

## *Who you know to succeed: Social capital in the community college*

Knowing the right people tends to help us get a foot in the door or get us closer to a desired outcome. This is social capital, which consists of the connections that a person makes over time through school, work, and other social settings. Research on social capital has taught us that social capital plays a large role in educational success as well as success in general (Coleman, 1988; Tierney & Venegas, 2006) and can have a positive effect on community college students' expectations, plans, and success (Wang, 2013; Deil-Amen, 2011).

We have also learned that social capital is built and used differently among people from different backgrounds (Lin, 2000). Community colleges enroll a wide range of students, with different life experiences and backgrounds. Knowing all these great things that social capital can do, we are still left wondering what exact types of social capital community college students actually use and how these differences might affect success. Taking this a step further, how might social capital be different if you are fresh out of high school versus being in the workforce for years and/or a family to care for? Who might be interacting at these different points in life and how might these interactions relate to success in the community college?

With these questions in mind, we embarked on a study (Wang, Wickersham, Lee, & Chan, in press) using a survey from a 4-year research project funded by the National Science Foundation. The project looks at factors that play a role in the educational paths and success of 2-year college students beginning in programs or courses in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields across three large 2-year colleges located in a Midwestern state. For our particular study, we were interested in finding out what the major sources of social capital were among first-year community college students and how those sources were different by age. Then, going a step further, we wanted to know how the different types of social capital affected first-year success for those students and how that effect differed based on age.

Using exploratory factor analysis, we found that students under the age of 24 tapped into their peers and teachers, specifically for school purposes (this can mean classroom discussions, office hours meetings, campus events, etc.), as dominant forms of social capital. On the other hand, those over the age of 24 relied on significant others' (e.g., family and friends) support. Looking at how these different types of social capital related to success by age, we used logistic regression and found that the students under the age of 24 were more likely to succeed if they frequently saw their advisors for academic reasons. Among other findings, the students over 30 years old were less likely to drop out if they somewhat tapped into their learning network (like working on research projects, group work, learning communities, and so on) or had discussions with academic advisors.

There is the common saying that it's not about what you know, but who you know that helps you get ahead in life. Our study reinforced that, based on the different types of social capital that community college students used, who you know plays a role in success during the first

year of college. Based on what we learned from our study, there are several takeaways that community colleges can think about going forward:

- Instructors integrate activities into the classroom, such as group work or learning communities, to allow students to build relationships with one another. This does not have to happen on daily basis, but providing these activities intermittently gives students the opportunity to build social capital among one another and use that capital to help support one another toward success.
- Re-examining and/or developing policies that put advising front and center of community college students' experience and progress in college. Intrusive advising is one example that institutions may wish to consider, as it involves frequent and intentional interaction between advisors and students. Based on the results of our study, younger students may particularly benefit from this approach.
- Although older students benefit from interacting with advisors too, a more moderate, as needed approach may be better suited to these students' success. This may mean advisor flexibility, such as advising hours or specific appointments available later in the day for these students if they have other obligations.

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