Learning The Ropes: The Role of Peers, Mentors, and Extracurricular Participation in College Persistence

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LEARNING THE ROPES: THE ROLES OF PEERS, MENTORS, AND

EXTRACURRICULAR PARTICIPATION IN COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Although college attendance rates continue to rise in the United States during the 21st century, college completion percentages still lag behind. This puts those not able to persist through higher education at a disadvantage, particularly because of the financial and opportunity costs of attending college without successful completion. Using data collected from 20 semi-structured interviews, I examine how social support helps students navigate and succeed during college. From the data I find that the various social relationships students cultivate in college with peers, upperclassmen and college-educated family members, as well as through involvement in on-campus groups and organizations can provide them with social capital that helps them get ahead academically. Acquiring knowledge and information about different aspects of college life (both academically and socially) from these networks may be important for 21st century students to succeed in college.

Keywords: Higher Education, college persistence, social capital, social networks

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, having a college degree is becoming increasingly essential to obtaining an economically secure job. High school aged individuals are becoming more aware of this and as a result, in 2009, 70 percent of individuals attended college within 12 months of graduating high school (United States Census Bureau 2012). Despite the increased enrollment in colleges and universities around the country (Attewell and Lavin 2009), college completion rates are still low. As of 2004, only 58 percent of first-time, full-time students completed their bachelor's degree at four-year institutions within six years (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Why are so few students successful at completing their college degree?

This important question has received substantial attention from sociologists and education researchers. Within sociology, a plethora of research has focused on the role of institutions of higher education in social stratification and social inequalities like failure to earn a bachelor's degree. This body of work generally emphasizes how institutions of higher education facilitate opportunities for social mobility or, perhaps more commonly, how they sort and sift (to borrow Sorokin's famous terminology (Sorokin 1959)) students into economic and social roles that perpetuate existing status hierarchies in society (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008). In other words, the focus has been on how institutions of higher education legitimate the inheritance of socioeconomic status by making it easier for students from privileged backgrounds to earn credentials. Because of this interest in stratification, this research focuses almost exclusively on elite institutions of higher education because, as Stevens and colleagues argue:

Selective four-year colleges and universities…historically have been especially important both substantively and theoretically because they exemplify many social processes – legitimation, incubation, and institutional interconnection – that sociologists have found worthy of examination (Stevens et al. 2008:128).

While it is true that elite institutions have important implications for systems of social mobility, as they are the primary legitimators of the inheritance of socioeconomic status, the expansion of non-elite institutions of higher education over the past fifty years suggests that ignoring their role in granting bachelor's degrees hinders our ability as a nation to successfully utilize colleges and universities as tools for social mobility (Attewell and Lavin 2009; Aud et al. 2012; Brint and Karabel 1991; Roksa 2008; Stevens et al. 2008). This is particularly important given that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend these non-elite institutions (Roksa 2008).

While sociologists have focused on the role of colleges and universities in social stratification, education researchers have produced extensive research on the broad factors that influence student persistence. From this research it is known that both students' academic and social experiences on college campuses matter to student persistence. Much of this work employs Tinto's theoretical model of student departure from higher education (Tinto 1975, 1988, 1997, 2012). One limitation of this body of work is that it relies heavily on quantitative research to identify factors that prevent student dropout from college. Thus, while we may know that "social support" helps, we know less about how or why these social factors matter.

With this study, I seek to address these two important limitations in existing research by examining how students use social relationships to enable their success in

higher education. I use data from semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduate students at a large, selective, public university, to shed light on how students learn to navigate the college campus in pursuit of successful college experiences.   I find that students emphasize how various social relationships with peers, upperclassmen and extended family members, as well as relationships cultivated through involvement in on-campus groups and organizations can provide them with resources – i.e. social capital - that helps them get ahead academically. Understanding how students work towards academic success and what factors they feel help them be successful is crucial to successfully improving graduation rates in a society that places such importance on having a bachelor's degree.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education and Social Stratification

Despite the widespread belief in the American Dream that education can provide social mobility to anyone willing to work hard, historically, access to education and particularly credentials such as bachelor's degrees has been reserved for elites in U.S. society. A substantial and rich body of sociological research documents the social transmission of advantage often through educational credentials. Max Weber was the first to articulate this perspective (Weber 1958). Weber demonstrated how the perception of educational credentials as symbols of individuals who are more qualified to accomplish certain jobs was actually problematic (Weber 1958). A closer examination of the credential system revealed that those in power in society designed the examinations upon which credentials were based and therefore had the power to determine who

received a credential and who did not. Credentials became a status marker rather than a true indicator of ability or experience. More importantly perhaps is that these credentials, which appear meritocratic but are in fact not, legitimate the reproduction of the status hierarchy of society (Weber 1958) – i.e. elites grant children of elites access to credentials and then award jobs on the basis of having a credential. Weber's insights into education as a stratification system for blocking social mobility had profound implications for later developments in sociology and particularly sociology of stratification and higher education.

