



Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community: A Comparison of Campus Involvement and Persistence

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Background

Underrepresented students' pathways to college tend to be more challenging, partly because they often have less access to resources, less college knowledge and preparation in the home, and often have to negotiate their identity once attending an institution of higher education (Park, 2007; Perna, 2006). Some of the factors that are correlated with not continuing on to post-secondary education include students' low socio-economic status, being a first-generation student, and also being a student of color (Ishitani, 2003). The Blugold Beginnings Learning Community (BBLC) strives to make the transition from high school to college easier by supporting underrepresented students through high school and facilitating their transitions into college.

The Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire was established to help students overcome some of these hurdles. Students who participate in the Learning Community have the opportunity to participate in numerous college enrichment experiences, such as Jumpstart Camp and the Civil Rights Pilgrimage, and they are able to attend these University sponsored events as a group. Additionally, Learning Community members are paired with two mentors: a veteran BBLC student as well as a University faculty/staff member. Incorporated into the program are goal setting exercises, a job with the Blugold Beginnings mentoring program, a staff member who is available to advocate for students, and a peer group composed of other students of color.

The following research has been incorporated into the development of the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community:

- By establishing support networks on campus through campus organizations and forming relationships with students and faculty who identify as multicultural, students of color are better able to experience a sense of community (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).
- African American students and students of color are considerably more concerned about their ability to pay for secondary education and whether the long-term financial benefits outweigh the costs (Perna, 2000).
- Mapping out academic support plans and familiarizing students with academic support services before students arrive as freshmen on campus can improve levels of social integration for underrepresented students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The purpose of the current research is to investigate whether students in the learning community persist at a significantly higher rate than students in the control group through their post-secondary education. Researchers also investigate self-reported levels of comfort and past experiences on campus by group to determine if the Learning Community students engage significantly more in campus activities or have more positive views of the University.

Method

Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community

New students are recruited into the community through past participation in the Blugold Beginnings High School Program and also through referral. Students in the Learning Community do not also participate in other multicultural retention programs on campus, and begin the academic year by attending the Jumpstart Camp a week before the academic year begins, at which time they are able to move into their residence halls and become more familiar with the campus. Relationships between members are fostered during this camp, through common courses, and also by attending monthly events. As a member of the Learning Community, students served as paid mentors for the Blugold Beginnings mentoring program, working approximately ten hours per week. Each member also meets with their campus faculty/staff mentors at least once a month, with more meeting times scheduled as needed. In addition, students in the Learning Community have weekly one-on-one meetings with a veteran member. In each meeting, students share information regarding their academic progress, mentoring position, and current circumstances in their personal lives. Finally, Learning Community members have the opportunity to participate in a multicultural immersion experience at no cost to them.

Instruments

The multicultural student survey consists of a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions that addressed participants' experiences as students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Students reported their experiences regarding volunteer work, participation in a student organization, meetings with their advisor, as well as numerous other factors. Seven of the yes/no questions specifically examined students' experiences with personal obstacles. One example of the described items includes: "Have you ever experienced a language barrier on campus?"

Additionally, participants are asked to respond to several Likert scale questions that assess their feelings of acceptance on campus. Items in this section included: "I feel like I belong on campus," and "The University cares about multicultural students."

Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community Participants

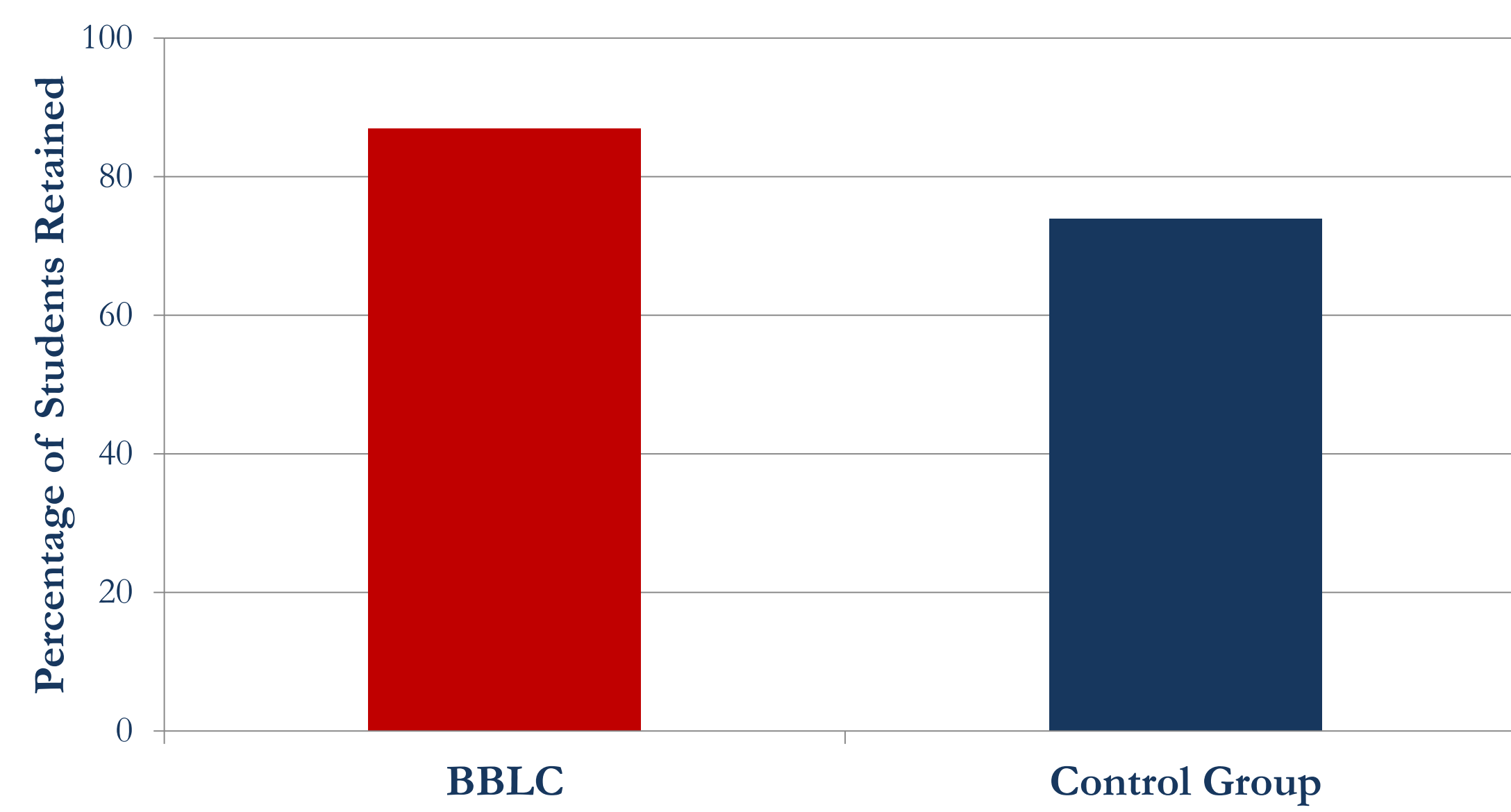
A total of 40 students currently enrolled in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community (of the original 43) were asked to participate in the current research. Each member of the Learning Community is a student of color, with over 50% of the students also identifying as low-income, and over 50% identifying as first-generation.

Control Group Comparison

Forty-three other multicultural students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire were matched with Learning Community members based on ethnicity, socio-economic status, first-generation status, ACT score, gender, and major. Of the invited participants, nine completed the survey.

