

2024

## Moving Toward Belonging: Library Integration In A Summer Bridge Program

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### Recommended Citation

Leathersich, Becky; Otero Ramos, Alessandra; Witt, Alan; and West, Brandon, "Moving Toward Belonging: Library Integration In A Summer Bridge Program" (2024). *Milne Library*. 21.  
<https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/library-research/21>

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## CHAPTER 1

# Moving Toward Belonging:

## Library Integration In A Summer Bridge Program

*Becky Leathersich, Alessandra Otero Ramos, Alan Witt, and Brandon K. West\**

### Introduction

Long before higher education's most recent shift to antiracist practices and policies, many universities and colleges implemented summer bridge programs (SBPs) to assist students from diverse backgrounds in adjusting to the rigors of college. The library instruction program incorporated into the SBP at the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Geneseo is a product of the librarians' understanding of the importance of advocating for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students. The research instruction librarians take a proactive approach to inclusion, diversity, equity, and antiracism (IDEA). Three of the four authors are founding members of the library's IDEA Committee, which focuses on educating staff and engaging BIPOC students in the library, and all authors participated in our campus' Safe Zone training and Advancing Cultural Competency

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\* Positionality statement: We acknowledge that our social identities and values inform our work. We are a Korean American cisgender heterosexual woman, a Puerto Rican cisgender woman, and two white cisgender gay men; two of the authors were first-generation college students; all of the authors hold master's degrees; and two of the authors grew up in middle-class households, one author was raised in a middle-lower class household, and one author came from a lower-class household. We recognize that our identities shape how we see the world and how we relate to students, especially those groups with whom we share some of our identities or, alternatively, how our identities hold privilege and how we can work toward being an ally on campus and in the library.



Certificate (ACCC) to further our understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and contribute to shaping a welcoming campus climate, respectively. In addition, our social identities and values inform our work. We are a Korean American cisgender heterosexual woman, a Puerto Rican cisgender woman, and two white cisgender gay men; two of the authors were first-generation college students; all of the authors hold master's degrees; and two of the authors grew up in middle-class households, one author was raised in a middle-lower class household, and one author came from a lower-class household. We recognize that our identities shape how we see the world and relate to students, especially those with whom we share some of our identities or, alternatively, how our identities hold privilege and how we can work toward being an ally on campus and in the library.

The Access Opportunity Programs (AOP) at SUNY Geneseo were established to recruit, retain, and sustain students of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity that reflect the population in New York state. Many students who participate in AOP identify as BIPOC, first generation, and/or from low socioeconomic status. AOP provides programs and support services to prepare students for success at SUNY Geneseo. The library is a key collaborator in one of these initiatives, the SBP titled AOP Summer Scholars Program. For more than a decade, research instruction librarians have provided scaffolded instruction, focusing on how to locate, evaluate, and integrate information, culminating with an academic poster session in which students present their research and newly developed skills to faculty and administrators from across the college. The librarians' initial involvement in the SBP was timely. At the time, the librarians were already involved in another SBP with the Rochester City School District. Because summertime typically yields fewer instruction requests, they were able to seek out other summer opportunities. SUNY Geneseo librarians were awarded the Innovation in Instruction Award by the Library Instruction Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA) in 2016 for the AOP Summer Library Research Academy program.

Historically, SBPs provide an orientation of academic skills and social networking for students during the summer between graduating high school and entering their first year of college. While many institutions incorporate library participation into their SBPs, SUNY Geneseo's award-winning collaboration has a few factors that make it unique. First, the library instruction program is deeply integrated with the formal coursework. All students take either statistics or precalculus/calculus as well as INTD 170, a writing-intensive course that incorporates research, reading comprehension, and study skills and strategies, and it is in the latter that the librarians are involved. Students who successfully complete the AOP Summer Scholars Program receive three credits in the subsequent fall semester. Since its inception, the AOP Summer Library Research Academy has maintained a similar collaborative partnership in which research instruction librarians and the teaching faculty work together to integrate multiple library instruction sessions on locating, evaluating, and integrating information into the INTD 170 coursework. For example, AOP students are some of the students who participate in the Common Read, a campus-wide

reading initiative, where students, faculty, and staff read the same book that connects to the academic environment at SUNY Geneseo. During the AOP Summer Scholars Program, the research instruction librarians work with students to select a research paper topic that relates to the Common Read theme. The integration of the library instruction program is assessed annually to meet the needs of each cohort.