Following Weber, sociologists Blau, Duncan, and Sewell offered more evidence regarding the role of education in social stratification (Blau and Duncan 1967; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). Blau and Duncan's model of status attainment highlighted how son's educational attainment and subsequent occupation was a product of his father's occupation and education (Blau and Duncan 1967). This model provided two contributions to sociology. First, it documented how powerful the intergenerational transmission of status was. Second, it was a first attempt at discovering how the transmission happened by concurrently examining father's and son's education and occupation (Stevens et al. 2008). Sewell and colleagues expanded this model into the more elaborate Wisconsin Model of Status Attainment (Sewell et al. 1970, 1969). The Wisconsin Model added the roles of academic performance and significant others, as well as, importantly, academic aspirations. The Wisconsin Model detailed how diverse aspects of children's lives, from the significant others they experience in daily life, to their performance in school, to their aspirations and goals,

ultimately shaped their educational and occupational attainment. Importantly, they examined all of this net of measures of ability. This status attainment model is still extremely influential today and is useful for considering the diverse reasons that students may not experience success in college. For example, the model points to the important role that significant others play, while also highlighting the importance of family background.

Many researchers within the sociology of higher education have continued the tradition established by Sewell, Blau and Duncan, by focusing on how colleges serve as a "sieve" that sorts "worthy" students from all others (Stevens et al. 2008; Stuber 2009). The concept of a "sieve" is borrowed from Pitrim Sorokin's famous descriptions of educational institutions as sorting machines where high status students are sorted systematically from low status students (Sorokin 1959). As we would expect based on Blau, Duncan and Sewell's models of status attainment, family background, prior achievement, friends' influences, and cognitive ability have all been implicated in who succeeds at college (Arum and Roksa 2011; Roksa and Potter 2011; Stuber 2009). What is missing from this research is a focus on the detailed processes that facilitate student success on the college campus. While some qualitative work on processes has come in to fill this void, this work has tended to focus on elite institutions (Beasley 2011; Karabel 2006; Stevens et al. 2008; Stevens 2009). Little research has focused on schools with selective or open admissions policies or higher dropout rates. These schools, which generally serve traditionally disadvantaged populations who may in general be less prepared for the rigors of the college curriculum, serve an important social need – namely

providing access to bachelors' degrees to those traditionally excluded by "sieve"-like academic institutions.

One notable exception is Ann Mullen's *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education* (2010). In *Degrees of Inequality*, Mullen compares and contrasts the experiences of students at Yale and a public Connecticut state university she calls "Southern Connecticut State University". The experiences of students between these two universities - from things like learning academic things from peers (only occurred at Yale) and emphasizing the helpfulness (rather than the brilliance) of their professors (primarily at Southern Connecticut State University; Yale students emphasized the brilliance of their professors) - highlight dramatic differences in the lived experience of college that intersect with socioeconomic differences in students' family background (Mullen 2011). Mullen argued that these differences in experiences on campus contribute to the lack of social mobility observed in American society. Though Mullen's study looks at an important aspect of stratification on college campuses, her study focused more on documenting the experiences of students and does not emphasize the interpersonal strategies students use (particularly at Southern Connecticut State University) to get ahead despite challenges. This study addresses that limitation while also integrating insights from education researchers, particularly Tinto's model of student departure from higher education.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure from Higher Education

Tinto's model of student departure from higher education has roots in sociology, specifically Durkheim's sociological theory of suicide (Durkheim, Spaulding, and

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Simpson 2010). Durkheim's theory argued that suicides are most likely to occur in societies (and this has been extrapolated to individuals) who are not strongly socially integrated or regulated by their societies. The main point of the theory is that social ties bind individuals into the institutions where daily life is lived and that without those social ties involvement becomes meaningless and even depressing. Tinto's theory of dropout from higher education argued similarly that "insufficient interactions with others in the college and insufficient congruency with the prevailing value patterns of the college collectivity" may lead to student departure from the institution (Tinto 1975:92). Tinto also acknowledged that family background characteristics, ability, and achievement motivation matter to college success, but his model is unique in that it emphasized the social aspects of the path towards dropping out. He argued that as students move into the collegiate environment, they trade the communities of their past (their family and their high schools) for an entirely new community (the college or university) with new rules, norms, regulations, demands, and values they must negotiate (Tinto 1988). Tinto argued:

> Because social interactions are the primary vehicle through which such integrative associations arise, individuals have to establish contact with other members of the institution, student and faculty alike. Failure to do so may lead to the absence of integration and to its associated sense of isolation (Tinto 1988:446).

The task of college students, particularly when they first arrive on campus, is to create new social relationships, and their academic success depends (in part) on their social success and ability to feel accepted. Quantitative research has confirmed Tinto's theoretical emphasis on social integration in higher education (Eggens, van der Werf, and Bosker 2008; Tinto 1987; Winston and Zimmerman 2004). For example, Eggens, van

der Werf and Bosker (2008) in their study of 1,451 college students found that having friends, family, or other significant others that a student could turn to during college was positively associated with college attainment. Interestingly, as long as students have some friends with whom they feel close with, their larger social fit into the institution of higher education as a whole is less important. This suggests the fit need not be perfect; instead having an "arena of comfort" (Giordano 2003) on campus is sufficient. Despite the evidence of the significance of friends, Tinto still stressed that information on how friends or significant others help bind a student into the institution is needed, specifically using qualitative methods (Tinto 1988, 1997).

The Importance of Social Capital

Drawing on Tinto and past sociological research, it is clear that success for 21st century college students depends on how strong their social networks are. These networks may provide a myriad of potential resources that benefit student persistence. In this section, I review the research on social capital to illuminate how social relationships and social networks in college may prevent dropout and facilitate academic success. To do this, I focus on the concept of social capital or the resources, information, support (et cetera) that individuals can access through their social relationships (Coleman 1988; Portes 1998) and discuss different sources of social capital.

