It's Who You Know: Leveraging Social Networks for College and Careers

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There is increasing concern that community college student success should not only consider how many students earn degrees, but also how and to what extent the degrees enhance individuals' professional livelihoods. Whether that happens depends on students' ability to make strategic and well-informed choices. Looking through the lens of a "career capital" framework, the present study leveraged a social network analysis to identify and rank sources of information regarding college-going decisions and future career fields. Data were gathered by administering the College and Career Capital Survey at a Southern community college. The key finding is that people in the educational and home settings are among the most prevalent sources, while other college-based sources were not as common. This study has implications for leaders seeking to inform students about college and careers.

Background

With a focus on higher education accountability, measures of success for two-year colleges are moving toward not only considering how many students finish degrees but also how and to what extent those degrees enable graduates to find jobs in their desired career fields and to earn more money than they otherwise could have (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Whether that happens or not depends, to a great extent, on students' strategic and well-informed choices.

By the time they get to campus, students have already made myriad decisions about the future they want and how the institution and degree program might help make it happen. However, pre-enrollment decision-making is followed by post-enrollment decision-making that leverages individuals' accumulation of new "funds of

knowledge" and forms of "capital" about postsecondary education (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011). In this article, we propose that students' college-going and career-related choices are often guided by information gained from their social networks. Or, to put it simply, *it's who you know* that influences what you know.

With the more job-oriented or hands-on perspectives that community college curricula offer (Provasnik & Planty, 2008), community college students have a broad range of options, especially when it comes to making post-enrollment academic or career decisions. Whether to transfer to a four-year institution or to earn an associate degree, or whether simply to gain the skills needed for employment, community college students have many decisions to make and a number of distinct institutional entry and exit points (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013).

In related discussions, we have framed "career capital" as particularly useful for understanding community college students' connections between college and careers. Students continue to learn about the institutions in which they are enrolled and how they might leverage their community-college experiences for "boundaryless careers" (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). This learning process is facilitated through the acquisition of postmodern "career capital" that includes *knowing how* (knowledge), *knowing why* (purpose), and *knowing whom* (networks) (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). However, discussions of community college students' academic/career decision-making processes, particularly through an analysis of social networks, to date, are not commonplace. Our study represents an important step toward exploring the associations between informational networks and academic and career success of community college students. We believe that understanding the social networks that students employ in their decisionmaking processes is important for two-year college leadership and faculty committed to helping students make strategic and wellinformed choices.

Research questions

The data analyzed here were generated as part of an exploratory study conducted at a Southern community college that introduced the College and Career Capital Survey (for a detailed description, see D'Amico, Rios-Aguilar, Salas, & González Canché (2012)). Through further exploration, we examined unanalyzed data from the broader study to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What are the most important sources of information about college-going decisions of community college students?
2. What are the most important sources of information about future career field decisions of community college students?
    a. Is there any overlap in the most important sources of information for college and career field decisions?
    b. Are there any differences when disaggregating the analysis by gender?

Along with looking for the most important sources of information, we thought it also important to present the least important sources of information through the following research questions:

3. What are the least important sources of information about college-going decisions of community college students?
4. What are the least important sources of information about future career field decisions of community college students?
    a. Is there any overlap in the least important sources of information for college and career field decisions?
    b. Are there any differences when disaggregating the analysis by gender?

Review of literature

Extending our previous discussions of two-year college students' academic and career-related decisions, our intent here is to examine how social network analysis might extract meaning from the sources of information that shape two-year college students' decision-making about their studies in relation to their targeted career fields and how those decisions might vary by gender.

Theoretical framework

Somers et al. (2006) reported a number of factors influencing a student's choice to attend a community college: access, aspirations, curriculum, information from family and friends, financial aid, location, and college support services. In a similar manner, Absher and Crawford (1996), Bers (2005), Bers and Galowich (2003), and Santos (2004) enumerated sources of information about careers that include members of one's social network (e.g., teachers, counselors, family, friends, employers). Sources relied upon may also vary by subgroup. For example, Nomi (2005) found that first-generation students were less likely to rely on parents than those with college-educated parents. Also, there is some discussion of web-based sources such as college websites when considering a specific institution (Zastrow & Stoner, 2007).

