THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE 1ST YEAR OF COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study investigated the academic, social, emotional, personal, and financial knowledge and skills of students at a midsize Midwestern university in the United States as they navigated the university system in their 1st year. The data interpreted through Stanton-Salazar's social capital theory showed that students were connected to some extent with other students, but often contacting a professor was a choice of last resort. Most students rated their social and emotional experiences positively and felt the positive aspects of the 1st year outweighed the negative. However, in using the system at large, most students were unsure of next steps but felt they would figure out how to reach their goals by continuing. Social capital created by exchanges among faculty, staff, and students was not consciously developed or utilized as a way to convey institutional knowledge or ways to find where to go for resources. Except in some classes, faculty did not encourage interactions among students in classes or in out-of-class electronic discussions. Electronic discussions were not used as a way for faculty and students to interact outside of class. As a result, opportunities to create social capital were missed both in and out of the classroom. The supports in place for the athletic department could be a model for other students, where students had close ties with faculty, faculty advisors, tutors, and peers. Although financial resources for this model might not be available throughout the campus, electronic means of interaction could be used to leverage contact and support.

Keywords: social capital, institutional knowledge, 1st year college students, nonacademic skills, electronic networking.

INTRODUCTION:

The research on student retention and success suggests a wide range of personal and social attributes on the part of students and a wide array of practices on the part of the institution that impact retention rates, student performance, and the overall experience for students at a university (Fike & Fike, 2008; Fitzgibbon, 2012; Goldman & Goodboy, 2014; Renn & Reason, 2012; Robinson, Le Riche, & Jacklin, 2007; Tinto, 2012; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The purpose of this study is to understand the 1st-year experience of students at a midsized, Midwestern state university in the United States. In a mixed-method study, a research team of students in an educational leadership doctoral program asked undergraduates to describe their experiences during their 1st year at the university.

The research questions asked students to describe cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of their university experience, including their sense of belonging at the university, how trust was created, how they learned to navigate the university system, or gain institutional knowledge, as well as how networks were developed which could facilitate learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

According to Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011), relationships between faculty and staff with students have the power to transform school cultures in a positive way, which then creates a positive experience for students. The foundational components of the relationship between the faculty and students are reciprocity and trust at both individual and collective levels. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined *reciprocity* as helping others without expecting anything in return. He characterized *trust* as being mutually respectful. He further stated the importance of these two qualities in three realms.

First, relationships need to be collaboratively beneficial and intentionally built between those in power (in this case, university personnel) and their students to benefit the student's academic development. This leads directly to the importance of social networking, the second realm Stanton-Salazar (1997,2011) described. Technological social networking can be an important component of these social networks. For example, professors and students knowing each other outside of the classroom setting and beyond the content expertise is one component of social networking. Discussion boards or social networking sites can be used to support out-of-class social contact. A third realm is the development of trust and relationships that allow for the transfer of institutional knowledge (that is, knowledge of the way the university system works). Stanton-Salazar (1997) stated that the *funds of institutional knowledge* include key points of knowledge a student must have in order to navigate an institutional setting effectively. Learning the way one professional, educational setting works can help a student work within other, similar institutional settings. Social networks and relationships that develop this institutional knowledge help students—especially first-generation college students—become aware of how to succeed within the institution. For example, if a student is struggling with coursework, are proactive mechanisms in place to support the student? Do faculty or staff understand the impact of low socioeconomic background on students (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014)? When faculty and staff are aware of other aspects of student needs outside of the content area of the classroom, students can have the confidence to persevere.

Social capital theory, according to Stanton Salazar (1997, 2011), allocates responsibility to the personnel who work at the university to convey institutional knowledge to students, especially students in their 1st year, nontraditional students, or those whose family members did not attend college. In addition to academic or cognitive knowledge, noncognitive skills are considered important for students to develop. Noncognitive skills include managing social, emotional, personal, and financial issues as well navigating a school system, that is, understanding institutional knowledge (Cashmore, Green, & Scott, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Jenkins-Guarnieri, Horne, Wallis, Rings, & Vaughan, 2015; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2005). Professors typically have felt the development of cognitive skills to be their domain. Noncognitive skill development and institutional knowledge often fall outside of classroom and academic concerns and may not be considered the normal purview of a university faculty member.

Nonetheless, non-cognitive aspects directly affect a student's performance with regard to motivation, academic self-confidence, and a sense of efficacy, ability to set goals, time management, and even the comfort level in contacting faculty. All of these non-cognitive aspects can affect performance inside the classroom. Additionally, how faculty members approach students can affect classroom interactions and responses from students (ACT, 2010; Alias & Hafir, 2009; Bandura, 1986; Goldman & Goodboy, 2014; Nouhi, Shakoori, & Nakhei, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; *Tahira Anwar Lashari,* Kesot, & Akasah, *2014*). Institutional services need to work collaboratively to provide effective structures for a positive student academic experience. This would increase

the likelihood of the creation of meaningful social capital and a sense of belonging, according to Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011).

