

# Bridge to Graduate School: Student Experiences in a Graduate Preparation Program

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## Introduction

### Abstract

Bridge to Graduate School is a graduate preparation program at Florida State University that aims to support minoritized students during their transition to graduate school. The program centers three components: academic preparedness, mentorship, and professional development.

Major findings of this mixed methods research suggest that mentors root their understanding of their mentees' journey and enact their support through affirmation of mentees skills, abilities, and identities. Second, mentorship and professional development interact to create connections across prospective graduate schools and overcome challenges in the applications process. Overall, the majority of students perceive a positive impact from various academic preparedness components.

### Aims of the Research

Mentorship is a well-researched practice that has continuously been shown to provide support to students as they navigate times of transition. Many graduate preparation models integrate mentorship within their programs. However, there is not much discussion on how mentorship interacts with and supports different program components such as academic preparedness and professional development. There is still a current need to examine how institutions are supporting students during times of transition and the experience of students within these programs.

This research aimed to build on the literature surrounding best practices of graduate preparation programs and how to best serve students given the following social identities: first-generation, racial and ethnic minoritized students, and students from low-socioeconomic status.

### Research Questions

The guiding research questions were used for this study:

1. How is support for graduate school application enacted through mentorship in a graduate preparation program?
2. How do students perceive different components of academic preparation in a graduate school preparation program?
3. What is the impact of professional development in a graduate preparation program?

## Method

### Research Design

The following research used mixed methods to explore the experiences of students. A survey with both open and closed ended questions was administered to all participants. Following completion of the survey, participants consented to an individual interview. The interview was structured and lasted from 30-45 minutes.

### Participants

The participants for the research study are Bridge to Graduate School alumni who participated in the program from Fall of 2019 – Spring 2021. To participate in Bridge to Graduate School, students must be classified as racial or ethnic minority, first generation, or Pell-grant eligible. Hence, all alumni hold various intersections of these identities.

As a result of the design of the program, participants find themselves in different life stages ranging from enrolled in graduate school, still seeking acceptance into graduate school, taking a gap year, or working professionally. The total sample size was 20 participants for the survey and 5 participants for the interviews.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a 3-month period. Surveys data were collected and analyzed using Qualtrics. Participants were then asked for consent to participate in a follow-up interview.

Interviews were conducted as participants consented. Interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. The transcriptions were manually coded through Microsoft Word and were analyzed for connections to academic preparedness, mentorship, and professional development.

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# PURPOSE

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## Results

### Results

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree
Bridge to Graduate School helped me explore graduate school options and create a timeline to fit my interests and goals.	56%	38%	0%	6%	0%
Bridge to Graduate School helped me develop my personal statement, resume, and cover letter to apply to graduate school.	56%	38%	6%	0%	0%
Bridge to Graduate School helped me identify strategies to get quality letters of recommendation for graduate school.	50%	44%	6%	0%	0%
Bridge to Graduate School helped me identify resources and opportunities for graduate school funding (ex. scholarships, fellowships, graduate assistantships, etc.).	44%	31%	6%	19%	0%
Bridge to Graduate School offered resources and strategies to prepare me for graduate school exams (ex. LSAT, GRE, GMAT, MCAT, etc.).	38%	31%	6%	0%	6%
Bridge to Graduate School increased my confidence in applying to graduate school.	63%	38%	0%	0%	0%

**ANGIE + JARED = LINDA + DESTINY**

**MENTORSHIP + PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT = CONNECTIONS**

53% of participants agreed that Bridge to Graduate School helped them establish a network of peer staff, and faculty, support for the application process.

**Angie**

Angie was able to make connections to faculty and staff at Florida State through her Mentor's network. She plans to reach out to those connections as she applies to graduate school.

**Jared**

During Jared's graduate school application process, his mentor encouraged Jared to reach out to a faculty member that he was connected to at the university. This faculty member responded to his emails and they had a conversation through zoom. This faculty member is now Jared's current advisor and mentor and his current Master's program.

**Linda**

"I just know that the process definitely would have been harder if I didn't have guidance and that community. If it was a 11 program and process it might have worked well, but having it as a class I got to see my other peers and bounce off ideas of other people when I was applying to graduate school. I felt like I was getting a class and network all in one. I didn't feel alone in the process, I was had my mentors and peers and helped me to know that even though we're all on different paths, we were essentially all in this together."

**Destiny**

During Destiny's graduate application, she encounters a challenge. Through her Mentor's connections, they were able to connect with faculty members at the prospective university and program and find a resolution to their challenge. This faculty member is still in contact with destiny and serves as a part of her support system at her current institution.

**Linda**

My mentor was someone who is very encouraging and I always felt comfortable speaking to him about anything like a personal statement. Even when I felt like things could be better, he would be like this good, this is exactly what they are looking for in your application. He always give me that reassurance that I needed. To know that I gave my best effort on application material and have someone vet for my work, meant a lot.

**Chloe**

She would support me with the application and give me words of encouragement and guidance on how to make my application better, even though classes were over. She didn't have to do that and that is what I think was most impactful from a mentor.

**Angie**

His mentorship was about instilling confidence in me and he would say things like you are great, you're awesome, you can do this, and I can help you this process. That made realize that I was not doing this alone and I have someone who will go over my application and guide me through everything.

**Jared**

I would say that I tend to doubt myself a lot and feel like I'm incapable of things at times, but he reassured me and dug deep inside me. He helped me realize my value and strengths. He shared his experiences with me about going to Ohio State and he told me you are going to get into the school. He believed in me and that's what I really needed at the time.

**MENTORSHIP AFFIRMATION**

69% of participants strongly agreed with, "My mentor understood where I was in my graduate school journey."

Interviews give insight into how mentors understood and rooted their support in affirmations as it relates to their mentee's identities, emotions, skills, and abilities.

### Discussion and Implications

The research reveals that support is enacted through mentorship affirmation. Mentors affirm their students as it relates to their identities, skills, and abilities. Students positively perceive their experience with different academic preparedness components within Bridge to Graduate School. The impact of professional development is coupled with mentorship to create connections at prospective schools and provide support in overcoming the challenging application process.

Implications of this research suggest that future participants of Bridge to Graduate School and similar graduate preparations programs benefit from mentorship and guidance in the graduate school application process.

### Scan For References

