

Is it possible to Create a Community Like the OASIS Summer Bridge Program

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SPEAKERS

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Ian Daly 00:15

Hello and welcome to Triton Tools and Tidbits. Today we talk building community. And we're going to discuss it by looking at OASIS Summer Bridge. This is a program that was designed from the ground up for first generation college students, students who don't have parents who went to college. And the idea was to try and provide them with a community. A place where they can feel at home feel comfortable and feel like they have people to go to. And OASIS Summer Bridge has been astonishingly successful. This is the program coordinator, Margarita Lopez.

Margarita Lopez 00:57

My name is Margarita Lopez. I am the Summer Bridge Program Coordinator. I actually participated in the Summer Bridge program as a student at UC San Diego in 2008. So, I think it was through my experience with the program and the mentors that I met, that I was able to be in this role. Now I never -- I always joke around and say I never once thought this is my dream job. This is what I'm going to be doing. It just happened out of nowhere. And I'm here now,

Ian Daly 01:33

Summer Bridge as a whole has a very impressive reputation of keeping its alumni as involved.

Nammie 01:40

Hi, everyone. I'm Nammie. I just graduated this this quarter from UCSD Sixth College. I'm a clinical psych major. I did Summer Bridge 2016 as a student and I'm currently summers coordinator this year.

Edquardo (Eddie) Juarez 01:54

Yeah, so my name is Edquardo Juarez, but I go by Edie. I am currently a coordinator for the Summer Bridge Program read through OASIS. I did Summer Bridge in 2016.

Sabrina Calahan 02:11

My name is Sabrina Calahan. I am a student coordinator for Summer Bridge 2020. My cohort was 2016.

Ian Daly 02:21

And each and every one of them will tell you that they are still in contact with the friends that they made their year that they did Summer Bridge. It's a pretty unique program. And I know some of you are thinking, is it possible to replicate that kind of success? How could I introduce some of that loyalty, some of that community building into my organization. The truth is, it's probably a little messier than that.

Margarita Lopez 02:51

I think it happens organically. So as much as we try to create that space for them, it is just an organic process that stems from living together. And from sharing very personal experiences and stories with one another. So, I think that's where it stems from. I've heard students say, "oh, it's only been five weeks and I've shared more than I've ever shared with my friend from kindergarten." I think it's just the time versus intensity within the space, that really allows for that process to happen organically and even for those relationships to extend after they're done at UC San Diego. I know from some alum, even me speaking from my personal experience, I still keep in touch with my Summer Bridge peer mate -- peers even though it's been years, since we've met.

Ian Daly 03:48

So, living and learning together is kinda like going away to camp. Or really, it's kind of like the first year of college when you are all in the same suite as a bunch of friends. But there is some stuff that's a little more nuanced even than that.

Margarita Lopez 04:08

I always say that the secret sauce in Summer Bridge is the student staff. The majority of our student staff are students that have participated in the program. Even some of our professional staff have participated in the program. For me, it being wanting to work for the program, to give back to a program that did so much for me and provided me with so many resources. So, I think it's that passion and dedication. That is the secret sauce.

Ian Daly 04:42

There's something I'm trying to communicate here. The majority of this episode is going to be about how to create and foster community within your organization. And we're going to look at how Summer Bridge has been so successful at doing that. But I want to be clear that you should not expect your org to be Summer Bridge. And you should not expect Summer Bridge to work like your org. Summer Bridge is a beacon. It is unique and special. It is a place that has helped people who did not have a lot of other help and support. I think there are some lessons that you can extract from the way that they do things. I think that there are some methods of community building that have a broader application. But I don't think that you can write a Summer Bridge playbook and take it and use it somewhere else. Because so much of what they have been able to build comes because they're just very, very giving. You can hear the way Margarita talks about the program and the fact that she wants to give back. And trying to design a program from the top down to create that, is never going to be as successful than trying to design program from the bottom up to give it. Summer Bridge was a program that was designed from the bottom up and has experienced a lot of flux. And has learned a lot of lessons. And there are lessons that hopefully I will communicate in this podcast episode. But don't expect an engineering org or an organization that is based around Greek life, to be able to create the same levels of community.

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Because OASIS and Summer Bridge are not creating this community for OASIS and Summer Bridge. They're creating it as a byproduct of doing really, really good things. And if that's where you want to start, I think that is probably a stronger place to start for an org. It just takes way more work. But without further ado, let's talk about ways to build community inside an organization.

Ian Daly 07:39

Step one is to build a sense of belonging within your group. This is my Nammie talking about the day her parents dropped her off.