Beyond the scope of academic expectations of the institution of higher learning, students come with their own set of personal values and expectations (Jansen & van der Meer, 2012; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). These expectations are affected by both cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). With a wide-range of student population, reaching each student is difficult by only lecturing. When faculty members know students in a more holistic way, students are more open to ask for help and faculty members are better able to make referrals to support services.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY:

The study used both quantitative and qualitative instruments to provide validity and reliability by using a survey, personal interviews, observations, and document review to triangulate and give a richer explanation of the student experience. The research was conducted by a team of four doctoral students in an educational leadership program and two professors who supported and guided the research.

RESEARCH SITE:

The research site is a public university in a large, urban, Midwestern city and is one of three universities in that metropolitan area. It is the only urban-based research institution in the state university system. There are approximately 12,000 undergraduate students, with 8,000 full-time students. Of these, about 1,400 are 1st-year students. For the most part, this university is a commuter campus, with only about 1,000 students living in campus housing. Most of the students are from the state (90%), and some are international (5%). The average age of undergraduate students is 24; the average age of participants in the study was 26.

INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES:

The instruments consisted of a survey, two types of interviews (one for students and another for university personnel), observations, and document review. Each of these is reviewed below.

SURVEY AND PROCEDURES:

The survey was created by Rutgers University as a pilot study and was used with permission. In addition to gathering demographic information, the survey contained eleven sections: Goal Achievement, Academic and Extracurricular Experience, Student Life, Academic Effort, Knowledge and Skills Development, Living On and Off Campus, Facilities and Services, Online Communication, Academic Advising, Student Employment, and Background and Comments. Nine sections of the survey that were used for this project contained 4-point Likert-type statements. The statements for each section were totaled and then divided by the number of questions in that section to obtain a score based on a 4-point scale. The survey was used only once before this study, and as such, no reliability or validity data were available.

INTERVIEWS AND PROCEDURES:

The field study team conducted follow-up interviews with eight students who participated in the survey. The 24 questions used for the oral interview process were adapted from the 12 sections of the survey. The first five questions focused on the students' family and high school experience to provide background information; eight questions delved into university experiences; five questions asked about attendance campus-sponsored events, the diversity of the campus, friends, current coursework, and communication with professors; three questions concerned students' personal lives; and two questions pertained to campus facilities and satisfaction with the institution. The final question gave the students the opportunity to make any comment that was not addressed in the previous questions.

PARTICIPANTS:

Students were 1st-year students and were surveyed during their English 101 classes, since most undergraduates take these classes in their 1st year and the classes represented a cross-section of students at the university. All of the English 101 classes participated, and 300 student participants took the 40-minute survey. Participants included 123 males and 147 females of ages ranging from 17–35 ($M = 26$). For ethnicity, 187 were White, 25 were Hispanic, 17

were Black, 15 were Asian, 7 were multiracial, and 5 were Native American. In terms of family income, 65 reported $30,000 or less, 72 reported $31,000–50,000, 65 reported $51,000–70,000, 45 reported $71,000–90,000, and 41 students reported over $90,000. Of the 300 students, 198 were first-generation college students.

For interviews, eight students were purposefully selected to broaden the understanding gained from the written surveys. The survey was administered the first semester before students had received their first semester grades. The interviews took place early in the second semester of the student's 1st year. Students were selected based on answers to questions, demographics, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

OBSERVATION PROCEDURES:

The team observed students in different areas of the university (including the student center, some campus buildings, parking lots, a satellite campus, and the library). The team observed students' interactions and modes of communication to notice commonalities and to triangulate data from the survey and interviews.

DOCUMENT REVIEW PROCEDURES:

The team reviewed literature about the 1st-year college experience. Such literature included previous studies conducted by the university, ACT reports (ACT, 2010; Lotkowski et al., 2004), and the National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programming (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2000). Online documents from the university website were also reviewed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

For the sake of brevity, only findings from the cognitive and non-cognitive sections of the survey are reported in this study. The report of the interview data also focuses on these aspects. The first research question asked how students described academic and classroom aspects as well as non-cognitive aspects of their 1st-year experience at the research site.

ACADEMIC AND CLASSROOM ISSUES:

Three items on the survey addressed academic issues during students' 1st year.
1. Knowledge and Skills Development items solicited a description of students' current level of knowledge in analytical skills, critical thinking, multiculturalism, library skills, collaboration, and understanding of current issues.
2. Mental activities (a question in the Academic Effort section) emphasized included the extent that coursework emphasized memorization, analysis, synthesis, judgment making, and application.
3. Reading and writing required (a question in the Academic Effort section) was determined by the amount of reading and writing assigned in classes over the school year.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS:

In terms of knowledge and skills development, most students reported that they gained a considerable amount of intellectual challenge (see Table 1). Table 1 indicates that the mean scores for all groups were 2.9 or above (out of a possible score of 4).

