

## Benefits of a Weeklong Summer Academy to Prepare Students with Intellectual Disabilities for College

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### Abstract

Empirical evidence of the impact of a brief college summer experience for students with intellectual disability is lacking. This qualitative and quantitative study provides evidence that a weeklong summer academy increases student interest in and awareness of the benefits of college. The participants included 23 college-age students with an intellectual disability who completed a survey about their experiences in the weeklong summer academy. Pre-post analysis revealed the statistically significant difference between participants' feelings about attending college before ( $M = 4.0$ ) and after the summer academy ( $M = 4.6$ ) ( $t(16) = -2.38, p = .03$ ). In addition, 46% (58/126) of participants' responses to open-ended questions related to benefits of college and 44% (56/126) of participants' responses mentioned themes associated with social opportunities. Analyses of student perceptions of the benefits of college and the social aspects of college and how these results can increase overall student interest in college are provided.

*Keywords:* postsecondary education, college, summer bridge program, college awareness, social development

### Plain Language Summary

- Students with intellectual disabilities have options to go to college after they graduate from high school.
- Not all individuals or families know about college options.
- **What we did in this study:** This study shows that going to a summer academy can help students with ID learn about college.
- **Findings:** In this study, students with ID who attended summer academy learned about the benefits of going to college and how college can help them with their social skills.
- **Conclusion:** After going to summer academy, most students wanted to go to college.

As high school students with intellectual disabilities (ID) transition to adulthood, many desire to pursue life experiences like their peers, such as higher education, employment, social participation, and independent living (Martinez & Queener, 2010). The Higher Education Opportunities Act (HEOA) of 2008 expanded funding to help students with ID reach these goals (Grigal & Papay, 2018; Lee, 2009). As a result, higher education is becoming a more common initial step for high school graduates with ID to reach the postsecondary goals of obtaining employment, forming a social network, and living independently.

Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for students with ID have expanded exponentially because of the HEOA primarily due to the allowance of financial aid (Grigal & Papay, 2018). There are over 300 IPSE programs for young adults with ID at colleges and universities across 49 states that focus on employment, independent living, social participation, self-determination, and academic skills (Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, 2020). Students enrolled in IPSE programs take college courses for either audit or credit, complete internships, engage in career development activities, and participate socially in traditional campus life activities (i.e., joining organizations and clubs, attending sporting events, living in dorms).

### **Benefits of IPSE Programs**

With an increasing number of jobs requiring postsecondary education, higher education is becoming a necessity (Butler et al., 2015). Obtaining any amount of higher education results in higher rates of employment and wages (Migliore et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2012). Compared to individuals with other disabilities, students with ID experience the poorest post-school outcomes (Hart et al., 2006). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), 17.9% of individuals with disabilities achieve competitive employment compared to 61.8% of individuals without disabilities (p. 2). In 2018, 44% of individuals graduated from an IPSE with paid employment and that percentage increased to 65% one year after completion of an IPSE program, which is equal to individuals without disabilities (Grigal et al., 2018, p.14 & 17). Comparatively, 2014-2015 data show that only 17% of individuals with ID who do not attend IPSE programs were employed (Grigal et al., 2018, p.17). Thus, IPSE programs are effective for increasing employment outcomes for young adults with ID (Grigal et al., 2012; Migliore et al., 2009; Zafft et al., 2004).

Higher education also positively affects social participation (Butler et al., 2015; Hart et al., 2010; Hughson et al., 2006). After leaving high school, individuals with ID often experience a decline in social relationships. Many of their high school peers go on to college or work experiences, while students with ID often remain in high school for a transition program (Foley et al., 2012). For individuals who attend an IPSE program, supports for building social relationships with structured and unstructured peer mentor programs lead to more productive social skills necessary for employment (Hart et al., 2010). Butler et al. (2015) surveyed 19 college students with ID and compared them with 158 adults with ID who did not attend college and found that students who attended two semesters of higher education had a greater likelihood of having friends with whom to talk

and hang out. Kleinert et al. (2012) concluded that “the social aspect of college [is] even more important for promoting students' growth and independence than the academics” (p. 33).

