

The Bridges to Adelphi Program: Support Program for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Statement of the Problem

The continuing rise in prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), now at 1 in 68 (Baio, 2014), has engendered greater awareness of the condition, brought increased research, and improved interventions and strategies for individuals identified with ASD. As suggested by the number of resources written on the subject, these individuals have the cognitive ability to process college level academics, and to attend institutions of higher education (Brown, Wolf, King, & Bork, 2012; Palmer, 2005; Freidman, 2010; Wolf, Brown, & Bork, 2009; Martin, 2010; Zager, Alpern, McKeon, & Mulvey, 2012; Shore & Rastelli, 2006).

These conditions have set the stage for increasing numbers of individuals with ASD to enroll in institutions of higher education. However, challenges in social interaction, executive functioning, and sensory issues create barriers to their success in academics, relationships, employment, and involvement in the community (Nagler & Shore, 2013).

Objectives of the Program

Individuals with ASD present with widely diverse problems and challenges that are different from neurotypical college students. Therefore, there is not one approach that will be effective with all ASD students. For a program to be successful, it is important that it engage in an individualized, problem solving approach, focusing on identifying individual areas of strength, while acknowledging and addressing areas of weakness or challenge (Nagler & Shore, 2013).

The Bridges to Adelphi Program's services are based on social learning theory, cognitive behavioral principles, and a person-centered approach as theoretical foundations. Bridges staff uses a problem solving approach designed to model, and teach these skills to Bridges students. The initial cohort of 3 in 2007 has now grown to 91 students who regularly receive comprehensive Bridges services from current Adelphi undergraduate and graduate students who are studying psychology, social work, education, or communication disorders.

Methodology

Bridges is strongly committed to positively impacting student success. In order to demonstrate this impact, since the Fall 2012 semester, the Bridges research team has implemented a longitudinal empirical investigation tracking all student meeting attendances and Grade Point Averages (GPA). In addition to tracking student progress and documenting program statistics, this data is utilized to determine program retention. Data collection will continue for each entry cohort.

Because positive self-regard has been identified as an important variable in the measurement of student success in Bridges, research has been conducted to measure student reported self-esteem. Each semester Bridges students are asked to fill out the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) to assess their self-reported levels of self-esteem. All entry cohort students are administered the measure at the beginning of each semester.