In terms of mental activities encouraged, mean scores ranged between 2.66 and 2.97 for all the groups, suggesting that students might not be challenged sufficiently with higher order thinking. The frequencies in these categories substantiated the mean scores in that the majority of students responded with a score of 2 or 3 out of a possible 4. In terms of reading and writing, mean scores indicated that students were not required to do much reading or writing during their 1st year (see Table 1).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

In terms of academic issues, we found a significant difference between age groups on knowledge and skills learned, $F(1, 265) = 7.06$, $p < .005$, indicating the older students felt they had acquired more knowledge and skills than the younger students. For mental activities (e.g., analysis, synthesis), again we found differences by age, $F(1, 267) = 5.25$, $p = .02$, once more indicating that the older students felt that more mental activities were encouraged than did the younger students. For the amount of reading and writing required, we found significant differences by racial group, $F(1, 248) = 3.86$, $p = .05$, and by family income level, $F(2, 281) = 3.13$, $p = .05$,

suggesting that ethnic-minority students and those from the lowest family income level believed that more reading and writing was required than did White students or those from higher income levels.

NONCOGNITIVE ISSUES:

Three items on the survey addressed noncognitive issues that students experience in their 1st year.

1. Contacting faculty determined the types and amount of contact with university faculty (including teaching assistants, lecturers, and administrators) students had during their 1st year. This was a question in the Academic and Extracurricular Experience section.
2. The Online Communication section determined frequency of students' online communication with faculty, students at the university, students at other universities, friends, and family.
3. Advising received allowed students to rate the helpfulness of their academic advising during their 1st year. This was a question in the Academic and Extracurricular Experience section.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS:

In terms of contacting faculty, most students did not contact faculty (see Table 2). The mean scores for all groups ranged between 2.25 and 2.84 (out of a possible score of 4). Also, a third of the participants never met with faculty members during their office hours or outside of the classroom.

In terms of online communication, the mean scores for all groups were 2.76 and above, suggesting that most students did use online communication (see Table 2). Students also described their perceptions of the advising they had received during their 1st year. The mean scores ranged between 2.73 and 2.87; 51% reported that the advising they received during their 1st year was somewhat helpful.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

For two of the noncognitive variables, contacting faculty and online communication, we found significant differences between the age groups. The older students indicated that they contacted faculty significantly more often than their younger peers, $F(1, 265) = 3.89$, $p = .05$, and they reported using online communication significantly less, $F(1, 263) = 11.32$, $p = .001$, than the traditional-aged college students. The significance of differences in age needs to be made with caution, however, as not many students were in the older age category. The findings from the survey indicated very little out-of-class contact with faculty. However, the interviews gave details of how the students felt about communicating with faculty outside of class as well as more details not available from the statistical data.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS:

Eight students were selected for interviews based on criteria such as how they answered questions on the survey, their ethnicity, parents' education, the family's income, and the present living situation. The way students answered certain questions was the first filter, in order to find students who gave both positive and negative feedback, suggesting a mature and balanced response to the university. In this way, the interviews would avoid students with grudges or students who only gave glowing reports. Short biographies of four of the participants (using pseudonyms) are included along with a narrative discussion of students' views on cognitive and noncognitive aspects of their 1st-year experience at the university. Autum, Carlos, and Jasmine attended high school with a graduating class of 100–135; Clint attended a larger high school with a graduating class of up to 350. Autumn was from a family of low socioeconomic status, Clint and Jasmine reported middle status, and Carlos reported middle to high socioeconomic status. Autumn and Clint are White, Carolos is Hispanic, and Jasmine is of mixed race. Carlos and Jasmine lived in dorms, Autumn lived in an apartment, and Clint lived with his father.

CARLOS PEREZ:

Carlos Perez grew up in a small Kansas town. Carlos is a first-generation college student; his father attended school only to the sixth grade, but with hard work became a railroad supervisor of people with college degrees. When Carlos worked in the summer on the railroad, he realized how hard his father worked. The summer job motivated him to have a job in air conditioning and taught him the importance of finishing work before relaxing. Carlos wants to work in a medical field after he graduates. He said, "I want to be able to influence people." He sees going into a medical field as way of "giving a person a chance. I want to help the little guy."

Carlos was an all-around student in high school, participating in sports, music, and theater. A high school guidance counselor and football coach helped Carlos with personal and academic matters. Carlos says that contact with the counselor also helped him realize he should go to college.

ACADEMIC AND CLASSROOM ISSUES:

Carlos has not worked while attending school. His father wanted him to focus on school. "If you bring me good grades, I'll work hard for you." Carlos feels challenged in classes. In Spanish class, he learned more in 3 days than he did in 2 years at high school. The library and the databases overwhelm Carlos; he does not use them, but he stated *if he needs to*, then he will figure them out. He uses the Internet to work on his papers. He says at the university "we have to think on our own," and reflected on the first semester, "It was really amazing how much . . . I didn't know I'd learned." Carlos studies with friends, especially a dorm mate he met early at the university.

NONCOGNITIVE ISSUES:

Even though he made a connection with one of his teaching assistants, Carlos did not have much individual contact with his professors. Carlos does take the initiative to greet his professors if they pass him on campus. When asked if the professors knew his name, he replied,
Actually, I think . . . even the world music teacher [knows me]. He has a big class, and he knows I'm Carlos. Of course, there really aren't a lot of *Carloses* that I've met at the university. I'm the *Carlos* here.
Carlos is active in the Activities Forum and feels connected to the university through this organization and through the dorm. "We're all good friends." If he has a problem, he will ask his network of friends, the advisors, and then a professor, in that order. "I don't talk with the professors one-on-one, *but if I needed to*, I would feel comfortable."
One observation Carlos made about the university was a lack of cliques or loners. "We all talk with each other. We're all together here. Different people get along together. There's no gossip. No drama." Carlos is used to getting along with different groups of people.