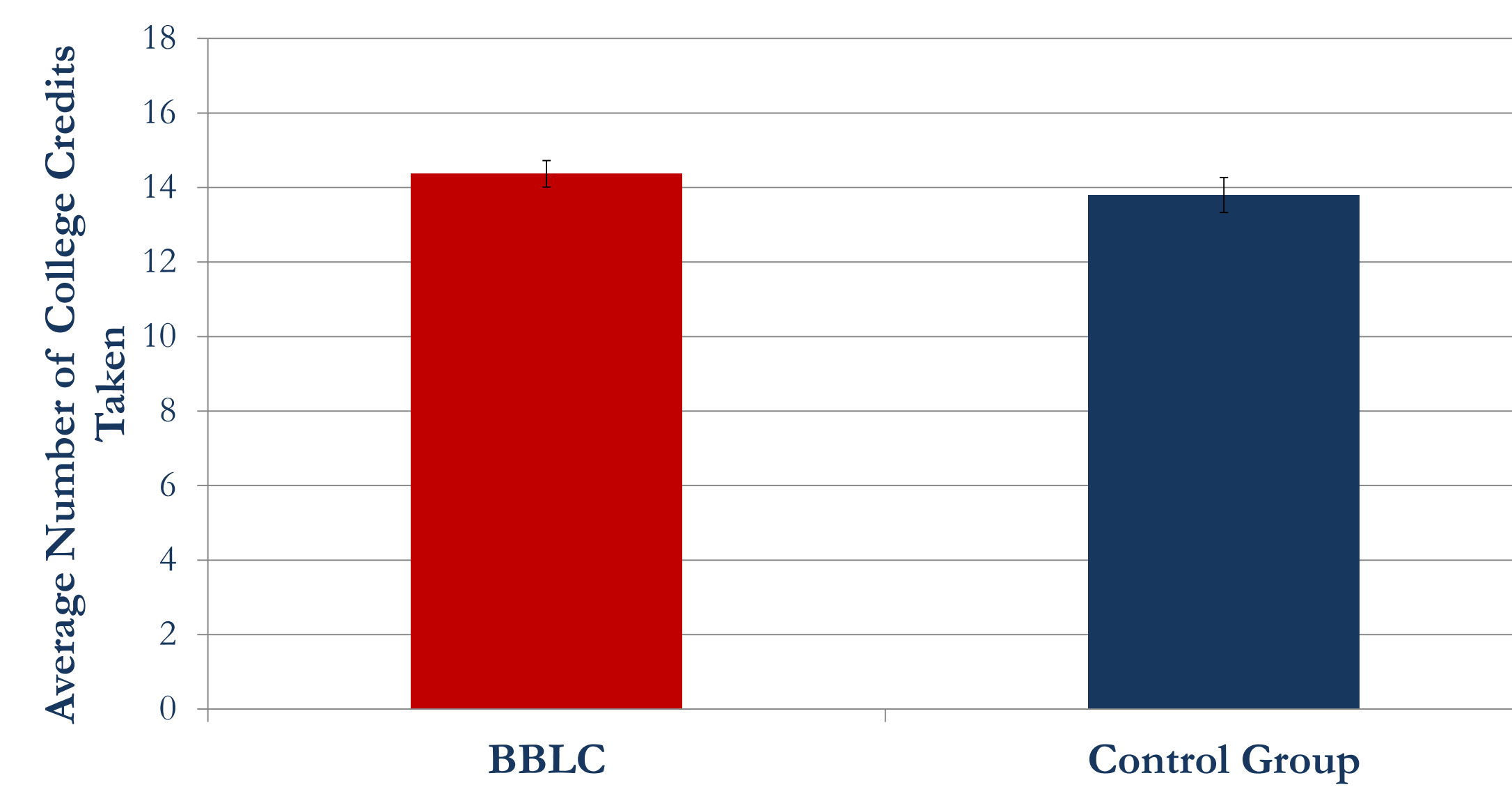
Results

Retention of Students by Cohort



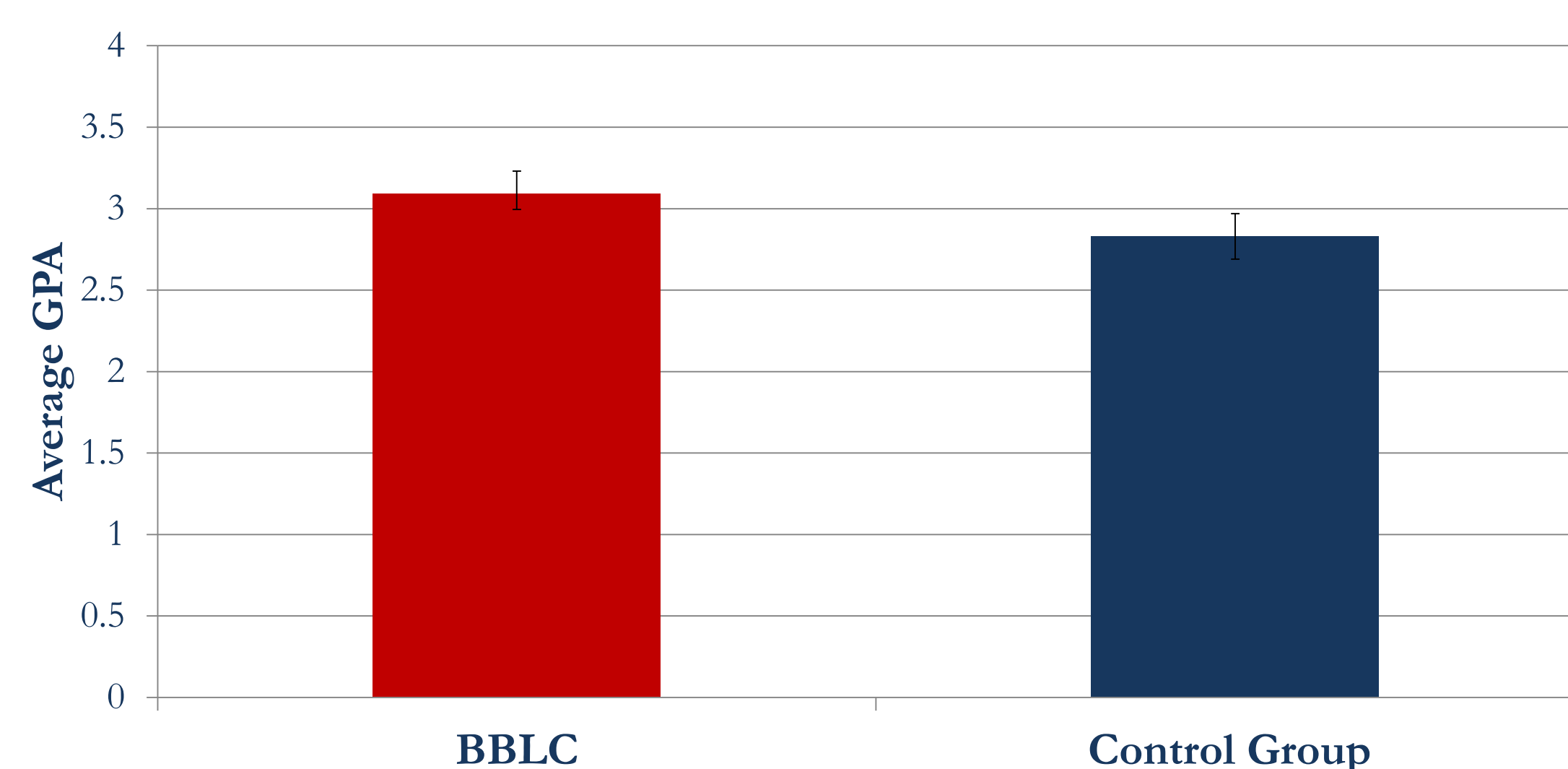
Students in the sophomore Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N = 23$) did not persist at a significantly higher rate (86.96%) than students in the control group ($N = 23$, 73.9%) $\chi^2(1, N = 46) = 1.24, p = .265$