Here we focus on *knowing whom* (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994)—sources of knowledge that leverage social network-based capital for advancing a career. Our original inquiry and this specific analysis were informed by the conceptualization of networks as relationships that "constitute a form of social capital that provides information that facilitates action" (Coleman, 1988, S104). Informational networks are the lens of traditional social network analysis—an analytic method that posits that networks have patterns and structures that encourage or constrain people's behavior and their access to resources (Wellman, 1983). Moreover, we drew from the notion of career capital (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001) adapted for community colleges (D'Amico, Rios-Aguilar, Salas, & González Canché, 2012). In addition to our previous study, the concept of career capital has informed other education-related literature on mentoring (Singh,

Ragins, & Tharenou, 2009), International Baccalaureate education (Suutari & Smale, 2008), higher education science (Duberley, Cohen, & Leeson, 2007), and graduate education (Sturges, Simpson, & Altman, 2003).

As we have explained, enrollment in a community college is the result of individuals exploring an array of considerations about the lives they have, the lives they want, and the influence of others on their choices (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2003; Santos, 2004). The analysis presented in the sections that follow is focused on those sources of information (i.e., social networks) that may influence choices regarding college-going and future career fields.

Methodology

Sample and data

The College and Career Capital Survey (CCCS) was administered at a Southeastern community college yielding 84 responses from a purposive sample of college-level and developmental English courses (three sections of each) on two campuses. English sections were selected since they are required of all college transfer and career-focused associate degree programs at the participating institution. Only one prospective participant declined to participate, resulting in a 99% response rate to the in-class administration of the survey. The demographic distributions showed that 65.5% of the sample was under the age of 25, 67.5% were women, and 70% were an ethnicity other than White.

While the CCCS captured data on several broad categories related to the career capital model, the data analyzed in this article are centrally focused on two portions of the survey (see the Appendix for details on the specific survey items):

- To what extent did you rely upon the following sources for information about going to college?
- To what extent do you rely upon the following sources for information about future career fields?

In each of the two sections, the participants had the option to select one of the four options: "not at all, a little bit, fair amount, and substantial amount" for each of the following 17 sources of information:

> (1) High school teachers (college-going question); College teachers (career-field question), (2) High school counselors (college-going question); College counselors (career-field question), (3) High school classmates (college-going question); College classmates (career-field question), (4) Mother or female guardian, (5) Father or male guardian, (6) Sibling(s), (7) Extended family member(s), (8) People in your neighborhood/community, (9) Representatives from specific colleges or universities, (10) Official web pages of colleges and universities, (11) Recruitment materials sent to you from specific schools, (12) College rankings, (13) Official college tours, (14) Col-

lege fairs, (15) Media (newspaper, TV, or magazines), (16) Employer, (17) Faith community or church.

Procedure

Using the *membership network analysis* approach (Breiger, 1974), we identified sources of information for each student and their importance regarding their academic and career-oriented decisions. We then used a procedure known as the CONCOR method (Breiger, Boorman, & Arabie, 1975; Wasserman & Faust, 1995) to determine if community college students have similar networks of information when thinking about their college experiences, and potential jobs and careers.[1] Our interest in examining patterns of similarity stems from the fact that there are different benefits accrued to being connected with individuals who play different roles and/or positions. This basically means that having more ties to faculty, for example, may be more beneficial to increasing one's career capital than ties to family members. Because male and female students may rely on different members of their networks to make college and career decision, we disaggregated the analyses by gender.

Limitations

Our analysis was an effort at trying to rank the most and least important sources of information to make college-going and career-related decisions. A limitation was the small sample size; however, this may be less of a concern for social network analysis (Carrington, Scott, & Wasserman, 2005). Although the survey was administered in a way that promised anonymity, it is possible that social desirability bias occurred (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), especially with an in-class survey. Rather than claiming statistical generalizations from this study, our aim was to begin building a method for measuring the importance of sources of information for students' academic and career decisions.