Second, the program culminates in a presentation by students to the college community, including faculty, administrators such as the college president and provost, and other SUNY Geneseo staff. This portion allows the students to celebrate their successes and be recognized for their hard work by campus authority figures. It also prepares students for future research and presentation opportunities, like the annual research symposium called Geneseo Recognizing Excellence, Achievement, and Talent (GREAT) Day and the McNair Scholars Program, a United States Department of Education grant-supported program to prepare students for research and graduate school.

Third, the program is continually improved and adapted to meet the needs of each cohort and the identified complications from previous years. Under the AOP umbrella is the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), a state-funded program that provides access, academic support, and financial assistance to students who show the potential to earn a college degree but might not have been offered admission because of their academic standing in high school. First-year students seeking admission to SUNY Geneseo through AOP must meet the special admissions considerations, reside in New York state for twelve months prior to enrollment, and qualify as economically disadvantaged according to the SUNY guidelines.<sup>1</sup> Previously, AOP also included the Transitional Opportunity Program (TOP), an internal-sponsored program that served a similar purpose and eligibility requirements; however, since it was phased out as part of budget cuts in 2020, AOP has produced smaller cohorts. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, like many colleges, schools, and other institutions across the nation, SUNY Geneseo shifted to online learning, including the AOP Summer Scholars Program. It was the first time in its decade-plus-long history that the AOP Summer Library Research Academy was held virtually.

In addition, library research instruction has become more integrated into the AOP Summer Scholars coursework over the years. Initially, students wrote two research papers—one with the instructor of record and another with the research instruction librarians. The program has since evolved to where students write just one argumentative essay and create a poster reflecting the students' research findings. The teaching faculty scaffold their instruction, assigning multiple outlines, evaluative bibliographies, and drafts. The research instruction librarians similarly scaffold the library research instruction in relation to the coursework. Prior to completing the first evaluative bibliography, students receive library research instruction on the necessary related skills, including developing a research question, generating keywords, locating scholarly articles in academic databases, and evaluating scholarly literature. This process has not only helped lessen students' workload but also has reiterated the alignment of library research skills to formal coursework.

This chapter provides a background of the AOP Summer Library Research Academy, a literature review involving the role of inclusivity and belonging in summer bridge programs, an overview of tactics to create a sense of belonging, a reflection on the success of the library's work with AOP based on the librarians' experience and feedback from the students, and a description of the benefits of creating a sense of belonging as well as providing the students with an advanced introduction to the library, its services, and research skills.

# Literature Review

## Library Integration into Summer Bridge Programs

The consensus found in the literature on assessing the outcomes of library integration into SBPs is that there is very little being written about this subject.<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason for this is that assessment efforts suffer from a variety of serious systemic challenges, including the fact that creating valid comparisons between assessment methodologies is often not possible because of the differences between each class of students and the conflating variables from other instructors.<sup>3</sup>

There is a greater body of work that explores various modes in which the library and librarians can be included in bridge programs. This divides into two broad groupings: the first is tangential or resource-based integration, where the library is included as a recommended place for study or a source of articles and resources.<sup>4</sup> The second is intentional and active integration, where librarians teach classes, are embedded in the program in collaborative partnerships with instructors, and have agency in the process as opposed to being a resource for referral.<sup>5</sup> Within that second grouping of literature, interventions vary depending on the institutional context and result in a range of goals, assessment methods, and approaches to the point where no one standard or best practice can be readily identified.<sup>6</sup> One study surveyed librarians that systematically assessed their interventions and the results were mixed: eight respondents leaned positive/mostly positive, five neutral, and one negative.<sup>7</sup> Given the small respondent pool (and lack of other studies focusing on this subset), there is a need for more data before broader conclusions can be drawn.