College is also an opportunity to grow in independence and self-management skills necessary for adulthood. When young adults attend college and live in dorms, it is often their first experience of living on their own. While in high school, students have many external supports for independent living and executive functioning skills that are often not provided in college. For example, high school students may receive help from their parents or guardians with cleaning, cooking, time management, problem solving, and organization (Barnhill, 2016; Cai & Richdale, 2015). Compared to high school, deficits in self-management and executive functioning skills may become more apparent in college due to higher expectations and decreased external supports (Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Parker et al., 2011). IPSE programs consider these needs and provide supports for the growth and development of executive functioning skills (Prohn et al., 2018). With the fading support model of IPSE programs, there is a greater potential for students to grow in independence.

While college may be beneficial, a gap exists between students with ID who qualify for IPSE programs and students who are knowledgeable about the opportunity to attend an IPSE. Many reasons explain this gap. High school educators and counselors may not be aware of or may not encourage students to apply for IPSE programs. Parents often report that they are interested in postsecondary options but do not feel like they have access to the options or resources to apply to college programs (Griffin et al., 2010). Roderick et al. (2008) found that one reason students do not explore postsecondary options is due to a lack of access to information and support in the decision-making process. Because of these issues in lack of knowledge and resources, IPSE programs would benefit from effective ways to inform and attract prospective students. One option to increase the awareness of college options for students with ID is through a summer program that allows prospective students to stay on campus and experience college.

### **College Summer Programs**

Summer bridge programs assist with the transition to college and provide necessary supports for academic and social expectations of college (What Works Clearinghouse & Development Services Group (WWC & DSG), 2016). Although the research related to summer college programs for students with ID is limited, there is an existing body of research that finds that summer bridge or orientation programs for traditional students are effective (Cabrera et al. 2013; Howard & Sharpe, 2019; Sablan, 2014; Wachen et al., 2018; WWC & DSG, 2016). Summer bridge programs help students get ready for college by helping them understand the resources available when they go to college. Howard and Sharpe (2019) found that summer programs helped students' college readiness related to building relationships with faculty and other students while also understanding the expectations of college. Cabrera et al. (2013) evaluated a 6-week summer bridge program in which students lived in the dorm, attended college classes, participated in social activities, and learned about resources on campus. Participation was effective for increasing students' use of resources and involvement on campus leading to

better retention, more social connections, and increased growth in independence and self-management skills. Summer bridge participants reported more confidence about expectations of a college experience and social connection with other students going into the fall semester (Suzuki et al., 2012). These studies showed that factors including peer mentoring, faculty support, and on-campus living experiences improved student outcomes (Namelka et al., 2017; Scheef et al., 2021; Wachen et al., 2018). Sablan (2014) reviewed 11 summer bridge programs and confirmed their effectiveness for increasing awareness of resources available to support students in a successful transition to college. The results indicated that having a residential component to summer bridge programs assists students in acclimating to the college environment. After attending classes, living on and navigating campus, learning about supports available, and meeting people, students reported more confidence in making the transition to college. Similarly, Kirkendall et al. (2009) studied the effects of a 10-week summer dorm experience on the independent skills of young adults with ID. Results found that this experience did support the development of independent living skills and the awareness of personal and vocational goals.