Nammie 07:48

They were there for an hour and a half. And then my dad started tearing up a little bit when he dropped me off. And I've never seen my dad that emotional -- like show that much emotion ever in my life. And so, when he left, I remember I was just I went to my room, and I started crying. And I walked out of my dorm and all the girls that I was living with at the time, were just there watching me cry and they all consoled me. And I was just like, wow, this is -- it was my first impression. But it was a really sweet first impression.

Ian Daly 08:16

And that was something that the students did without any kind of input or advice from the leadership. It just was because of who they were. For Nammie, that sense of community was helped along by seeing people who look like her in Summer Bridge.

Nammie 08:40

I think community wise -- culturally wise I've always felt like I fit in more like with the people of color community. If that makes sense more. Just being surrounded with people of color made me feel like I was at home.

Ian Daly 08:54

OASIS and Summer Bridge in particular have managed to create one of the most diverse communities on campus. And in addition to that, Summer Bridge just forces its students to spend a lot of time together. Here's Eddie.

Edquardo (Eddie) Juarez 09:14

The amount of time that you spent with people outside of the dorm kind of forces you to be friends in a way. Because even the classes are like, two plus hours long. So, I've met a lot of my friends through my classes and the discussion sections for those classes. Yeah.

Ian Daly 09:38

And sometimes it just helps to have really thoughtful smart people. Especially when it comes to giving gifts. Here's Sabrina.

Sabrina Calahan 09:48

Okay, I this is actually good because I had an experience where in my first year of being a peer mentor, we had this tradition where we do a gift exchange. The pure mentor who gifted me two beautiful paintings of myself on album covers. Me in place of the artists and in was basically of a fan. And I

idolize people, but to be able to appreciate myself and idolize myself. And I thought that was a really big moment for me.

Ian Daly 10:40

Might not be easy and it might not always be clear but building a sense of belonging matters. Step two is to create shared emotional connection. This is again, kind of a complicated expectation. But you heard Eddie earlier talk about how just time does it naturally. And another pretty effective way to do this is by sharing secrets. Here's Nammie.

Nammie 11:25

Again, I think all my best relationships have come out of being very vulnerable. Which was very surprising because, at least was my high school relationships, it took me four years to actually open up to my high school friends. When I first met my peer mentor, I didn't really think much about it. I was just thinking maybe it's just someone supposed to look out for us. And then I didn't think much about it. I knew we had one-to-ones, and I was the last person that signed up for my one-to-one. Because I was so scared of it because I didn't know what to expect. But I kept asking everyone else I was like, "I don't know if I'm invading your privacy, but how was your one-to-one experience?" And they would share. And I was just like, "I don't know if I can do that with someone I just barely met." And then I remember, my peer mentor took me, and we talked. And I remember just looking at her and right in five minutes of it I just started talking about myself openly. And I don't think I've ever done that with anyone in my life.

Ian Daly 12:14

If your org is the kind of org that measures its success by very specific metrics, job placement, or salary earned, or some sort of connection-based metric, these insights get overlooked. It's very easy to focus exclusively on the things that affect your metrics. But then you forget to do things like hold space.

Nammie 12:44

And I think it's the first time someone's ever held that much space for me as well. To just be able to put my thoughts out there and know that there's no judgement from how I'm feeling.

Ian Daly 12:54

And basically, everyone I talked to, talked about this feeling of vulnerability and how much that created these relationships.

Edquardo (Eddie) Juarez 13:04

On weeknights, we had these suite meetings that were hour long. Some of the suite meetings would be -- very vulnerable with each other. Yeah. Some of the activities like the feeling -- getting to know someone else on a deeper level, encourage those friendships.

Ian Daly 13:36

I don't necessarily know if this is something that you can bootstrap. But I think it is something to consider. And something to think about how you can encourage and whether you are structuring your org in a way that encourages it. But it matters that OASIS does this from the top down and from the ground up.

Margarita Lopez 13:57

We have such a large staff. And we are ones that are like "how are you doing? But how are you really doing?" We don't want to hear like "fine." We want to really know how our students are doing, how our staff is doing. And so, we have different pockets of time and meetings that we have scheduled to ensure that we provide time and space to be able to do that. Again, going back to if students and staff aren't okay, then you know, our work is not going to -- it's going to suffer. And so being able to really learn about how we're doing, what we're experiencing. Whether it is with our jobs or family life. Because as much as we'd like to keep our boundaries between all aspects of our lives, some of those experiences bleed into different roles that we play. And so, we need to really assess how people are doing in order to better support them and those better support the students that we're serving.