Credit Load by Cohort



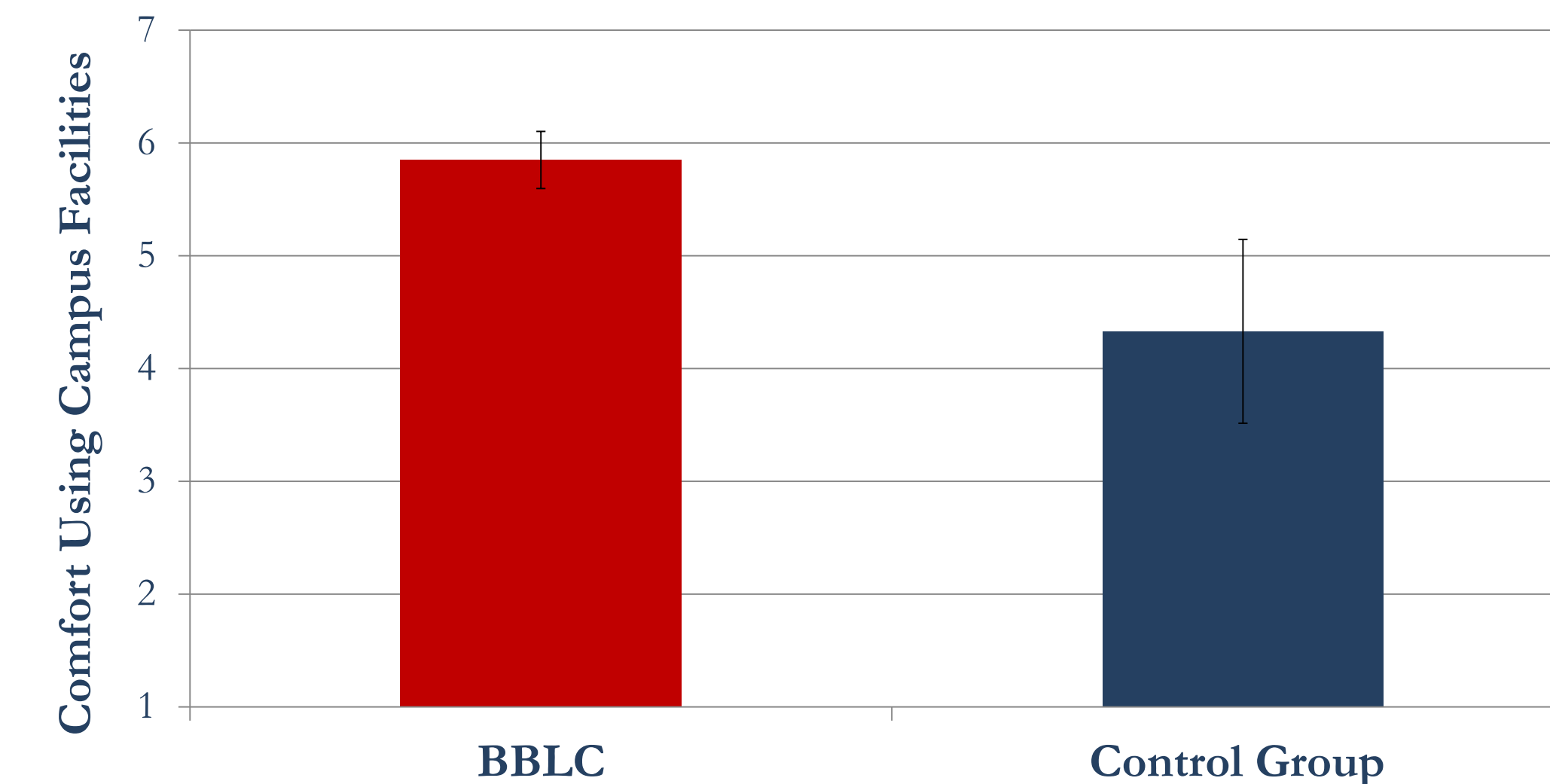
Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N = 41$) did not take a significantly higher credit load ($M = 14.37, SD = 2.28$) than students in the control group ($N = 41, M = 13.28, SD = 3.02, t(40) = .125, p = .725$).