Summer bridge programs can also improve important college outcome measures such as GPA and retention. Using quantitative outcomes, researchers found that summer bridge programs positively predicted the participants' first semester GPAs (Wachen et al., 2018) and led to more prepared and persistent students (Namelka et al., 2017). Wachen et al. (2018) conducted a study of a 5- to 6-week residential summer bridge program at a university. The results showed that the summer bridge program boosted academic and social readiness and was effective for creating academic momentum that leads to retention and graduation, a worthy financial endeavor for institutions to support. Namelka et al. (2017) used a month-long summer experience to determine the impact on GPA and retention of first-year at-risk college students. The support provided in this summer bridge program included peer mentors, staff coaching, small class sizes, dedicated faculty, and typical college supports (i.e., counseling, recreation center, academic advising). The researchers found that students who are at risk for not succeeding in college could be successful with appropriate supports.

Overall, the summer bridge programs evaluated in the literature have ranged in length from 5 to 10 weeks. We report outcomes of a 1-week bridge program referred to as a summer academy. The summer academy is a college experience to promote knowledge, awareness, and motivation to attend an IPSE. The goal of the summer academy aligns with Sablan's (2014) description that college readiness "acknowledges that access to college also involves important skills and knowledge of the higher education environment" (p. 1040). In the weeklong summer academy, potential students live on campus and participate in college classes, social activities, career exploration, and volunteer opportunities throughout the week. They meet the program staff, university faculty, traditional college students who serve as peer mentors and counselors, and departmental staff who share information about supports on campus.

Since there is a need for more research of the impact of a summer bridge program for students with ID, we sought to determine if our weeklong summer academy would provide similar results to the summer bridge programs for traditional college students

(Sablan, 2014). Using both qualitative and quantitative measures, we asked the following three research questions: (a) how does a weeklong summer academy impact participants' interest in college; (b) how does a weeklong summer academy impact participants' awareness of the benefits of attending college; and (c) how does a weeklong summer academy impact participants' awareness of the social opportunities in college.

## Method

### Participants and Setting

This study was conducted at a 2-year, IPSE certificate program at a small liberal arts university in the south. The university IRB committee approved the study. The data analyzed were archival data from two previous years of pre- and post-surveys related to the program's summer academy. The participants were 15 females and 8 males between the ages of 17 and 23 who qualified for admission to the IPSE program, which means they met the criteria for having an intellectual or developmental disability, had basic reading skills, had functional communication skills, and had no history of severe behavioral problems. Admission to the summer academy included a review of a psychoeducational report and a 2-hour meet and greet session with program staff. The participants had not previously attended an IPSE program.

There were 23 participants from the 2018 and 2019 summer academies who completed the survey. All 23 participants' data from the post-surveys were used in the qualitative analysis. Both pre- and post-data were available from 17 participants which consisted of 9 females and 8 males. Only data from participants who completed both the pre- and post-survey were used for the quantitative analysis.

The setting was a weeklong summer academy held on a university campus. The participants stayed overnight in the dorms, ate in the cafeteria, attended class sessions in the university classrooms, and played games in the student activity center. The participants were provided with a daily schedule with activities from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm. The activities included meals, classes, free time, a volunteer project, off-campus outings, and group games. There were also fun events like a dance party and a movie night. Traditional college students served as peer counselors and stayed overnight in the dorms with the participants. The program staff led the daily activities along with university faculty and other volunteers.

### Instrument

A survey called the Summer Academy Perspectives Survey (SAPS) was created by program staff. The SAPS has a 7th-grade reading level based on the Flesch-Kincaid Scale (Fleming, 2020). The SAPS assessed participants' experiences, awareness, and interest in college. The survey consisted of both quantitative and qualitative items. The quantitative items were five questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The first four questions were based on the following responses, 1 (very nervous) to 5 (very excited) and the last question was based on 1 (never) to 5 (a lot) with higher scores being more positive (see Table 1 for items). To expand on the quantitative questions, two open-ended

questions were included that asked participants to report on what they anticipated before attending the summer academy and what they experienced after attending the summer academy (e.g., some fun things at college might be...; see Table 1). The post-survey was identical to the pre survey but added one additional open-ended question concerning perceptions after the summer academy (see Table 1). Two questions were not analyzed and therefore were not included in Table 1. The internal consistency (alpha) of the Likert questionnaire was 0.60 at pretest and 0.76 at post-test.