AUTUMN FIELDS:

A reentry student in her mid-20s, Autumn Fields grew up as a self-proclaimed "country girl" in a small town in southern Kansas, with her mother and her two sisters. Her mother worked as a beautician. Autumn did not go to the university right after high school because she never liked school: I did not like school at all. I was hardly ever there—I pretty much just barely made it by. . . . I was not involved in anything. [School] felt like an imprisonment for me because I grew up in the country and I wanted to feel free. School didn't make sense to me at all. Autumn now has a young daughter and realizes that she wants more from life. Her goal is to make a difference in the world, so she has decided the best way for that to happen is with a college degree.

ACADEMIC AND CLASSROOM ISSUES:

Autumn stated she understands concepts and "the bigger picture," but she lamented that she lacks the younger students' understanding of mechanics and grammar. In her second-semester English class, the professor would discuss "radical ideas," and the younger students showed they did not understand the discussion at a deep level. Despite her feeling comfortable with class discussions, the grade in her first semester English class suffered because she did not understand grammar and mechanics. Autumn reported that she has always loved to write, but despite spending a week or two writing papers for her first English class, "pour[ing] my heart and soul into it," she never received more than a grade of 70% on her written work. She visited the writing center, but her grade still did not improve. The professor in her second semester class mentioned that perhaps graduate students had helped her in the past at the writing center, and even though he normally did not tutor one on one, if she was not satisfied this semester, he *might* be able to help her.
Her communications class had tough tests, but the professor prepared them for everything that was on the test. Math had online support in three categories: an explanation of how to solve the problem, an example, and a tab for e-mailing the professor. The explanations and examples helped her finish her homework. She never pushed the "ask the professor" tab. Autumn, like Carlos, would like to know more about how the use the library and felt "lost on how to use it."
Autumn said she knows why she is at school: "I am here for a reason. I want to soak up and learn what they are trying to teach me." Even though she has not yet declared a major, she felt the university provided a structure for her.

NONCOGNITIVE ISSUES:

Autumn transferred to a satellite campus close to her home, which provides personal attention she likes. She goes to school 3 days a week while her mother takes care of her daughter. Autumn has met other older students while waiting in the halls for class to start. "It's comforting to know that there are people in the same situations." Autumn does not socialize outside of class, as her schedule is full with going to school and caring for her daughter. She stays in touch with professors via e-mail, especially now that she has a laptop. When Autumn is in class, she tries to listen and make eye contact to be in touch with the professors.

Autumn does not feel the university is responsible for developing leadership or providing opportunities for her to develop her confidence. "My past is what has made me what I am today." She is surprised, though, that the university is supportive and has helped her along. Although Autumn is positive in general, she stated she would like to be stimulated intellectually by her peers and hopes to have time for that one day.

CLINT FALCON:

Clint Falcon attended a high school with a graduating class close to 350 students. His mother is finishing her associate degree at a nearby community college, but his father never attended college. His uncles went to college, however, and his younger cousins will attend college. Clint's mother helped him do his financial aid paperwork and then told him, "I've got you this far; now you do the rest."

Clint's high school encouraged students to go to college but was not academically challenging for him until his senior year, when he started advanced math classes. Clint says at the university he studies "twice as much as in high school." His friends went to college, and many were valedictorians. Clint is not so much interested in having a college experience as staying focused and doing what he needs to be a mechanical engineer.

ACADEMIC AND CLASSROOM ISSUES:

Clint stated the engineering department has a good reputation. At the university, the students are not "spoonfed."

It's more on me to figure it out. I learn it better than just going up and asking the teacher. I think it's mostly on the individual [here] 'cause if you can't do it yourself, then . . . I don't know how you are going to survive once you get out of college.

If Clint had a question about what classes to take, he probably would go to his advisor. His only complaint was that his physics teacher acts as though the students are at his level when explaining concepts, so the professor can be a little hard to follow. Nonetheless, Clint likes that classes challenge him, which "makes me pay attention more."

Clint is looking forward to next year when he can start working in one of the labs on an independent car project. He wants to work with cars and described a "lot of cool people there." He likes that smart people share his interests. When they do homework together, they take turns being the leader, with the one who understands the problem best explaining it to the others.

NONCOGNITIVE ISSUES:

A teacher at high school, who was also a neighbor, inspired Clint to be an engineer after he took a 3-D design class. He has friends at the university who share his interests, and this social group keeps him focused, since they study together. If he were at another school, he might just socialize and party. During the first semester, he had 3 Cs. In the end, he made the dean's list because he spent a week studying for the finals. As a result, in the second semester, he said he was staying focused on studies from the very beginning.

Having a group of people he can study with helps him feel comfortable. "I think if I didn't have that, then I'd feel like an outcast." He e-mails professors when he has a question about class. He likes being at the university because he can live at home and continue the window-cleaning business he started while in high school.