## Broader Research on Bridge Programs and Student Success

The research on bridge programs and student success suffers from some of the challenges that plague library-focused research. However, many of the studies show links to varying measures of success. The most commonly measured element of success is retention from first year to sophomore year; while several studies mention that future research should focus on overall graduation rates, few studies have collected data out to that point.<sup>8</sup> A common side focus within bridge programs is assessing improvements in grades and/or subject knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Overall, results appear mixed. Some studies show high levels of success for retention

in comparison to students not participating in the bridge programs.<sup>10</sup> Others show weak correlations between retention and participation or failed to collect sufficient data to reach conclusions.<sup>11</sup> While there are a greater number of studies on this topic than on the library aspect, the data in this field still appears to be rather sparse, and thus generalizable conclusions are difficult to draw. This is especially true given the lack of any true consensus, not to mention potential differences in institutional data collection and practices or even a shared definition between or within institutions as to what “success” means.<sup>12</sup> Despite these problems, the fact that most studies show a weak to strong correlation between success in retention and grades, coupled with anecdotal evidence from participants and teachers, indicates that this topic deserves more attention and research.

## Scholarship of Belonging Within Bridge Programs

A major influence in most of the scholarship on belonging in academia, referenced by multiple writers, is Vincent Tinto.<sup>13</sup> His research covers multiple aspects of the importance of belonging, with the repeated motif that a sense of belonging is vital for students and is especially important for retention at any institution.<sup>14</sup> This finding is repeated and accepted in the body of research on belonging and bridge programs.<sup>15</sup> An important subset of this research looks specifically at the importance of belonging for diverse students, and the findings in those studies show that universities need to specifically cultivate a sense of belonging for BIPOC students to combat the effects of racialized stigma.<sup>16</sup> All of these findings make a convincing argument toward a major metric that bridge programs seek to improve: belonging improves retention. Therefore, bridge programs could focus on belonging as a component to improve that aspect.

The specific research on belonging and bridge programs focuses more on efficacy, building off the findings above. It highlights a diverse array of elements as successfully fostering belonging, including repeated summer support and contact with faculty,<sup>17</sup> time spent studying and social experiences (specifically for Latino students in this particular study),<sup>18</sup> creating a cohort or cadre experience that bonded the group on multiple levels,<sup>19</sup> and in a library-specific case, embedded librarianship and asset-based pedagogies coupled with active relationship-building.<sup>20</sup> Research on the correlation between bridge programs and belonging shows low levels of impact, with Strayhorn finding no statistically significant effect on belonging from the programs he studied<sup>21</sup> while another cadre of researchers found a mild correlation in their program.<sup>22</sup>

## Summing up the Findings

Some broader conclusions can be drawn from the body of research: there are many different strategies that have shown some efficacy in fostering belonging and retention, and a holistic approach incorporating multiple strategies is likely to be most successful. Assessment of the actual effects of bridge programs generally uses retention and grades as the

main units of analysis, and researchers agree that all such assessments should acknowledge the challenges in parsing out the actual effects of the programs on students. There is broad agreement that fostering a sense of belonging is important for student success in general and especially crucial for BIPOC and first-generation college students who are at risk of failing or leaving the institution. Bridge programs have not yet been shown unambiguously to be effective in fostering this (or academic success in general), but the findings so far have been promising enough to continue to innovate in this area. At the same time, scholars need to explore better methods of assessment to identify the true effects of those programs on students. For librarians researching this topic, the work of Juliann Couture et al. is the most relevant focused research on bridge programs, meaningful library involvement, and how that involvement can foster belonging.<sup>23</sup>

## Creating a Sense of Belonging for AOP Students

### Why Belonging?

SUNY Geneseo (referred to here as “the college”) has been very active in pursuing campus-wide IDEA initiatives for the past several years, in recognition that our campus is a primarily white institution consisting of predominantly white administration, faculty, staff, students, and community members. Thus, the college needs to improve recruiting, retaining, and supporting BIPOC students. As the campus culture has become increasingly focused on IDEA, the Office of Diversity and Equity introduced the concept of belonging to the college, and it is now the focus of our IDEA discourse. The college defines belonging as “Welcoming a diverse campus community that supports and celebrates different identities, promotes equity and inclusion, and respects the ideas of contributions of each individual.”<sup>24</sup> This move aligns with what is being discussed in the literature, which theorizes that the more students feel like they belong on campus, the more likely they will see their college education through to completion.<sup>25</sup> Belonging also refers to the concept of interpersonal relatedness and social support.<sup>26</sup> The librarians have interpreted this in the context of IDEA and see it as a goal that results from the efforts to support IDEA. It has been helpful for us to think about it this way, as the concept of belonging can only be achieved if the other dimensions of IDEA are met.