Ian Daly 15:00

And so that transparency and that honesty allows for an environment where the org can improve. Allows for the org to take on continuous improvement as kind of a philosophy. And sometimes that creates a bit of inconsistency, which can also be tough because then you're measuring yourself against widely differing year-over-year results. But a lot of times, it means that people are just more willing to share areas for improvement. Problem areas. And stuff doesn't come out in torrents, it trickles up in ways that is actually helpful and manageable.

Ian Daly 16:07

Tip number three is to give them a shared goal or something to all work towards. Summer Bridge does this fairly effectively just through coursework. Everybody is in similar classes and everybody's working towards the similar goal of doing well in those classes. Those classes aren't exactly easy.

Edquardo (Eddie) Juarez 16:29

I'd took pre calc [precalculus] at Summer Bridge and that was really hard.

Ian Daly 16:39

Of all the different pieces, this might be the easiest one to implement. There's plenty of competitions, or fundraising drive, or goals that you can design yourself, that can bond your org around a specific purpose. And really unify everybody to get them on the same page. Summer Bridge does this effectively with their coursework. They make it difficult, but they make it up to UCSD standards to prepare the students so that they can do well in their fall quarter. It's both a useful bonding purpose and something with a very specific benefit

Nammie 17:16

First year -- when I did Bridge, we moved in, and the next day was the right we start class right off the bat. And when I did Bridge, there was two options. It was either you're on math track. You're doing -- at that time there's either a five-week program or a four-week program. So, math track was one of them. And then the other class option was EDS. And EDS is like each week you're doing a new topic. So, it's like physics, chemistry, and a lot of group work as well.

Ian Daly 17:45

And those sort of group projects only provide further help to creating these bonds. If you have to work with someone, you're going to figure out how to work with them.

Nammie 17:56

And then we all took CI. And CI is learning about issues where it's like Asian Americans, black American students issues that they face. how the Latin X community students face. And so, it's overall the gist of that. And just how institutional structures or barriers are made, the red lines, the model minority myth. So, CI, that's what compromised CI.

Ian Daly 18:24

And Summer Bridge doesn't stop at simply offering the classes and expecting the students to learn and teach themselves. They create a community that's pretty conducive to learning.

Nammie 18:34

I think with Bridge, they just always opened up the space to go to office hours. And everyone was just very nice and comforting. And you would talk to each other, and it felt like high school. It felt like you could express, "yeah, I don't get this, I don't know what's going on." And it was okay not to know what's going on.

Ian Daly 18:51

Which is good, because I'm not sure anybody really knows what's going on right now. But those are the three pieces of advice I would have. If you want to build community within your org, create a sense of belonging, create shared emotional connection, and find a goal that you can work towards as a group. And might sound simple, but if you take one thing away from this episode, I hope it's that way Summer Bridge has kind of uniquely managed to do this well. And that matters more than ever right now. Because of course, this year's Summer Bridge has been online because so much of what used to be in person is now migrated to online. And that's opened up a wealth of new problems and difficulties and things that they've had to figure out.

Margarita Lopez 19:45

I know that the peer mentors have expressed stress and frustration. And even feeling like these students have already lost a lot of opportunities, especially as being seniors. So, feeling sad for them in that way.

Ian Daly 20:03

And for the students too, it's really tough.

Margarita Lopez 20:07

I think that they're very thankful and appreciative of the resources that we're providing them, especially because it's free of cost. And we're working with them on technology grants. So, they feel very thankful and very fortunate. But I also know that it can be very stressful and very frustrating, especially if they have questions. For example, during our orientation, a lot of students had a lot of questions. And using the Q&A feature just was not efficient at all. And if we had been in person, that would have been a little bit easier to troubleshoot, and to be there to assess those questions. Versus the Q&A being inundated and the email being inundated. And us not having the energy or the time to respond to every single student. So, it has created a lot of confusion and a lot of frustration and stress for students not being able to ask a question or have a point person or be able to go to someone. But just having to rely on

email, basically, to ask questions and having to wait for an answer. Versus just being able to call someone or go to someone's office to get a faster response.

Margarita Lopez 20:13

It's easy to feel uncertain, easy to feel like the right answers are difficult. And like no one can possibly know for sure. And I think right now, especially, it's easy to feel like you don't know what everyone's motivation is. With the political climate in the way that it is with the president the way that he is, it becomes harder to tell people who are really trying to do good. I think OASIS is really trying to do good. Everyone I talked to every insight that was given, so uniformly positive and so overwhelmingly empathetic, that it felt like a group of people that at its core was really trying to do good. And I want to leave you with an insight that Nammie had. She said something that I found to be kind of special.

Ian Daly 21:32

And I think it's just there's a beauty of knowing how resilient people are, especially student of color and first gen students.

Ian Daly 22:47

For Triton Tools and Tidbits, I've been Ian Daly. Thank you.