## Procedures

The staff used Google Forms to develop the survey and emailed it to participants before and after participation in the summer academy. One reminder email was sent to participants who had not submitted the survey. The researchers assigned participants a number to maintain confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods. For the quantitative results, using the SAPS, we compared scores for the two cohorts to determine if we could collapse results. A between-groups comparison based on cohort using paired t-tests revealed no significant difference in mean SAPS scores for the pre survey ( $t = 1.57$ ,  $p = .14$ ) and for the post-survey ( $t = 1.14$ ,  $p = .26$ ). Therefore, we combined cohort 1 and 2 for data analysis.

Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis (Gall et. al, 2007). The survey was developed with questions about attending college and the social aspects of college. Initially, the first three authors read responses to identify primary themes in the data, which was defined in an initial codebook (Saldaña, 2013). Using an iterative, consensus-building process, research team members further refined the primary themes, developing a detailed codebook with code definitions, typical and atypical exemplars, and exclusions (Guest & MacQueen, 2008). To ensure dependability among multiple investigators, coding pairs conducted inter-rater reliability tests of each code by applying codes to responses, discussing findings, and then refining code definitions until agreement reached at least 80%. Then, reliability was established using percent agreement. The number of responses categorized with agreement was divided by the total number of responses (those with agreement plus those without agreement) resulting in 99% agreement.

Using the final codebook, the researchers applied codes to each response independently. These steps strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings through triangulating code definition across investigators and checking the individual coding processes through collaboration (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Sub-codes were then re-grouped to integrate them across key responses related to benefits of college and social aspects of college.

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

The researchers analyzed 17 pre- and post-surveys. T-test analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between participants' perceptions of attending college before ( $M = 4.0$ ) and after the summer academy ( $M = 4.6$ ) ( $t(16)=-2.38$ ,  $p=.03$ ).

#### *Interest in College*

Three questions in the SAPS focused specifically on attending college (See Table 2, Q1, Q2, and Q5). Figure 1 shows the pre- and post-responses. After attending the summer academy, participants reported an increase in their interest in college following the summer academy (See Table 2, Q5 and Figure 1). When analyzed at the item level, participants reported statistically significant higher scores for thinking about attending college following the summer academy.

#### *Social Opportunities in College*

Two items in the SAPS focused on social aspects of college: talking to new people and making new friends (See Table 2, Q3 and Q4). Figure 2 shows an increase in the desire for social opportunities in college following the summer academy. Participants reported significantly higher scores for talking to new people following the summer academy.

### Qualitative Results

For the two questions on benefits of attending college and social opportunities in college, the first three authors reviewed the number of responses and the themes falling within those two areas. Overall, three themes were identified within the benefits of attending college and two themes were identified within social opportunities of college.

While there were only 23 post-surveys analyzed, many of the participants had more than one answer for the open-ended questions. Thus, 126 open-ended responses were generated by participants and analyzed. Out of the total, 46% (58/126) of participants' responses related to benefits of college and 44% (56/126) of participants' responses mentioned themes associated with social opportunities. The other 10% of the responses did not fall into either category and were not analyzed.

#### *Benefits of Attending College*

Three key themes related to the benefits of college were identified: independent living skills, executive functioning skills, and accessing and participating in college. Specifically, 43% of the total responses in this area related to independent living skills. For example, direct participant quotes on the surveys were "how to live on your own," "learn about independent living," "how to get a job," "how to take care of myself," and "making good food choices." In addition, 33% of the responses related to executive

functioning skills. Direct quotes from participants related to this theme were “how to be organized,” “following a schedule,” “study strategies,” and “asking for help when I need it.” Lastly, 22% of responses related to accessing and participating in college. Direct quotes from participants included “living in a dorm,” “getting involved in classes,” “learning my way around campus,” “talking to teachers,” and “trying new things.”