Perhaps one of the most important sources of social capital a college student has is their family. A plethora of research has documented how social capital received from family members is important to a child's success in school (Dika and Singh 2002; Portes 1998). Parents who have frequent conversations and discussions with their child about

school or are involved in their child's school, on average, have more academically successful children. Parental involvement in school can also help convey norms and standards about attending college that may help encourage college enrollment (Perna and Titus 2005). Students with family members who have already graduated from college may be able to take advantage of the social capital of these family members. This may help not only their transition to college, but also their persistence by providing information about how to navigate the college experience. Not only can families provide key information to college students, the support they provide is important for student persistence as well. Terenzini et al.'s (1994) qualitative study of college students found that students stress the importance of their immediate family members as well as their spouse in providing support and motivation for them to perform well academically. A similar finding comes from Herndon and Hirt (2002) who found that the family is not only important for encouraging college students, but is also pivotal in providing financial, moral, and social support. Herndon and Hirt emphasize an important aspect of social capital – it can have two functions, namely, social support and information. Is one more effective for promoting college success? This is a question I will return to in the discussion. Either way, students with supportive families and especially families that can provide information-based social capital will have an easier time negotiating the college context.

While family is important to understanding whether college students persist through or drop out of college, forming ties on campus, particularly to friends was found by prior research to be key to making it on campus. As such, the role of friends and peer

groups may be as important if not a more important factor to examine as families. Friends and peer groups are crucial support systems for college students because not only are students around this group more during their post-secondary career than their family, but they also undergo similar experiences to their friends and peers in the new college environment (Kaufman and Feldman 2004). Having discussions with classmates about classes is beneficial to smoothing a student's transition to college; it can also create within students a feeling of classroom community (Summers et al. 2005). Hurtado and Carter (1997) indicated that the more frequent Latino college students discuss course content with other students outside of the classroom the more they feel like they belong in college. Studies also indicated that Black students tend to create fictive kinship networks with other black students on campus (Herndon and Hirt 2004). These peer networks students create allow for more chances to transfer social capital by interacting with individuals within the same institution (a college campus).

In addition to crucial forms of social support and belonging, friends may be able to provide resources that students may not be able to access through their families, particularly if their family members did not attend college. Past research has shown that students receive important tangible resources and information from their friends and peers that can help them navigate the schooling process (Crosnoe, Cavanagh, and Elder 2003). Research has even shown that students can access their friends' parents' social capital and use it to get ahead (Carbonaro 1998). For students in college, this information may include knowing which professor's class to avoid, how to approach professors, or

how to access various student resources on campus, like where to get help with writing or studying.

Having a strong peer network may also help students stay accountable academically. In his study of "fitting in" in high school, Robert Crosnoe (2011) discussed how some high school students held themselves accountable by comparing their grades with their close peer groups as well as to the peer hierarchy in their school. The students joked and teased each other in a friendly way to reinforce the norm of high achievement. Being held accountable by peers and classmates is a way students can stay motivated which in turn can help their persistence in higher education.

Whether it comes from friends or parents, there is no doubt that help from those with experience in college benefits incoming students both socially and academically (Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo 2006). In addition to friends and parents, students can find other mentors on campuses that may provide crucial social capital. Hurtado, Carter and Spuler (1996) found that students in their study indicated that resident assistants, academic counselors, upperclassmen, and other non-freshmen students were most beneficial to their college adjustment. This led them to conclude that "students may need the guidance and support of upper class students or peer mentors and staff members for successful academic adjustment" (Hurtado et al. 1996: 147). Resident assistants and upperclassmen have experience maneuvering through the college environment in comparison to entering freshmen and are more likely to have a form of social capital that is beneficial for helping students transition smoothly through college.

Similar to friendship and peer groups, college and community organizations are other avenues for social capital as well as social support. Involvement during college in extracurricular groups, organizations, and activities can start a student on the path of persistence through college (Christie and Dinham 1991; Fischer 2007; Kuh et al. 2008). Martin's (2009) study of students at an elite private university showed that having campus networks ties which includes membership in extracurricular activities has positive effects on final college achievement. This may be due to the exposure to people with varying levels of social capital. For example, someone a student meets via organizational ties may benefit college students by providing them with resources to help them adjust to the greater academic workload in college. Hurtado and Carter (1997) stated that membership in a religious organization, a fraternity, or a sorority resulted in Latino students possessing a stronger sense of belonging while at college. Likewise, Herndon and Hirt (2004) found that spiritual support from religious organizations helped African American students cultivate academic success during college. Involvement in a social group or community organization provides a person with a sense of belonging to something that is bigger than them. Depending on the group, this accountability may include pressure to live up to certain standards, for example, possessing a certain GPA or attending weekly group meetings. Along with providing students opportunities to tap into new social networks this accountability provides some students with the necessary motivation needed to successfully persist through college.

