  
Associate Professor, Radiologic Sciences  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
815 W. Michigan Street – UC 3149  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
E-mail: ssbaker2@iupui.edu  
Telephone: 317-274-5070

Michele J. Hansen  
Director of Assessment, University College  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
355 N. Lansing St. – AO 139E  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
E-mail: mjhansen@iupui.edu  
Telephone: 317-278-2618

Gayle Williams  
Assistant Dean, University College  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
815 W. Michigan St. – UC 3151  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
E-mail: gawillia@iupui.edu  
Telephone: 317-274-8923