He wishes the library stayed open later; the 24-hour room gets crowded late at night. He said it would be convenient if the library stayed open until midnight. Another comment about the facilities was that the weight room on campus has good equipment but is often crowded and "confined," so he usually goes to the YMCA to work out. As with the other students, he said he wishes the parking situation were better.

JASMINE AHMED:

Jasmine had a rough childhood. Her parents were both alcoholics and consequently she ended up in Kansas with her grandparents. "You didn't expect to hear all of this, did you?" She was perky and spoke of her past as though she were talking about someone else. When in high school, Jasmine moved back and forth between her grandparent's and aunt's houses in a town close to the flagship university in the state. When she moved to her aunt's house, she left her sisters behind.

I started to struggle with that a lot because leaving my sisters was really hard, even though they were right next door. I was . . . protection for them, and then I wasn't. Then I finally moved back in my senior year, but then I moved back out in April with my mentor—my volleyball coach—and she ended up being kind of like my mom figure, I guess. She let me move in with her and her family in April.

From the beginning of her stay at the university, things began to fall into place.

ACADEMIC AND CLASSROOM ISSUES:

Jasmine was always a good student, and she went to an academically challenging high school, so when she came to the university, she was concerned until she saw her first tests and made adjustments. "I got the hang of it." She said she was in General Education classes, which might "not emphasize critical thinking." Her goal is to get a piece of paper, whether it is a dual degree or a degree with a minor in exercise science and sports management. She wants to become a National Collegiate Athletic Association All-American Athlete, become a trainer, and start a family.

NON-COGNITIVE ISSUES:

Jasmine has always been good at time management, but at the university she had to improve because of traveling to track meets on weekends. She said if she needs help with a course, she calls up her academic advisor and says, "Can you get me a tutor for this class?" Her roommate has become her best friend. Her advisor helped put them together. "It is the one of the best things that has ever happened to me."

She has mentors in her field of sports, and she worked with a psychologist at the university the first semester. Jasmine feels fine contacting her professors and using facilities on campus. "That's their job, isn't it?" She called her criminal justice professor that morning, but he had not returned her call by the time of the interview.

She went home every weekend the first semester, but in the second semester started attending athletic events on the weekends, and in general felt more settled in. By being in track, she automatically gained 100 friends and could easily make connections with other athletes either in class or at activities where she attends as a spectator, such as volleyball or basketball.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS THROUGH SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY:

Students used out-of-class time with peer groups, family, or advisors. Table 3 shows that very little time was spent with professors.

STUDENTS CREATED RECIPROCITY AND TRUST AMONG THEMSELVES:

Jasmine has easy access to the athletic professors and to her advisor, who was also a professor. Students with general education majors are advised by a student advisor until they become juniors or seniors. The course Blackboard and e-mail were the most common ways students communicated online to contact teachers, get advising information, and expand career awareness. On the survey, the students' sense of satisfaction with advising overweighed their dissatisfaction. They reported that advisors were very helpful in giving advice on how to choose classes and following a plan. Advisors informed them about career opportunities after graduation. For example, Jasmine said,

> When I came on my athletic visit, they set you up with an academic advisor. . . . She told me to call her and we would get my courses set up and we got it all figured out. . . . She has been really helpful.

For the most part, students relied on their network of friends and graduate student advisors for the information they needed. Clint, an engineering major, found a peer group in his engineering classes that he found rewarding. They did homework together, taking turns being the leader. This was different from high school, where few students shared his interests or abilities. His advisor is an engineering professor, so he can go to him for advice on classes—but he does not go to him for help on homework. Even so, he has not contacted the advisor about some key questions in his field. Next year, Clint is looking forward to working on an independent car project; this is especially motivating for him because he would like to work with automobiles after graduation. Clint says that without peer connections he would feel ostracized.

Carlos has found his peer group in the Student Forum. This group has provided him the sense of belonging and stimulation; since he was social and active in high school, he needed this contact. He participated in sports, music, drama, and other activities. His cousin introduced him to the forum, where he meets a cross section of students. He knows he wants to do something with medical care, but for now, has no idea of how this will connect with his classes. He feels that if he keeps this as a goal, he will figure it out. It had not occurred to him to talk with faculty for understanding how the courses will help him move in the direction of his goal or about other academic or noncognitive matters. He has only relied on one graduation student teaching assistant.

Autumn said it would be nice to have peers who stimulated her thinking. After a visit to the art museum on campus, she thinks she wants to major in art. She does not, however, know what being an art major would entail. She spoke wistfully about having stimulating conversations with peers, but now has to go straight home to her daughter. As long as she is a General Education major, she, like Carlos, will rely on graduate student advisors. She has had a few conversations with professors. In particular, when her grade was suffering her English professor he indicated that he might help her, if she could not find help elsewhere. For now, she relies on eye contact with her professors for direction and connection.

Jasmine has an instant peer group with the 100-member track team. She has access to the facilities at the gym and the track field, where she spends 4 hours a day, with this track activity taking the time of a part-time job. The athletic advisors help her find tutors, direct her to students who can become friends, and help her find services such as psychological counseling or career services. She is the only interviewee who had gone to career counseling.