In sum, this study seeks to unite insights from sociology and research in higher education and to address gaps in knowledge regarding persistence in higher education by

conducting a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews on students' social and academic experiences at a large, public, selective university. Specifically, I focus my analysis on three potential sources of social capital – family, friends, and through organizations – in order to understand the role they play in helping students successfully navigate their college experiences.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Study Location

This study took place on the campus of The University of Memphis (The U of M), located in Memphis, Tennessee. The U of M is an urban university where most students commute to and from campus. It is considered a selective university, meaning that it is neither among the elite nor the open-enrollment universities, but instead has some academic criteria that must be met prior to admission. The total enrollment during the fall semester of 2012 (at the time of this study) was 22,139 students (17,647 undergraduate students). Sixty percent of students are women and 40 percent are men. During the fall semester of 2011 approximately 48.6 percent of undergraduate students were white, 41.6 percent were black, 2.6 percent were Hispanic, 2.4 percent were Asian, and approximately 4.8 percent of undergraduate students were classified as "non-resident alien" or "other." The fact that the University is not an elite institution renders it an ideal location to examine the processes that facilitate social mobility among students who are often first-generation college goes. Non-elite institutions have been neglected by past studies in sociology to the detriment of the field. Further, this study has the potential for useful policy implications as the University of Memphis has a low graduation rate,

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indicating the college dropout is a problem. In 2008, 57.7 percent of full-time college students in the United States graduated with a bachelor's degree in 6 years or less; however, the six-year graduation rate at the U of M is 36 percent (National Center for Education Statistics). The four-year graduation rate is even more telling at 11 percent (National Center for Education Statistics).   After considering the preceding facts, doing a study about persistence in higher education on a campus where college completion is lacking may help uncover vital information that can help the graduation rate of The University of Memphis as well as similar institutions around the country.

Study Sample

The population of this study included all undergraduate students currently enrolled at The University of Memphis. From this population I took a sample of 20 students. I employed a snowball sampling technique where respondents were recruited via word of mouth.   I was also able to locate respondents to interview through the help of an undergraduate academic advisor as well as by advertising my study in-person to an introductory to sociology class. Interested students then emailed me and we set up an interview time that worked with the respondent's schedule.

Of the 20 respondents, 19 were full-time students and one was part-time. Fourteen respondents were female (70 percent) and 6 were male (30 percent) which roughly approximates the overall sex demographics of the campus. The racial makeup of the respondents also reasonably matched the campus population with nine interviewees being white (45 percent), nine being Black (45 percent) and two who were classified as "other", one being South Asian and the other being Native American and white (10

percent). Respondent's year in college was distributed fairly evenly with a sample of 5

freshmen, 3 sophomores, 7 juniors, and 4 seniors.

Qualitative Interviews

This study used qualitative, semi-structured interviews for data. Qualitative

methodology attempts to "develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study.

This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying many factors involved in a

situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges" (Creswell 2009:176).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover the various factors that help students

persist in college with an emphasis on why these factors matter and how students

experience social capital and deploy it to stay in college.

Interviewing is a useful method to collect data because unlike quantitative data

collection, responses to interviews are not standardized with fixed responses (Weiss

1994). In other words, qualitative interviews substitute depth in place of breadth when

collecting data. This is particularly important for the present study as past research has

shown that social support and social capital on campus matter to student persistence, but

less is known about why and how students use their social relationships to stay in school.

My focus on understanding the mechanisms underlying the concepts that can be

measured (liked number of friends or feelings of acceptance) warrants a qualitative

approach.

Another feature of conducting interviews is the ability to receive historical

information from respondents (Creswell 2009). This was helpful for my study when

asking upperclassmen to remember certain events that happened earlier in their college

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career. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), in-depth interviews are also a good tool to use to gather descriptive data that has the potential to be helpful in generating theory.

Interviews took place between February and April of the 2012-2013 academic school year. Interviews were conducted at various locations on The University of Memphis campus including the sociology graduate student office and classrooms that were not in use at the time of the interview. Before the start of each interview, respondents were briefed about the purpose of this study and were asked to sign an informed consent form. Also, with the respondent's permission, interviews were audio recorded for the purpose of performing transcriptions at a later date. All interviews were transcribed manually and coded according to standard qualitative research analysis techniques. All names in this study are pseudonyms.

The duration of the interviews was 30 to 60 minutes. I asked respondents questions assessing their academic and social experiences in high school as well as college. I asked respondents questions about academic experiences such as classmate communication and experiences with various teachers/professors. I also asked questions about social experiences, such as questions about friends and peers or about group or organizational involvement. While this is a study about persisting in higher education, asking questions about their high school experiences was a way for respondents to better remember the academic and social transition they went through from high school to college. An interview guide with the questions I asked respondents is located in the appendix at the end of this paper.

RESULTS

In this section I discuss three different sources of social networks that provide students with social capital that may help their persistence in college. I begin by addressing social capital created via **classmate and peer communication**. From there I discuss the help respondents received **from upperclassmen as well as family members who have attended college**. Finally I talk about the benefits of social capital created by students through **involvement in on-campus groups and organizations**.

Classmate and Peer Communication

When entering The University of Memphis most respondents discussed how if there were peers from their high school who also attend the U of M they had little or no communication with those individuals. In order to have a smooth transition from high school to college, respondents had to create new social networks. One way respondents built new social networks was through communicating with peers and classmates. Many times in-class communication lead to the formation of peer study groups. When Amber, a 22-year old African American senior, was asked if she ever spoke with classmates outside of class she responded:

> Amber: Well my Marriage and Family class last semester we had study groups actually. I don't know how it came upon but we were just like, 'hey, you wanna study with us?' like, you know we just started studying outside of class basically in the library…
> (Female, black, 22 years, Senior, Major: Child Development, F.G. Student: Yes)

For Amber, the creation of a study group from people she met in her class became social capital because she was able to share and receive information about this class from others in the group. Having this classmate network was beneficial to helping her persist through

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college. Rudy, an African American freshman, also benefited from communicating with a fellow classmate. She described a peer she had a class with every day one semester and how that that benefited both students because "we developed a relationship because we're always helping out each other in class and everything. And she focuses on school so that is overall great." Having a peer she was able to see in class everyday as well as study with helped Rudy stay motivated and stay accountable with her classwork.   This suggests that one strategy students use to get ahead in college is to form relationships with classmates that they can use when they need help. As evident in the case of Rudy, daily or frequent exposure (e.g., sharing multiple classes) facilitates the process of making this sort of friend.