### *Social Opportunities in College*

Two key themes emerged related to the impact of the awareness of the social opportunities in college: making friends and participating in group activities. Specifically, 61% of the responses in this area related to making friends, and direct participant quotes on the surveys included “meeting new people,” “hanging out with friends,” and “having a roommate.” In addition, 39% related to group activities. Direct participant quotes related to this theme were “joining a club,” “playing intramural sports,” and “attending sporting events.”

## **Discussion**

Inclusive postsecondary education positively impacts not only education and employment but also the independence and social participation of all students (Butler et al., 2015; Hart et al., 2010). With the development of IPSE programs, students with ID are pursuing the same experiences and personal growth opportunities as their same-aged peers (Martinez & Queener, 2010). However, a gap exists between students with ID who can attend college and students who are aware that inclusive college programs are available to them. A summer program that allows prospective students to stay on a college campus is one option to increase the awareness of college and the social opportunities in college, as well as the confidence for attending college (Suzuki et al., 2012). Up to this point, effective summer bridge programs have consisted of multiple-week experiences with various typical college supports to improve the preparedness of college students (Cabrera et al., 2013; Namelka et al., 2017; Wachen et al., 2018). This qualitative and quantitative study sought to explore the effectiveness of a much shorter, weeklong, summer academy experience for increasing the perceptions, awareness, and interest in college for participants with intellectual disabilities.

After the summer academy, participants were more aware of the benefits of attending college. This finding is similar to other research that shows that students who attended summer bridge programs were more acclimated to college and knowledgeable of the expectations (Sablan, 2014; Suzuki et al., 2012) providing the experience necessary for decision-making (Griffin et al., 2010). As Sablan (2014) indicated, summer bridge programs are beneficial in preparing students for college by addressing cognitive strategies, executive functioning skills, and awareness of resources available to support students in a successful transition to college. Similarly, but over much less time, the summer academy showed that a weeklong experience was effective in helping students see the benefits of college and feel more comfortable and more prepared to access the supports available to them in college.



Following the summer academy, participants reported a greater interest in college. Participants also reported thinking about college more and being more excited about staying away from home and living on a college campus. These results are similar to patterns reported by traditional students as research on summer bridge programs shows that a residential summer experience can decrease participants' fears about college (Kirkendall et al., 2009; Sablan, 2014).

In addition to increased knowledge about college, participants from this study reported increased recognition of the social benefits of college. They reported thinking of college as an opportunity to meet new people and develop a community. They also reported increased excitement and enthusiasm for talking to new people and making friends. The findings from this study are consistent with other research that shows that introducing social opportunities and resources in a summer bridge program increases participation on campus and access to resources (Cabrera et al., 2013; Sablan, 2014). In addition, there is improved social readiness and social connection with other students going into the fall semester (Howard & Sharpe, 2019; Suzuki et al., 2012; Wachen et al., 2018).

In addition to social aspects, participants also reported new knowledge that college is an opportunity to grow and learn new skills in independence and executive functioning needed for success in adulthood (e.g., living on their own, managing finances, cooking meals, managing time, navigating campus, and getting a job). Kirkendall et al. (2009) found that students with and without ID had similar reflections and feelings about living on a college campus for the first time, including recognizing the potential impact a college experience could have on their personal and vocational goals and skills. Overall, the results of this study support a summer academy as an effective strategy for increasing the perceptions, awareness, and attitudes towards college for students with ID. Additionally, the outcomes of this study showed that a weeklong summer academy had similar impacts to summer bridge programs of longer duration (Cabrera et al., 2013; Kirkendall et al., 2009; Sablan, 2014).