Average GPA by Cohort



Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N = 41$) did not perform significantly better ($M = 3.09, SD = .61$) than students in the control group ($N = 41, M = 2.83, SD = .9$) on their overall academic performance as measured by GPA $t(40) = 1.582, p = .212$.

Levels of Comfort Using Campus Facilities by Cohort



Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N = 33$) did express a significantly higher level of comfort with using campus facilities ($M = 5.85, SD = 1.46$) than students in the control group ($N = 9, M = 4.33, SD = 2.45, t(40) = 7.65, p = .009$).

Multicultural Students' Responses to Survey Items

Question	Mean	SD	p
I am interested in being a member of a University organization (on a 1 to 7 scale).	5.85	1.48	.033
	5.33	2.50	
My opinion is valued on campus (on a 1 to 7 scale).	5.06	1.48	.021
	4.00	2.40	
The University cares about multicultural students (on a 1 to 7 scale).	5.45	1.58	.532
	3.78	1.92	
On average, how many hours do you study per week?	13.39	8.37	.338
	8.56	6.19	
How many hours a week do you work on average? (paid position)	7.69	9.25	.176
	16.78	12.54	
Percent of students responded yes to the following items	Responded Yes	χ^2	p
Are you responsible for taking care of or helping to take care of anyone else? (family members, friends, etc.)	41.2%	5.495	.019
	0%		
In the last six months have you provided financial assistance to others? (e.g. lending/giving money to family members)	58.3%	.115	.735
	55.5%		
Have you ever experienced a language barrier on campus?	41.2%	1.859	.173
	66.7%		
Have you participated in a University immersion experience?	61.1%	1.481	.224
	40%		

BBLC (N = 33)

Control Group (N = 9)

Discussion

The overall findings suggest that the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community students are significantly more comfortable using campus facilities, report higher levels of interest in campus organization, and also felt like their opinions were valued more than students in the control group.

One finding that was counter to researchers expectations was that of those who responded to the survey, only students in the learning community reported that they were in part responsible for taking care of someone else. This finding was unexpected since Learning Community members seem to report an overall higher level of willingness of engaging in University events and are active members in the Learning Community.

While the retention rate of second year students in the Learning Community was not significantly higher than students in the control group, the trend appears to be in the expected direction. A larger sample size over the next two years will allow for a larger comparison.

It was not found that BBLC members took a significantly greater number of credits per semester, nor was it found that BBLC members had GPAs significantly higher than participants in the control group. Students in the BBLC did report studying more hours on average, however the difference was not significant.

One interesting finding is the percentage of students who reported experiencing language barriers on campus. In both cohorts, over 50% of those who responded to the survey reported having experienced a language barrier at some point on campus.

One limitation to this study is that members of the Learning Community self-selected into the program, making it difficult to determine whether the trends in retention, interest in campus organizations, or reported comfort using campus facilities would generalize to other multicultural students on campus. Since participants were not randomly assigned, there could also be differences in motivation and overall willingness to engage in campus activities between students in the Blugold Beginnings Learning Community and other multicultural students on campus. Another limitation is that a limited number of students responded to the control group survey, despite offering an incentive.

Researchers plan to continue tracking the first two Learning Community cohorts as well as the control groups over the next few years to determine whether students who participate in the BBLC graduate from the University at a significantly higher rate than those in the control group. Researchers also plan to survey both groups again in the future and offer a different incentive in an attempt to improve the response rate from multicultural students in the control group.

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