Interestingly, this was a strategy employed by both white and black students in the study. White respondents also talked about keeping lines of communication open with their classmates. Similar to Rudy, Danielle, a white sophomore, mentioned a classmate who later became one of her closest friends:

> Danielle: Well my first semester I didn't know anybody in my classes and I made one good friend, her name's Alisha and she is in my pre-med sociology class with me. *We had math together and art and then this semester we have pre-med sociology and then we, like come to find out getting to know each other, we're both biology majors*, we both want to be doctors. *So we go to the pre-med meetings together and we have chemistry this semester at different times but we will tell each other what's going on in the class like, 'we did this today so you'll have a test tomorrow,' that sort of thing.* And we text all the time, *we work on the lab together*, so we're good friends.
> (Female, white, 19 years old, Sophomore, major: Biology, F.G. Student: No)

Having multiple classes with the same person provided Danielle with a useful resource to collaborate on assignments with as well the opportunity to give and receive knowledge about what is going on in their chemistry class. The multiple exposure to her classmate

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also enabled their relationship to transition from classmates into friends, suggesting that she probably has greater access to her friend Alisha's resources given the deeper, closer aspect of their relationship. Sufficient exposure to classmates was a consistent theme among respondents. Increased exposure makes it easier to form social bonds with classmates.

Danielle's quote above also highlights another way that students use their social relationships on campus to facilitate success. Danielle mentioned that if she misses a class she can get caught up through her friend. She was not alone in this use of friends. Several respondents mentioned that communication with classmates is a helpful way to find out what happened when they missed class. Allison shared a story that highlights this (similar to Danielle). When asked whether or not she communicates with her classmates, Allison, a 19-year-old freshman majoring in nursing, said "well I always try to like, meet the few people I sit around that way if I miss class [I can ask them] 'hey what was the homework?' you know, 'hit me up.'" Allison deliberately cultivated social capital in her classrooms to fulfill this academic need. The quote also reveals how strategic students can be about forming social relationships. The value of friends is acknowledged as a way to stay on top of coursework.

Another example of students strategically gleaning information from peers was revealed through comments by several respondents. Students regularly asked their peers about for information that will help them navigate relationships with professors. For example, when talking about one of her classmates who had had a prior class with their current professor, Julia, a 43-year-old non-traditional senior, stated how helpful talking to

this classmate about the professor was because "[h]e's taken classes with Ms. Wilson before so I've asked him about how she does things and he told me what to expect from her." In this instance, Julia was able to perform better in the class by obtaining information she strategically extracted from her friend in the course. Holly, a 21-year-old white junior, also used her social capital to navigate relationships with professors. Specifically Holly reported:

> Holly: …You know also, if I meet people and say they're like in this major I'd be like, *'look, who should I take? What professors should I take? Let me know who's good. Let me know who's cool.'* So I always ask that. *So that kind of helps me, not only rate-my-professor but I also ask these people what courses have you taken, who not to take, and things like that.*
> (Female, white, 21 years old, Junior, Undecided Major, F.G. Student: Yes)

Holly actively engaged peers she met on campus. Every new acquaintance was a potential source of information that would make her campus experience more successful. Knowledge about professors gave both Holly and Julia an upper-hand once they entered class because they already had a sense of what to expect from the class and that the class would be well taught because of the information they received from other students. These examples also emphasize how savvy students can be about using peers to improve their academic experiences.

From the preceding examples, we see that classmate communication is one key instrument that helps students' persistence in college. This social network of peers and classmates provided both black and white students with viable resources and information they used to have better success in the classroom. Whether it was through forming study groups, getting lecture material from classmates if a student happened to miss that class, or receiving information from peers about the personality or teaching style of a professor,

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it is evident that peers are one major network respondents relied on heavily in order to be successful at The University of Memphis.

Family/Upperclassmen Support

The previous section discussed tangible, concrete information that students solicited from peers. Along with this concrete knowledge, students also pursued relationships that helped them "learn the ropes" of being a college student. Some examples were quite explicit and tangible, like help completing financial aid papers or the meaning of credit hours and the difference in class schedules between high school and college. Respondents often turned to students with more experience than them to solicit information that helped them learn the ropes. Two main sources of this information were family members who previously attended college as well as advanced students at The University of Memphis. Brandon, a 23-year-old senior who participated on the track and field team at The University of Memphis, discussed how his uncle was important to his early experiences at The U of M:

> Brandon: Yeah, another one of the reasons I went here was because my uncle played football here my freshman and half of my sophomore year. *So I looked up to him, he helped me out because he went through the same stuff so he kind of showed me the ropes.*
> (Male, black, 23 years old, Senior, Major: Criminal Justice, F.G. Student: No)

Not only was it helpful for Brandon to have his uncle at the start of his college career to help him adjust socially to college life, but by his uncle playing on a sports team as well Brandon was able to be better oriented in the life of a student-athlete (i.e. balancing schoolwork and practice, attending team study halls). Emily, a 20-year-old white

sophomore majoring in sociology, talked about the family member who helped her most

in her transition to college:

> Emily: Well I had my sister who had gone through college and she went to school in our hometown so she didn't really leave but *she knew a lot of the ropes*. I asked her questions about taking notes or financial aid because she had to do that stuff too. So usually I'd go to her first during my first semester or so.