### **Implications for Practice**

A summer academy has the potential to increase college awareness and the overall benefits of attending college (Scheef et al., 2021), as well as the college social opportunities for students with ID. This study showed that a weeklong summer academy is successful for introducing students with ID to inclusive postsecondary education. One barrier families face is a lack of awareness of IPSE programs (Griffin et al., 2010). While awareness of IPSE programs is increasing, summer academies can help students and parents consider if college is a fit for them. Summer academies can be an informative piece of the postsecondary planning process for families, counselors, and educators. Scheef et al. (2021) summarized components of a summer academy that can prepare students for college and increase their ability to meet postsecondary goals, such as connecting them with areas of interest and faculty in those areas, providing social opportunities and experience living in the dorms, and connecting them with campus resources.

Thomas (2012) summarized evidence from What Works research and listed effective practices to assist students with the transition to college including “providing information, informing expectations, developing academic skills, building social capital, and nurturing a sense of belonging” (p. 12). The current research shows that a summer academy is one avenue to increase students’ knowledge of college options and the expectations of college so they can make informed decisions. The summer academy also built social capital by increasing the students’ awareness of social opportunities in college and using peer mentors as support. Lastly, the summer academy enhanced participants’ sense of belonging by increasing the awareness of what college can do for them and how college may be attainable for them.

Young adults with ID often experience a decline in social opportunities and sense of community after leaving high school (Foley et al., 2012). College provides the natural environment for individuals with ID to develop meaningful relationships through a variety of social opportunities (i.e., joining clubs, attending sporting events, participating in group projects, meeting new people). The variety of social experiences students with ID have in IPSE programs on college campuses positively affects the social skills necessary for employment and adult life after graduation (Hart et al., 2010). Learning about the social opportunities in college through a summer academy, as well as the social supports available while attending an IPSE program, allow individuals with ID to be more aware that college can be a place to practice key social skills needed for adult life.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There is limited research on the use of summer academies in an IPSE setting. Without a control group, it is difficult to determine if the outcomes were due to programmatic causes. In addition, outcomes from the sample size of 23 respondents over 2 years may not generalize to all IPSE students. Also, the researchers did not create the survey, but used archival data from a survey already created by previous program staff. Because archival data was used for this study, detailed demographic data on the participants was not available. The outcomes were also limited to a single site and to participants interested in attending a summer academy at a small, liberal arts university in the southeastern United States.

Future research should further explore the effectiveness of summer academies for students with ID in increasing awareness of college, benefits of college, and social opportunities at multiple universities. Making comparisons across IPSE programs or including multiple IPSE summer academies in a single data set could increase the sample size and strengthen the outcomes. Exploring specific activities that contribute the most to increasing college awareness and preparing students for IPSE programs, as well as comparing the outcomes and perspectives as reported by summer academy participants and parents/guardians would be useful for program development. Future research could also include analyzing longitudinal data related to how a summer academy leads to outcomes of the IPSE program.

### Conclusion

Participation in inclusive postsecondary education has led to a positive impact on employment, social, and independent living skills for students with ID (Butler et al., 2015; Grigal, 2009; Hart et al., 2010; Migliore et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2012; Zafft et al., 2004). Individuals with ID and their families often lack knowledge and awareness of IPSE programs. A summer academy model used at a small, private university has shown to be effective in increasing awareness of postsecondary options and the benefits of attending an IPSE program. IPSE programs can use summer academies as a method of increasing access and knowledge of their programs for prospective students.

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**Table 1: Survey Questions**

Likert Scale (1- very nervous, 2- a little bit nervous, 3- don't care, 4- a little bit excited, 5- very excited)

1.\* How do you feel about spending the night away from home?

2.\* How do you feel about staying on a college campus?

3.\* How do you feel about talking to new people?

4.\* How do you feel about making new friends?

Likert Scale (1 - never, 3 - sometimes, 5 - a lot)

5.\* How often do you think about going to college?

Open Ended Questions

6.\* Some fun things at college might be...

8.\* Some things I want to learn more about or get better at in college are...

9.\*\* What was your favorite part about Summer Academy?