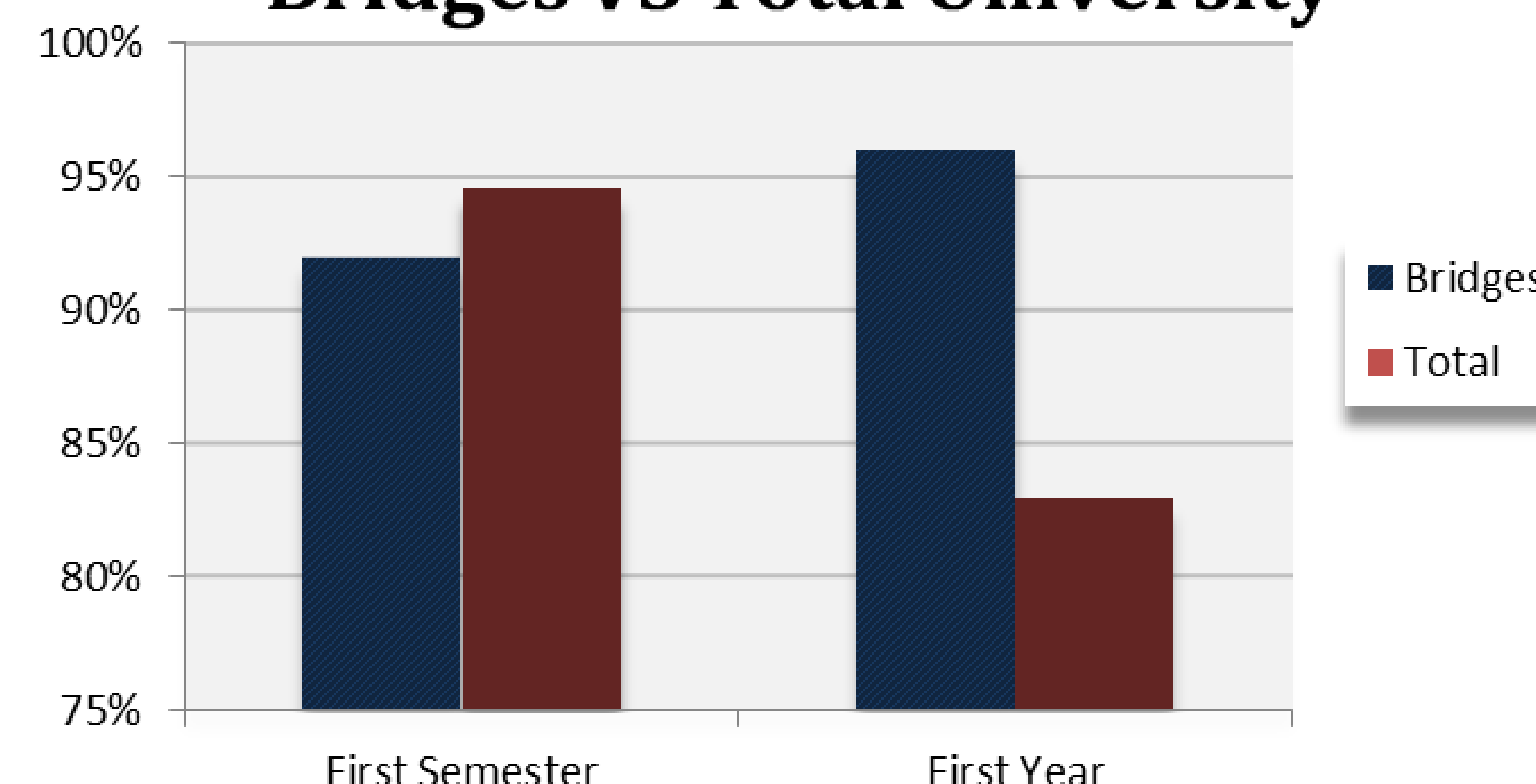
Participants:

As of the Fall 2014 semester, 91 students were actively enrolled in the program. 70 males and 21 females between the ages of 18-26.

Measures

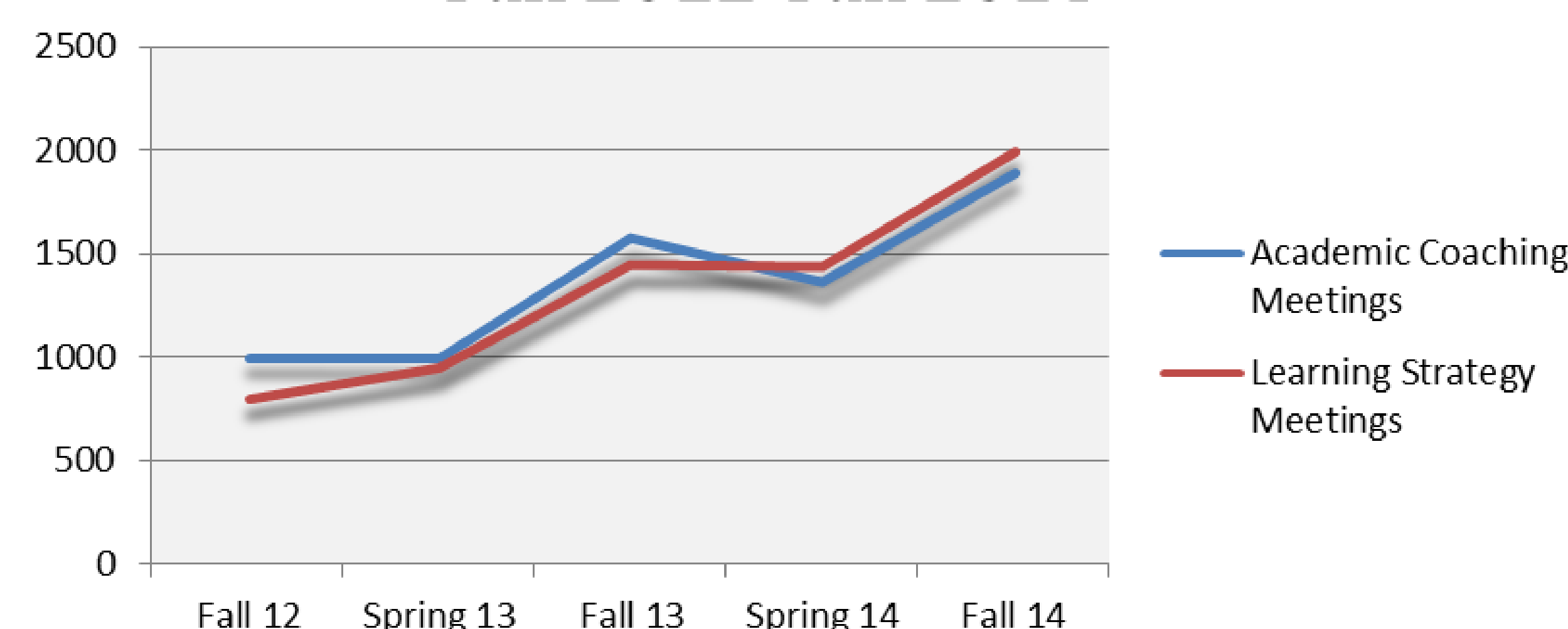
The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg 1965) is a 10-item self-report measure using a Guttman scale. Items range from 1 (Strongly agree) to 4 (Strongly disagree). A score of 15 and above represents positive self-esteem. Items include statements directly representing feelings toward the self. Evidence of construct validity and reliability of the RSES can be found via Robins, Hendin and Trezesniewski (2001).