> Interviewer: Do you think that's benefited you in any way?

> Emily: Yes (laughs). I know that it has because, I don't know there were just a lot of things that I already knew. I already kind of know how to fill out the financial aid things when I was in high school because my sister did it. *And there still are a lot of people who are confused about financial aid or even applying for college just because they never had to do it and they never had anybody else that had to do it.* So I'm really lucky I have an older sister.
> (Female, white, 20 years old, major: Sophomore, Sociology, F.G. Student: No)

Since this respondent did have a sibling who went through the college experience before

her, she essentially had her own in-house financial aid and admissions advisor that made

this part of the college process more manageable. This is interesting because studies often

conceptualize first generation college students as lacking access to useful social capital

on how to navigate the college campus. But Emily shows that these students may obtain

that knowledge and social capital through other relationships, often even family

relationships, just not necessarily their parents. Having an older sibling, cousin, aunt or

uncle may for some students be extremely influential to their success in college.

Vanessa, a 21-year-old African American junior, is another example of a student who

accessed social capital from a family member that was not her parent. Vanessa received

good advice from her brother about the importance of taking classes on campus instead of

online: "When I was first fixing to transfer here I was gonna decide to just take the

classes online and my brother was like, 'no, you need to go on campus and meet people

and get into some stuff.'" Her brother, who has had college experience already, knew how important being immersed in campus life was to student development and shared this knowledge with his younger sibling. If she did not have this source of information Vanessa may have taken nothing but online classes and her college experience may have been substantially different. These quotes highlight that it may not be parents, but other family members more similar in age (i.e. older siblings, aunts, uncles) that may help transmit advantageous college information to students attending college in the 21st century, even for students considered "first generation" college students.

Besides family members, respondents also discussed how advanced students (e.g. juniors and seniors) were beneficial to their early college careers. College juniors and seniors usually have more experience than first years and sophomores navigating the college environment both academically and socially. Those freshman and sophomores who are able to receive advice or information from upperclassmen may have a smoother transition to college. Claudia, a 21-year-old African American junior who was also a dorm assistant, made it known during our interview that she understood how rough starting college can be and how she was willing to act as a mentor:

> Claudia: *Anyone who knows me knows I try to make myself approachable in any aspect; if you need help with work, need someone to talk to, going through a family issue, I'm always here. I just rather be there for the person so they can feel like they don't have to go through anything or can't figure out something by themselves.*
> (Female, black, 21-years-old, junior, major: Sociology, F.G. Student: No)

Randy, a 19-year-old white sophomore majoring in biology also acknowledged that he turned to senior students when in need of advice. He stated how he would "go to the seniors in the fraternity who have been here for four years" when he needed help. This

example provides a prelude to my discussion of benefits respondents attributed to campus involvement (which I discuss in the next section). Finally, a student named Nadine also pointed to the usefulness of having a mentor on campus with more experience than you. With the help of an on-campus program for entering freshmen, this 19-year-old majoring in nursing was able to receive assistance from upperclassmen that helped with the transition to college:

> Nadine: I went to Frosh camp…It's another thing for freshman. It's a lot of fun; I'd recommend it to anyone. You basically, it's literally like summer camp and you go hang out with a bunch of freshman. It's fun if you're looking for the college experience, not so much what I was looking for. *But people I went to frosh camp with, like my frosh camp counselors, were very good at calling me the first couple of weeks of school and be like, 'ok, let's walk around, let's find your classes, let's show you where everything is so you won't have any questions.'* (Female, white, 19 years old, Freshman, major: Nursing, F.G. Student: Yes)

Attending campus-sponsored events like Frosh Camp is a way The University of Memphis provides incoming students with a smoother transition into college. Freshman like Nadine who take advantage of these opportunities also have the ability to create networks not only with fellow freshmen but upperclassmen (i.e. frosh camp counselors) that can be beneficial to their persistence through college.

On-campus Group/Organizational Involvement

Respondents reported that social networks consisting of classmates as well as family and upperclassmen provided important sources of knowledge that helped respondents persist through college. Another important source of information and social capital that students have access to is on-campus groups and organizations. One major benefit respondents like Danielle realized about involvement in organizations was the opportunity to find a job while in college through the network. This 19-year-old white

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sophomore who is majoring in nursing stated that "creating a lot of friendships and connections" was a benefit of being part of a sorority. For her, these "connections" turned into an actual employment opportunity when she stated, "one of my friends just got me a job interview at a [grocery store] pharmacy because she works at [grocery store]." Being involved in an organization like a sorority, and thus having the ability to make meaningful connections, gave Danielle the opportunity for an interview in a job that is related to her major and that can be beneficial to her future career.