Students' social capital was developed through their own networks, rather than through those initiated by the university or faculty. Students' sense of reciprocity and trust was developed through these peer networks where students worked collaboratively and intentionally. The peer networks in some cases were indirectly connected to the professors (as in the engineering and athletics department), but for the most part, students relied on student advisors and their own networks in lieu of approaching professors about their classes or issues related to the university. By relying on peer networks, institutional knowledge that faculty could have made available was not communicated directly.

LACK OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS WITHIN CLASSROOMS:

Being able to make positive connections and develop relationships creates a sense of belonging for students. Autumn commented that the smaller class sizes and finding nontraditional students like herself have made her more self-confident. "I am here for a reason," she said, but having some contact with others helped her feel validated. Many classes did not contain a discussion component. From the interviews, students said the labs, composition, and speech were the areas where discussions took place. Interacting with students in class was limited, and students had to find ways to meet students on their own.

LIMITED COMMUNICATION WITH FACULTY EXCEPT DURING CLASS:

Students were divided on their views about the ease in visiting faculty and their availability to help answer students' questions. Carlos mentioned that he made a great connection with one of his instructors, a teaching assistant, during the first semester. He saw her through his following semester and credited her with helping him answer questions about finances and career choices. As shown in Table 4, about half of the students surveyed said that they talked with professors right after class, and 27% said that they went to office hours. Fully a third of the students surveyed had never met with faculty during office hours or outside of class. This survey finding was supported by the interviews; students indicated that they had not talked with professors in their office, except in Clint's case to ask for an extension on an assignment. Clint felt fine sending an e-mail message to a faculty member with a question.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ELECTRONIC NETWORKS AS SUPPORT:

If professors could create an online network with their students through their class, the out-of-class activity could mimic the kinds of networks adolescents create for themselves among their friends (Mesch & Talmud, 2010). In this way, students would create more of a connection with the university, rather than relying on peer groups only.

Social networking is a part of most students' lives. Students network via text messaging, e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites. The interviews revealed students stayed in touch with each other frequently through electronic networks, but not so much with the university. As shown in Table 5, 69% of the students surveyed said they communicated online with faculty more than once a month. Jasmine stated, "I

use Blackboard, but as a study tool." Her classes did not utilize any social network. Students' most frequent online communications were with friends and family.

Autumn talked with teaching assistants in the writing center, but that did not seem to help. She liked the online math support provided by the course syllabus, but never used the option to ask the professor for help.

When asked about making friends at the university, in general, students made these connections on their own or through activities with students. Faculty members easily could send e-mail messages to their students via the class Blackboard to stay in touch with students out of class and make themselves available out of class. Study groups also can be formed via electronic software now available to create online learning communities to support classes (Calhoun & Green, 2015).

UNDERUSE OF FACILITIES:

An example of how students relied on friends is shown by how they used their out-of-class supports. Some of the students did not know how to use the library. Carlos said, "It was a whole lot larger than my school library was, and I was a bit lost. We did do a tour through the Getting Used to College class, but that didn't help me." Autumn concurred: "I would like to get more direction on how to use the library. I don't know how to use the library, using the course catalog or looking up stuff." Without being able to use the library, research and the windows of knowledge available to students remained closed. In the survey, 71% of students said that they used the Internet several times a week for research and homework, which supports what the students said in their interviews. Ironically, students were satisfied with the library, even though they did not use the electronic databases, but rather the Internet. Table 6 shows survey responses regarding facility satisfaction.

University personnel oversee many support services. The fact that facilities were not mentioned in student interviews means that they are not using them during their 1st year. Observations showed students waiting in cars until minutes before class began, waiting there rather than in the crowded hallways. Hallways were often full of silent students, sitting side by side, working on the computer or reading the newspaper. There was no sense of collective effort or socializing in the halls before class; students only reported interacting with other students in English, speech, and science labs. University faculty could create study groups as homework for their classes to encourage out-of-class socializing connected to the classes. Autumn said, "I transferred to the satellite campus where the classes are smaller, and I receive more one-on-one help from my professors." All students had "parking lot stories" about their frustrations on campus.

NEED FOR CAREER AWARENESS:

Many of the students said they had a goal, but did not know how to connect this goal to their classes. Carlos knew he wanted to work in the medical field, but did not know the coursework path to take. The students said that if they made goals and worked in that direction they would get there *somehow*. The exact steps and process seemed mysterious to them. The lack of contact with the professors and other staff members made it difficult to see how their classes and activities connected to their life goals. As shown in Table 7, 53% of the students indicated career was the most important concern on their mind, with only 3% concerned with critical thinking. On the survey item about career services, only 162 of the 300 survey participants responded to rate the item at all (Table 6), perhaps indicating a lack of knowledge that such an office exists.

On the website and in orientations to the university, the school personnel provided services and activities that fostered social supports including (a) information support, (b) institutional support, and (c) emotional support with activities and offices open to students. The students did not make reference to using these services. The students themselves created a sense of belonging with each other, creating a family-type feeling, and building their experiences from their own initiative. Even Jasmine, though, with a host of university personnel provided to her via the athletics department, said that with regards to her goals, she would probably have to "figure it out on my own."