1. To obtain the five most and least important sources of information, we closely followed Breiger (1974)—treating Tables 1 and 2 as two-mode, rectangular matrices reflecting duality. The original two-mode matrices for sources of information about college-related decisions and career-related decisions are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The rows of each matrix corresponds to specific sources of information (i.e., high school counselors, or colleges' websites) and the columns are the degree of importance students gave to that source of information. We normalized these matrices so that any entry/cell is the proportion of that category's responses that were chosen by the participants in the sample. This procedure was conducted for the two matrices of interest, and it was repeated to account for the disaggregation by gender. After each transformation was performed, we used the UCINET Affiliations program to create a one-mode matrix using the sources-to -sources mode. This procedure is based on equation (3) presented by Breiger (1974, p. 183): P=A*AT. The equation allowed us to transform this two-mode matrix to a one-mode matrix. After these transformations took place, we used CONCOR to identify the top and bottom five sources of information. CONCOR divided the network into blocks that contain similar or equivalent actors or agents (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2011). We stopped the procedure once the subsets clearly contained the top and bottom five choices made by the participants.

Table 1. Original Two-Mode Matrix of College-Related Sources of Information

Source	None	Little	Fair Amount	Substantial Amount
HS teachers	29	22	21	11
HS counselors	27	12	23	21
HS classmates	30	26	19	8
Mother/guardian	17	11	21	33
Father/guardian	27	21	15	20
Sibling(s)	29	21	21	11
Extended family	28	20	23	10
Neighbor	41	18	15	7
Colleges representative	27	20	22	14
College web pages	27	16	23	16
Recruitment materials	33	20	19	11
College rankings	45	17	13	7
College tours	41	19	16	6
College fairs	43	20	14	7
Media	39	26	14	4
Employer	47	18	13	4
Church	43	19	14	7

Results

In the following section, we describe findings regarding the most and least prevalent sources for both college and career-related information.

Sources of information about going to college

Social network analysis revealed that for the 84 respondents, high school teachers, high school classmates, sibling(s), extended family members, and college representatives were the five most important sources of information about college decisions (see Table 3). School-based networks had a strong influence on college going decisions with three of the top five sources as school agents—two from the high school setting and one from college. We suspect that given the characteristics of the study's participants with 60% self-identifying as 21 or younger and 96% in their first year of college, high school representatives and college recruiters were important members of the network influencing college enrollment decisions. Surprisingly, parental guardians seemed to not play a fundamental role in the respondents' decision to go to a community college. In contrast, siblings and extended family were important to that decision process.

Table 2. Original Two-Mode Matrix of Career-Related Sources of Information

Source	None	Little	Fair Amount	Substantial Amount
College teachers	21	18	25	17
College counselors	21	13	21	26
College classmates	28	27	20	5
Mother/guardian	19	15	26	20
Father/guardian	30	17	19	14
Sibling(s)	32	19	19	10
Extended family	27	26	22	5
Neighbor	41	19	16	4
Colleges representative	38	16	17	10
College web pages	27	20	19	14
Recruitment materials	36	20	13	12
College rankings	46	12	15	8
College tours	41	14	19	7
College fairs	36	15	23	6
Media	38	15	22	5
Employer	43	14	13	10
Church	44	14	16	7

Table 3. College-Going Sources of Information Aggregated and Disaggregated by Gender

College-going top five		
All	Females	Males
HS teachers	HS teachers	HS teachers
HS classmates	Father/guardian	HS classmates
Sibling(s)	College reps.	College web pages
Extended family	Recruitment materials	Father/guardian
College reps.	HS classmates	College rankings
College-going lowest five		
All	Females	Males
Mother/guardian	College tours	HS counselors
HS counselors	Media	Mother/guardian
College web pages	HS counselors	Extended family
College rankings	Mother/guardian	Neighbor
Employer	College web pages	Recruitment materials

Disaggregation by gender yielded two distinct patterns. First, father or male guardian appeared in the top five sources of information for both females and males even though father/male guardian was absent in the top five choices for the aggregate data. Second, female and male respondents noted that the sole non-school figure was a father/male guardian; the other four top sources were related to school agents. High school teachers and high school classmates were important for both males and females. Nonetheless, there were some notable differences in the data. For females, recruitment materials and college representatives were important in their decisions to attend a community college. Males looked at college rankings and college websites as sources of information to make decisions.

In terms of what mattered least, the influence of mother or female guardian as a source of information was negligible for college decisions. Also, high school counselors did not play an important role in these decisions across groups. In this respect, literature reports that in poorly funded schools, the counselor-student ratio is 1 counselor per 1,056 students, and in some extreme cases this ratio is 1:5000; even worse, some schools simply cannot afford to have a counselor (McDonough, 2005; Paul, 2002; Perez, 1999).