Many respondents who were involved in organizations also discussed the opportunities they had to listen to speakers talk about their profession as well as find out about careers students may be interested in. Along with being involved in a sorority, Danielle was also involved in another organization she felt gives her a forecast of what to expect if she stays in the biology field:

> Danielle: Well I'm in [sorority name] and then I'm in the Pre Health Professional Society. *And that's like just meetings with doctors and like getting them to talk to us and like kind of give us an insight to what it's gonna be like if we continue with biology and go to med school. Also other occupations out there in case there's something else we might enjoy.*
> (Female, white, 19 years old, Sophomore, major: Biology, F.G. Student: No)

Holly, the 21-year-old white junior heard from earlier, also provided a good example of an on-campus group that helps students prepare for careers after college:

> Interviewer: Can you describe this entrepreneur [organization you are a part of?]
> Holly: Ok yeah. It's a new gig, just this semester I kind of checked it out over in the FedEx center. So yeah, basically they host all these things that are free. Like *whiteboard sessions for instance where people who have a business plan pitch, and we offer improvements and constructive criticism blah, blah, blah. But you're just kind of learning different little parts of starting your own business maybe in the future. So me, I feel very welcomed because I don't have a plan; I'm just there to learn… I think if I do have an idea in the future now I know these people; they can help me. I've learned little bits that I have wouldn't know before.*

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(Female, white, 21 years old, Junior, Undecided Major, F.G. Student: Yes)

Both Holly and Danielle demonstrate the concrete benefits of social networks formed in formal organizations – that they can help students find jobs, form career plans, engage in extracurricular learning and even network for future job opportunities.

In addition to opportunities and information, students often used their participation in organizations to hold themselves academically accountable. Other research has shown that the social norms students have in their peer groups can reinforce, or disrupt, the formal goals of academic institutions like college (Coleman 1961; Crosnoe 2011). Students at U of M explicitly discussed this role of peers in a positive light. For example, when describing her group of friends at The University of Memphis, Whitney, a 21-year-old junior, said the following:

> Whitney:…Maintaining good relationships is really important too because that kind of keeps the motivation otherwise you wake up and you just don't feel like doing anything. So yeah, *having that good support group, those study sessions and stuff like that, holding each other accountable, I think the most important thing might be that*, like having a good surrounding, like having a good (pause) just good people to be around.
> (Female, 21 years old, South Asian, Junior, major: Health/Spanish, F.G. Student: No)

While friends and study groups represented the social side of the institution providing accountability, students also talked about how formal aspects of the university also demanded accountability. Specifically, some on-campus organizations hold students academically accountable by requiring a certain grade point average to continue to be a member in the group/organization. Some students reported this as quite helpful to their persistence in college. For example, Allison, the 19-year-old freshman majoring in nursing, said "I think being involved [on campus] keeps you on track. I mean, to be in

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different organizations you have to be in good standing; not only academically but like with your professors and stuff like that." Whitney also touched on this point by talking about how the organization she is in helped keep herself academically accountable:

> Whitney:…When it comes to academics, because the organization set that foundation for us, it set the foundation for really good friendships. So, it's like, *the organization requires us to maintain a certain GPA*, and we have an academic chair and she makes sure we have study sessions every week and stuff. *And because of that we make sure we keep each other accountable on academics. And then my involvement on campus has made me hold myself accountable because I know I can't behave in a certain way I can't have a really really low GPA because people know me*, or they associate my name with the organization and stuff.

Most examples on this point have emphasized the student as a savvy consumer of social capital. Students work their connections for information, advice, help, and accountability. However, as Tinto mentioned, belonging is extremely important to student persistence on campus. I found evidence of this aspect of social capital among respondents at The University of Memphis. I found that social networks can help lead to student persistence by giving students a sense of campus belonging. This feeling of having a purpose on campus was emphasized more by those respondents who were a part of a formal campus group or organization. When asked about the benefits received from participating in campus organizations, Janet, an 18-year-old African American freshman majoring in journalism, responded: "I believe being in an organization and being around different people helps you grow, it helps you build character. It helps you find out who you are in the midst of all these people." Attending college, especially in a large urban university like The University of Memphis, could be daunting for a freshman like Janet. Being involved in on-campus organizations helped her find her place and feel like she

belonged in college. Randy, the 19-year-old white sophomore majoring in biology said

the following about campus involvement:

> Randy: Well, *I think the more involved you are the better your experiences will be*…I didn't come to college at first looking to have fun, I was just trying to get it over with. But honestly now that I started doing what I'm doing, I'm having a great time doing it. I enjoy actually being in college. *I think that if you're not involved then you'll never be able to fully take your college experience to its full potential. You'll just be hating college everyday of their life. I have people that will come up to me and talk to me and say, 'why is college so boring?' I'm like, 'because you're not going out and looking for things to do.'* You have to find, there's stuff going on every day and it's, I mean the less involved you are the less you'll know about.
> (Male, white, 19 years old, Sophomore, major: Biology, F.G. Student: No)

By participating in extracurricular activities students are able to experience more to

college than going to class and studying for exams. This helped satisfy their

developmental need to belong to the campus community and even helped them continue

to discover "who you are in the midst of all these people" (as Janet so eloquently said,

above). Feeling comfortable on campus provided students with extra motivation to persist

through college by having the opportunity to experience various aspects of the college

experience.

In sum, students activated their social capital in a variety of ways. Specifically,

they used their friends and peers for information about professors, for help studying, for

academic accountability, and for things they may have missed from being absent from

class. Involvement in campus organizations served a similar purpose. It helped students

feel like they belonged and helped them by holding them to high academic standards.