### Cultivating Belonging at the Library

As librarians, we view the library as a place for everyone. However, this does not necessarily mean that everyone feels like they belong. As stewards of the library, we must consider how our identities and experiences shape our worldview and, thus, how we shape the library and the environment. Before we could foster belonging, we felt it

important to better educate ourselves, and we did this by participating in the college's ACCC program, a semester-long training that helped us navigate our identities and learn about concepts such as privilege and power, implicit bias, stereotype threat, and allyhood. We include signage in our library and email signatures signifying to students that we have completed the ACCC program. We recognize that showcasing our certificates may come across as a bit superficial, but we also know from the literature that students are more likely to use the library when they feel welcomed and respected.<sup>27</sup> As a staff of primarily white librarians, we feel that it is necessary to do whatever we can to help show students that we care about IDEA. Our participation in the program continues to play an important role in helping us incorporate more intentional IDEA practices. One such practice is partnering with the director of Multicultural Affairs to establish research help hours in the Multicultural Center on campus, with the intent of bringing the library to our students in hopes they will feel more welcome in the library if they can establish a connection with us outside of it.

We have also created the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Anti-racism (IDEA) Committee at the library. The committee is an effort to make IDEA a conversation among all facets of the library, from research instruction to collection management and to access services. We have done this by helping the library director coordinate IDEA-based training during all-staff meetings, consulting staff when they have IDEA questions about programs or services, and showcasing IDEA in our library by curating displays that include resources that relate to diverse populations. While the work of the committee needs to continue for the foreseeable future, there is noticeably more thought being given to IDEA by many other library staff, and this will help lead us to our larger goal of making the library a place of belonging.

## Establishing Belonging in the Classroom

Our journey to establishing belonging in the AOP Summer Library Research Academy has required us to reflect on our teaching and pedagogical philosophies. We identified that our early approaches were embedded in deficit thinking—that is, we focused on the learners' weaknesses or what they did not know.<sup>28</sup> This manifested itself largely as us assuming that students would not know how to perform academic research. Many educational philosophies are rooted in deficit thinking, placing the onus of learning (and navigating the hidden curriculum) on the learners. Deficit thinking is exclusionary in nature, as it requires marginalized identities to put forth the most effort in navigating broken systems.<sup>29</sup> After educating ourselves about deficit thinking, we embraced a strengths-based approach, where we consider what the students are bringing into the classroom and tailor our instruction around them, as compared to making our students fit our instruction. This is a small but very important shift in how we teach, as it makes us rethink how we can make the library and its systems work for students instead of making them conform to us.



This has not been an automatic and immediate process. Deficit thinking permeates educational settings because there are layers of bureaucracy that fall outside of an instructor's control. Traditionally in our library, most of our instruction is based on single-session instruction. This type of teaching lends itself to deficit thinking, as the amount of time we have available to work with students is limited. With AOP students, however, we are embedded and have four class periods in which to work together. The additional time allows us to shift the way we think about students in the planning process. As reported by van Herpen et al., giving clear instructions and stimulating learning experiences can contribute to the engagement component of belonging.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, we focus on ways students can bring their expertise into the instructional experience. By considering the students' strengths and experiences at the forefront of lesson planning, we can integrate more constructivist approaches to teaching. We know that even if students have not participated in traditional academic research habits, they do have ample research experience. Students look up information all the time on their personal devices and evaluate the value of one information source over the other. With this in mind, we are able to teach about evaluating a scholarly source from a starting point of how they already evaluate information and have a discussion about translating that to the academic context of INTD 170. This shift has allowed us to move away from prescriptive evaluation exercises to more realistic ones that take the students' experiences into account. It also allows the entrance to more nuanced conversations about the power and privilege of information and why information is valued in certain contexts over others. This makes the teaching-learning process more interesting for us and the students alike, while also helping to break down the power imbalance often felt in the classroom.

Another big shift that has helped us alleviate deficit thinking is collaborating more wholeheartedly with the professors who teach AOP students' credit-bearing courses. In earlier years, the library's portion of the AOP Summer Scholars Program was largely separate from the work done in class. For example, students would complete a research project in INTD 170 and a second one for the library. By scheduling more planning meetings with the INTD 170 professors, we have been able to work together to better align the library class content with the assignments in INTD 170. In our conversations, we learned that the INTD 170 professors were already covering basic database searching with our students. This allowed us to revise our learning objectives in the first library session and to spend more time getting to know the students. This relationship-building is important for multiple reasons, but mostly we want students to feel like they know who the research instruction librarians are as people, helping them feel more at ease with working with us and using the library. We have also been able to reframe what would have been a database demonstration to a more conversational format that allows us to learn what the students know about database searching and what we can show them. This more conversational format disrupts the dynamic of the "Sage on the Stage." Another benefit of this collaboration is modeling what collaboration looks like for students.