*Note.* Questions 7 and 10 were not analyzed and therefore were not included.

\* Questions analyzed pre and post

\*\* Question analyzed post

**Table 2: Pre and Post Comparison of Summer Academy Perspectives**

Question	<i>n</i>	<i>T1 Mean</i>	<i>T2 Mean</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. How do you feel about spending night away from home?	1 7	3.941	4.3529	16	-1.237	.234
2. How do you feel about staying on a college campus?	1 7	4.000	4.176	16	-4.82	.636
3. How do you feel about talking to new people?	1 7	3.353	4.353	16	-3.234	.005
4. How do you feel about making new friends?	1 7	4.353	4.647	16	-1.000	.332
5. How often do you think about going to college?	1 7	4.059	4.765	16	-2.954	.009

*Note.* Items for questions 1-4 were rated on a 1-5 scale (1 -very nervous, 2 - a little bit nervous, 3 - don't care, 4 - a little bit excited, 5 - very excited). Items for questions 5 were rated on a 1,3,5 scale (1 - never, 3 -sometimes, 5 - a lot).



Figure 1

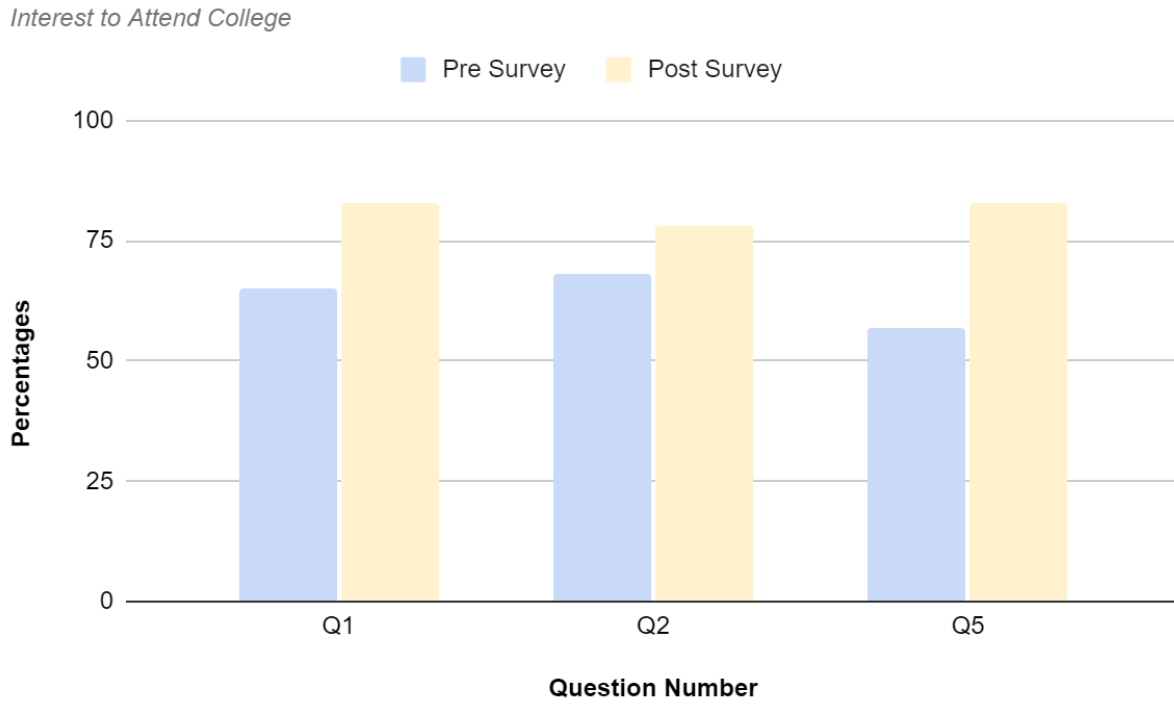


Figure 2