DISCUSSION

The rates of college attendance continue to rise in 21st century society as a bachelor's degree becomes essential for achieving economic stability. The expansion of college going has been particularly pronounced in selective and open-enrollment institutions. Despite this growth, completion rates are low suggesting that research needs to investigate why students do not persist through higher education. Previous literature particularly within sociology has overemphasized the experience of elites and provides little insight into how students, particularly students on non-elite campus, experience and navigate their college campus to get ahead. Another limitation with existing research is that most of it is quantitative, allowing us to know that social support and social relationships matter, but shedding little light on how students use these relationships to become successful in college. This study's primary finding is that students use the social relationships they form on campus in diverse and often strategic ways to navigate the college campus and their course taking. Through these relationships, students formed study groups and garnered information that helped them "learn the ropes" from financial aid to what professors to take. Respondents also turned to family members, sometimes extended family members, and upperclassmen for reliable information on how to succeed in the college environment. Helpful information respondents said they received from these sources included filling out financial aid forms, navigating the U of M campus, and help understanding credit hours and class schedules in college. Students receiving help from these networks emphasized how easier the transition into college was since they had these networks. Importantly, for some students, the networks that helped smooth their

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arrival on campus were formed of older family members that were already on campus; but for others, these relationships were formed through formal orientation programs – namely a summer "Frosh Camp". These all helped puts students on the right track to persisting through higher education. Perhaps most interestingly, students used their social relationships for accountability. Study partners reaffirmed social norms that supported achievement. These findings support and elaborate prior research by Tinto (1987, 1988, 1997) by showing why social support is so important to student success on campus.

In addition to relationships with friends and classmates, involvement in on-campus groups and organizations was helpful to respondents. These organizations also provided access to networks and often helped provide concrete resources, such as jobs. Organizational networks also gave students opportunities to talk with professionals in potential future employment fields. This is important because students with future employment goals in mind may be more motivated to persist through college. Not only did respondents discuss employment benefits received from these networks, organizational involvement also helped students stay academically accountable. Respondents who were involved on campus discussed how some organizations required students to maintain a certain GPA which helped these students stay on track academically. Finally, as Tinto found (1987) interviewees involved on campus were more likely to feel they belonged on campus in particular and college in general. Being involved and having a stake in campus life provided respondents with extra motivation to do well academically and helped them better persist through college.

This study has several implications. First, sociology of education should broaden its focus from elite institutions to include selective and open enrollment institutions. Understanding how students at these institutions (which are more likely to serve first generation students (Roksa 2008) promote their own success will help universities develop better policies to help promote student retention. With that same goal in mind (improving retention), additional qualitative research is needed to further elaborate how students use peers, mentors, and campus involvement to facilitate their success. A limitation of this study was the lack of students who were struggling academically in the sample. Their experiences may be quite different from academically successful students and their experiences with peers may shed further light on how and why social capital matters. It is also not enough to know that social capital helps – we need to know how it helps so that we can develop policies to promote student persistence.

One limitation of the current work is that I was unable to collect data on what facilitates student learning. The findings from this study indicate that students' feel that social relationships are an important part of their college experience that helps them get ahead. Students clearly feel that being socially involved and having peers, mentors, teammates and sorority sisters or fraternity brothers helps them learn how to navigate college successfully. But what do students actually learn? Does social capital actually facilitate greater learning in college classrooms? What students actually learn on campus has become a major focus of recent research (Arum and Roksa 2011). A major criticism of Tinto's model of higher education is that it hasn't been linked to true gains in knowledge and skills (Arum and Roksa 2011), in other words the human capital gains

most important to success in the future labor market and to maintaining the value of bachelor's degrees and avoiding their becoming, as Weber said, "hollow credentials" (Collins 1971; Karabel and Halsey 1977; Weber, Baehr, and Wells 2002; Weber 1958). Specifically, Arum and Roksa (2011) argue that the social processes that promote persistence and graduation in college are not necessarily identical to the processes that promote learning and human capital growth. This suggests that future research should examine the intersection of what is learned in the classroom and social experiences on campus. Unfortunately it was beyond the scope of this study to match student's statements about success in college to their actual gains in learning and achievement. Yet my findings regarding how peers interact to help "hold each other accountable" may have interesting implications for both learning and persistence.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to examine how social capital enables student persistence in higher education. From my interviews with 20 undergraduate students attending The University of Memphis, I found that classmate communication, mentors, and on-campus involvement important to students' perceptions of their college success. These findings stress the importance social networks and social capital is to persistence in higher education. My findings point to several policy interventions that may successfully improve retention. First, colleges and universities around the country should try to develop policies to encourage student involvement in organizations and facilitate friendship and study group formation in classes. One way universities can do this is during freshman year, have students attend multiple classes together (i.e. living and

learning communities) and live in the same dorms. Finally, social capital and a sense of

belonging are just as important to success in college as getting good grades. Creating

policies that improve students' sense of belonging on campus may dramatically improve

persistence in higher education for 21st century college students.

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APPENDIX

Qualitative Interview Guide

1. Tell me about the high school you attended.

2. Tell me about your friends in high school.

3. Tell me about your decision to attend college at The University of Memphis.

4. Describe the adjustment process you went through going from high school-level work to college-level work.

5. Tell me about the people you would describe as your "good friends" at The University of Memphis.

6. Tell me about the person(s) you go to if you have questions about college-life.

7. Are you involved in a group or organization here on campus? If you are, tell me how that group has impacted your experience at The University of Memphis.

8. What's your impression of the people that you're in class with?

9. Do you ever interact with them outside of the classroom, like to collaborate on assignments or study for tests? Other ways?

10. Can you tell me about a good and/or bad experience you've had with a professor at The University of Memphis?

11. Tell me about future plans you have after you graduate from The University of Memphis.

12. What advice would you give to an incoming freshman in order for them to have a successful college experience?

13. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your college experience or is

there something we didn't discuss that you want to talk about?