**Figure 1. 2013-2014 Retention:
Bridges VS Total University**



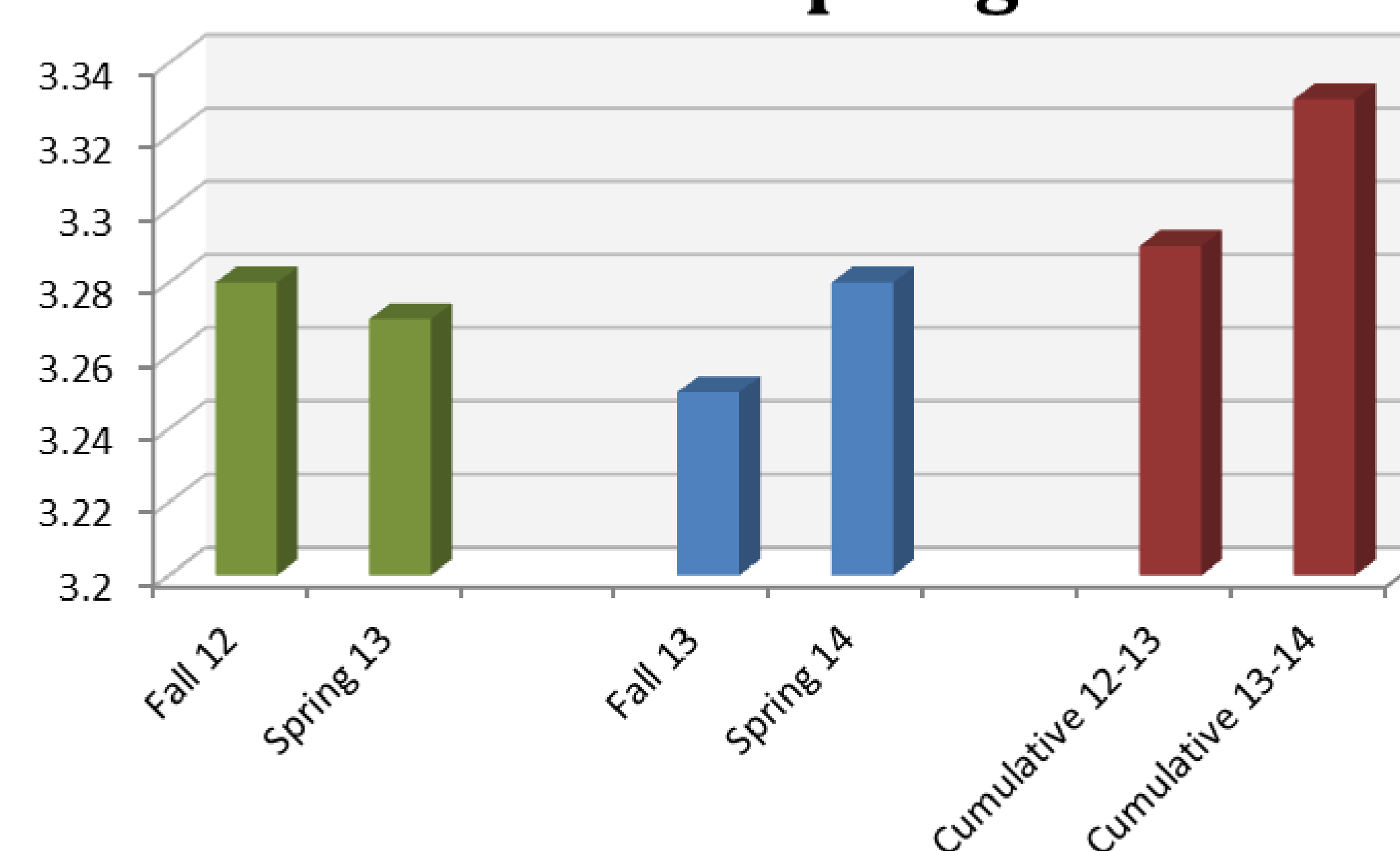
Note. 2013 retention is documented as follows: Total University: First Semester; 94.6%, First Year; 83%. Bridges: First Semester; 92%, First Year; 96%