CONCLUSION:
IMPLICATIONS FOR CREATING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH POLICIES AND PRACTICE:

The university could provide opportunities for social capital development on campus in various ways to create a sense of belonging for students. Students need to know how to find out about services provided by the university, or at least whom to approach to gain access to the academic, social, financial, and personal support systems in place at the university. First-year students expressed varying degrees of social capital; some students knew how to find people and resources for their needs, and other students did not have basic information to

navigate support readily available on campus, such as career services or the library. Social capital plays an integral role in helping students feel a connection to the university and in retaining students beyond their 1st year in college. The research team found ways to discuss the 1st-year experience within the framework of social capital theory, blending to make up the students' experience: aspects of institutional knowledge, academic or cognitive aspects, non-cognitive factors, and aspects of a student's life. If students have contact with faculty members or university staff, the transition can be more effective than if students contact only peers or graduate students (Countryman & Zinck, 2013; Drake, 2011; Kaufka, 2010).

ATHLETIC PROGRAM AS A MODEL FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL CREATION:

Jasmine Ahmed's experience as an athletic scholarship student in track provided an intentional system that connected the students' in- and out-of-class experiences to the professors, providing emotional, informational, and institutional support. From the very beginning, social connections were created for her at school.

> I actually ended up getting roomed with a thrower . . . and we had been texting the 1st week. . . . My academic advisor [said], 'she is on Facebook [now].' . . . I found my best friend, and we hadn't even met each other yet.

With over 100 students on the track team, Jasmine has automatic "friends." She sits with her teammates in classes or chats at athletic functions. Her track activities fill half of each day, and she attends classes for 4 hours. This fills her days. If she has questions, she has a faculty advisor who acts as a mentor to direct her towards resources.

This sports advisor is in addition to her academic advisor who "knows what she is talking about." She tells Jasmine the requirements for her major and then advises her on course choices. Jasmine also took advantage of the university psychologist the first semester.

It is hard to say which came first, supports offered by the university or Jasmine's proactive manner. "I'm the kind of person who asks questions." By asking questions, and getting answers, she has felt confident about her experience. The emotional support, regular feedback and mentoring, and people acting as advocates have helped Jasmine feel that she is "having the time of her life." She understands how to move within the institution and to gain access to needed technical knowledge to succeed; that is, she can learn how the university works and where to go if she needs help. The team, coaches, mentors, and other support personnel provide the social capital that Jasmine needs to feel comfortable and succeed.

How can the university, given limited resources, provide this kind of support for *all* students? Are there ways to leverage human capital through social media and with as simple a gesture as professors, staff, and university personnel saying "hi" to a passing student or the way a teacher responds to students during classes (Goldman & Goodboy, 2014)? Out-of-class activities that give student opportunities to connect to other students who share similar goals are another aspect of the athletic experience. Certainly the challenge to create social capital exists, but personnel at the university can create the environment that fosters access to institutional knowledge that otherwise can remain hidden, through contact outside of class, proactive advising, or a change with the kinds of in-class interactions (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Countryman & Zinck, 2013; Drake, 2011; Kaufka, 2010).

CONCLUSION:
NEED FOR DEVELOPMENT OF INTANGIBLE SKILLS:

After all, the reason students come to a university is to develop academic and intangible, broader ways of looking at the world. In general, students felt that college was helping them with knowledge, skill development, and other qualities that are hard to explain but that help them transition to adulthood. One student participant commented that she was just in her first semester, "but I have learned so much. I can't explain it. Nothing specific, but I can see why people need to go to college." Clint Falcon echoed the idea, "I think that college is a lot more on you. . . . You got to kind of dig deep in the textbooks and what's on the Internet and whatever help you can get." He had to do a lot more than he expected.

Jasmine definitely benefited from interconnected network of students and faculty. Yet even she, with all of these supports, is not sure how she will reach her goals. Jasmine lamented, "Am I making the right choices?" Through ongoing feedback with those who hold institutional knowledge, she should be able to find a good direction.

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TABLES

Table 1: Number, Mean, and Standard Deviation for Knowledge and Skills Development, Mental Activity Encouraged, and Reading and Writing Required by 1st-Year College Students, by Demographic

Demographic Variable	Knowledge & skills		Mental activity		Reading & writing	
	N	M (SD)	N	M (SD)	N	M (SD)
Gender						
Male	114	3.01 (.40)	123	2.71 (.59)	120	2.04 (.44)
Female	138	2.92 (.42)	146	2.79 (.65)	144	2.13 (.40)
Total	280	2.95 (.41)	299	2.74 (.62)	294	2.09 (.42)
Age range						
18–19	221	**2.94 (.40)**	232	**2.72 (.59)**	228	2.07 (.41)
20+	31	**3.14 (.45)**	37	**2.97 (.76)**	36	2.17 (.47)
Total	252	**2.96 (.41)**	269	**2.75 (.62**)	264	2.09 (.42)
Race						
White	175	2.95 (.41)	186	2.73 (.61)	184	**2.04 (.38)**
Non-White	64	2.98 (.45)	69	2.77 (.65)	66	**2.16 (.46)**
Total	239	2.96 (.42)	255	2.74 (.62)	250	**2.07 (.41**)
Mothers' education						
High school	95	2.99 (.41)	99	2.66 (.67)	98	2.11 (.47)
College	180	2.95 (.41)	195	2.78 (.59)	191	2.07 (.39)
Total	275	2.97 (.41)	294	2.74 (.62)	289	2.08 (.42)
Fathers' education						
High school	95	2.95 (.41)	100	2.68 (.62)	97	2.04 (.42)
College	177	2.97 (.42)	191	2.77 (.63)	189	2.11 (.42)
Total	272	2.97 (.41)	291	2.74 (.62)	286	2.08 (.42)
Family income						
$30,000 or less	126	3.01 (.41)	137	2.73 (.66)	134	**2.14 (.45)**
$31,000 to 50,000	61	2.90 (.38)	65	2.69 (.56)	65	**2.02 (.32)**
$51,000+	82	2.95 (.44)	86	2.78 (.61)	85	**2.02 (.41)**
Total	269	2.96 (.41)	288	2.74 (.62)	284	**2.08 (.41)**