We are still learning and finding ways to move away from deficit thinking and trying to embrace students' strengths. Overall, our initial reaction is that the students are more engaged and willing to continue the discussions before and after class, and we are more excited about teaching. We believe that these changes are contributing to the sense of belonging we are working to establish.

## Reflecting on Our Practice

As we reflect on our practice, we consider how the library instruction program contributes to the students' sense of belonging. Overall, our conversations and feedback from the students indicate that the SBP helped facilitate interpersonal relationships among students. One student shared, "It helped me get close to a group of people before attending college where it's hard to connect with students." The library instruction program and the poster presentation in particular helped students to view themselves as scholars and a part of higher education, which can be inaccessible and unwelcoming to students from BIPOC, first-generation, and/or from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Another student described the presentation as "a great experience being in a room with other scholars and making small conversations with people about their topics." Providing students with the opportunity to share their learning with their peers in a formal and celebratory manner helped them start their academic journey on a positive note.

Additionally, interactions focused on the development of research skills and the librarians' attitude toward the students' learning process seemed very helpful for students. One student expressed that the librarians "did a great job and were very kind and patient with us!" As students progress through their college experience, they frequently visit us for reference, which we consider a byproduct of feeling a sense of belonging or safety with the librarians. Part of this comes simply from awareness. One student noted, "I believe that not many people know about how helpful the librarians are."

Lastly, we consider the program to be a positive way for the students to connect with other people on campus—specifically, administration, faculty, staff, and librarians—outside of their daily interactions with each other. One student commented that "the experience was really great in regards to meeting faculty and showing off our hard work," and another expressed that "it was rewarding to have people look at the work we've done over the course of the month." This could combat the common environment within higher education, where administration's power and privilege can create a barrier between themselves and students, especially those who identify as BIPOC or from other historically marginalized backgrounds. This reflection is supported by Tinto's research that students' sense of belonging "is most directly shaped by the broader campus climate and the perceptions of belonging students derive from their daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators on campus and the messages those interactions convey about their belonging."<sup>31</sup>

# Conclusion

The librarians at SUNY Geneseo will need to adapt to changing circumstances in AOP as well as the overall library and college. In the spring 2022 semester, the college opened the Multicultural Center for BIPOC students to use as a gathering place as well as to host club meetings and special events. The renovated campus library is set to reopen in the 2024–25 academic year, and it is possible that it might include a similar student area. The research instruction librarians plan to explore sharing these physical spaces for reference, instruction, or outreach efforts. At the broader, structural level, the demographic cliff beginning in 2026 (low birth rates during the Great Recession resulting in a reduction in the number of college-age students in the population) will shrink higher education enrollment nationwide absent other demographic influxes.<sup>32</sup> This will likely result in smaller cohorts for AOP and a smaller college overall, a communal change that could change how belonging is experienced on the campus. Whatever transpires in the future, this collaboration rooted in IDEA principles will continue to lay a foundation for BIPOC students to feel a sense of belonging at SUNY Geneseo.

University and college libraries looking to start an instruction program in their institution's SBP should set clear goals and plan for incremental progress rather than expecting an instant culture of belonging to blossom. Our ability to focus on cultivating a sense of belonging is a product of numerous years of collaborating and developing the instruction program. That is not to say that a new instruction program cannot address both inclusivity and instruction simultaneously, but rather that setting realistic expectations for both research instruction librarians and students could lead to a sense of success instead of failure. Additionally, since SBPs are typically held annually, objectives can be reviewed, reflected upon, and updated regularly to best meet the needs of the participants.

Given the overall lack of research on this topic, there is room for future investigations into differentiation between the perceptions of first-year AOP students and AOP alumni and whether creating a sense of belonging during an SBP leads to better retention. Belonging can be difficult to measure, but it is a worthwhile goal in the pursuit of finding direct links between library practice and students' connection to the institution and each other.

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