**Figure 2. Total Meetings Offered from
Fall 2012-Fall 2014**



Note. Number of offered meetings by semester are as follows: Fall 2012: AC: 998, LS: 804. Spring 2013: AC: 992, LS: 947. Fall 2013: AC: 1,565, LS: 1,441. Spring 2014: AC: 1,352, LS: 1,431. Fall 2014: 1,891, LS: 1,991

**Figure 3. Bridges GPA from
Fall 2012-Spring 2014**



Note. Fall 2012 GPA= 3.28 Fall 2013 GPA= 3.25. Spring 2013 GPA= 3.27 and Spring 2014 GPA= 3.28. Cumulative GPA from 2012-2013= 3.29 and the cumulative GPA from 2013-2014= 3.33

Major Findings

The central results of research are summarized in Figures 1, 2 and 3. Figure 1. indicates that total Bridges population has a documented retention of 96.71% in the Fall 2014 semester. First semester retention in 2013 is at 92% in Bridges and 94.6 for the University as a whole.

Figure 2 demonstrates that over the course of the 16 weeks of the Fall 2014 semester 3,882 Bridges meetings were offered. For that period of time, total attendance percentage was 79.4%

Figure 3 indicates GPA has remained consistent in the Fall 2014 semester and the Spring 2014 semester, with both semester GPA's at 3.32. The average GPA for the University is documented at 3.37 for the Spring 2014. GPA is documented as the following for the Spring 2013 semester: Bridges: 3.27; total university: 3.33

Additional data collection identifies the following: The average RSES score in Fall 2014 is 21, when healthy self-esteem is equal to or greater than 15, indicating that students are evaluating themselves in positive respects. RSES data from previous semesters are documented as following: Fall 2012, 19.15 and Fall 2013 21.25.

Since the Fall 2012 semester, total student enrollment is documented as the following: Fall 2012: 51, Fall 2013: 72, Fall 2014: 91

Conclusions

From the Fall of 2012-Fall 2014 the number of students enrolled in the program has nearly doubled. Even with the increases in student enrollment and services, retention rates remain high for the Bridges population as a whole, and for first year/semester students. Bridges GPA also remains on par with the University GPA across semesters.

These combined data trends, coupled with the documentation of self-reported, highly rated, self-esteem, suggests that Bridges students find Bridges services to be beneficial and useful.

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