Note: Means and standard deviations in bold indicate those variables for which there were statistically significant differences. Scores based on Likert scales of 1–4, with 4 being the most desirable response.

Table 2: Number, Mean, and Standard Deviation for Frequency of Contacting Faculty, Frequency of Online Communication, and Helpfulness of Advising Received by 1st-Year College Students by Demographic

Demographic variable	Contacting faculty			Online communication			Advising received	
	N	M (SD)		N	M (SD)		N	M (SD)
Gender								
Male	121	2.25 (.61)		119	2.97 (.43)		123	2.73 (.82)
Female	146	2.36 (.60)		146	3.00 (.45)		146	2.87 (.76)
Total	297	2.32 (.60)		292	2.98 (.46)		299	2.81 (.79)
Age range								
18–19	230	**2.26 (.60)**		**229**	**3.02 (.43)**		232	2.80 (.78)
20+	37	**2.49 (.62)**		**36**	**2.76 (.41)**		37	2.85 (.85)
Total	267	**2.32 (.61)**		265	**2.99 (.44)**		269	2.81 (.79)
Race								
White	185	2.27 (.61)		182	3.00 (.44)		187	2.79 (.78)
Non-White	68	2.38 (.60)		69	2.93 (.42)		68	2.87 (.85)
Total	252	2.30 (.60)		251	2.99 (.44)		255	2.81 (.80)
Mothers' education								
High school	98	2.84 (.58)		98	2.97 (.48)		99	2.86 (.77)
College	194	2.76 (.61)		189	3.00 (.44)		195	2.79 (.81)
Total	292	2.78 (.60)		287	2.99 (.45)		294	2.82 (.79)
Fathers' education								
High school	99	2.27 (.59)		100	2.94 (.40)		100	2.73 (.76)
College	190	2.37 (.61)		184	3.02 (.46)		191	2.86 (.82)
Total	289	2.33 (.60)		284	2.99 (.44)		291	2.81 (.80)
Family income								
$30,000 or less	136	2.37 (.58)		136	2.95 (.48)		137	2.87 (.75)
$31,000–50,000	65	2.31 (.67)		68	3.03 (.39)		65	2.87 (.74)
$51,000+	84	2.26 (.58)		80	3.00 (.44)		86	2.65 (.88)
Total	285	2.33 (.60)		281	2.99 (.45)		288	2.80 (.79)

Note: Bolded means and standard deviations indicate those variables for which there were statistically significant differences. Scores based on Likert scales of 1–4, with 4 representing the most frequency or highest quality of advising.

Table 3:How Students Gained Social Capital: Percentage Responses

Student	Friends	Parents	Advisors	Professor	Other
Autumn	**15[a]**			**10[b]**	**75[c]**
Carlos	50	25	20	5	
Clint	75		15	10	
Jasmine	40		25	25	10[d]

Note: Responses from the individual interviews.
[a]People she met in the halls. [b]E-mail. [c]On her own. [d]Religious Activities.

Table 4: Contact With Faculty: Percentage Responses

Student	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Talked with faculty at the end of class	10	45	39	6
Met with faculty (e.g., office hours)	5	22	38	34

Note: Survey $N = 299$.

Table 5: Kinds of Online Communication: Percentage Responses

Online communication	Several times a week	A few times a month	< Once a month	Not at all
With faculty	19	50	20	10
With students at university	35	26	18	20
With students at other universities	40	22	7	31
With other friends or acquaintances	69	20	7	4
With family	54	26	7	12
Participate in class discussions online	3	7	12	78
Use Internet for research or homework	71	27	1	1
Use Internet for nonacademic reasons	89	9	1	1

Note: Survey *N* = 295 to 298 depending on item.

Table 6: Satisfaction With Facilities: Percentage Responses

Facility	Survey item *N*	% very satisfied	% somewhat satisfied	% somewhat dissatisfied	% very dissatisfied
Library facilities	251	50	44	6	1
Library services	232	47	47	4	1
Career services	162	23	54	20	4

Table 7: Percentage of Students Identifying Each Concern as Most Important

Concern	%
Career	53
Social interaction	20
Intellectual growth	14
Personal interests	9
Critical thinking	3

Note: Survey *N* = 299.