These findings are reinforced further through a graphic representation of the social network analysis in Figure 1, which we term a Web of Influence about college-going. Those sources of information closest to the center of the figure are most prevalent in the college choice process and at the center include a cluster of individuals (e.g., high school teachers, classmates, siblings). Out from the center is a secondary cluster of college-based information that was much less influential (e.g., college web pages, college rankings).

Sources of information about careers

As a caveat, we underscore that the survey was administered to students already enrolled in a two-year college, and thus reflects potential responses geared more toward sources one encounters following initial college enrollment, specifically college teachers, counselors, and classmates. Regarding the most important sources of information, in all cases, college teachers appeared to be important sources of information (see Table 4). College classmates were important for females, but not for males. Both females and males frequently relied on community college counselors for information about careers. Interestingly, females relied on their mothers or female guardians, whereas males relied on their male guardians. We imagine that the sorts of professional activities, to which many of the 84 participants related, were modeled by same-gender parents/guardians. Extended family was important for females, but not for males. Conversely, neighbors were important for males but were not so for females, and it was only through disaggregating the data where the results revealed the importance of community college counselors for both males and females.

The disaggregation revealed the importance of separate analysis by gender status. For women, three of the bottom five sources for college information were related to college. These were: college representatives, college websites, and college tours. For males, mother, siblings, and extended family were the least influential resources regarding career-oriented decisions. The influence of father or guardian was important for males, whereas for females it was the influence of the mother figure.

It is worth mentioning that it seems that the "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973)–(indirect relationships that are often critical to career building)–were more relevant for the male respondents than for female respondents in terms of their career-oriented decisions. The category of "neighbors," for example, entered into male respondents top sources for careers. In contrast, for female students, the extended family was a more powerful career-decision network than neighbors–potentially underscoring a gender preference to rely on strong ties (relatives and mother) to make career-related decisions.

An additional representation of the most important sources is available for the career field sources of information (see Figure 2). Though not as tightly clustered, the Career Web of Influence shows those most prevalent sources closest to the center of the diagram with many of the college-recruiting variables playing little role (e.g., recruitment materials, college fair).

Conclusion

This study sought to identify and rank the sources of information within community college students' social networks that represent key informants for aca-

Table 4. Career-Field Sources of Information Aggregated and Disaggregated by Gender

Career top five		
All	Females	Males
College teachers	College teachers	College teachers
College classmates	College counselors	College counselors
Father/guardian	Mother/guardian	Father/guardian
Sibling(s)	College classmates	Neighbor
Extended family	Extended family	Recruitment materials
Career lowest five		
All	Females	Males
Recruitment materials	Colleges representatives	Mother/guardian
College fairs	College web pages	Sibling(s)
Media	Employer	Extended family
Church	Church	Colleges representatives
Mother/guardian	College tours	College web pages

demic (i.e., college-going) and career-oriented information. The information and potential knowledge these sources can provide to community college students are likely to enhance students' ability to make more informed academic and career decisions.

Reviewing the overall findings, it is important to consider any patterns similar to information gathering for college and careers. One logical place to start is with the high school and college faculty and staff. Both in high schools and in the community college, teachers were centers of influence, which is understandable considering the amount of time spent with teachers versus other professional roles in the educational setting. Further, community college counselors were important for career-oriented information among men and women. The influence of mother or female guardian was almost always in the bottom five sources of information. This was true except for the case of female students who reported that their mother or female guardian was important for career-oriented information. Nonetheless, for college-going decisions, females reported the importance of their fathers/male guardians in the same manner as males did.

Contrary to what we expected, students' consideration of employers was absent from all of the rankings of top sources of information. In two cases they were among the lowest ranking sources: in the aggregated analyses of college-going sources of information, and in the report by gender (females) regarding career-oriented lowest sources of information. We suspect that, because the majority of the participants were recent high school graduates, employers were less important points of reference than they might have been for older participants.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway was the influence of people on community college students. Although websites, digital publications, rankings, and media are available at one's fingertips, it is still largely the teachers, classmates, counselors, family members, and others who are informing students' decisions. Where these lines can be blurred between the personal and technological connections is through the online social networks; however, even as we have seen in this study, the importance is the connection with individuals.

Recommendations

Based on the findings presented here, we have recommendations for practice and future research. Our primary recommendation is for colleges to encourage the connections between individuals and students when facilitating the college-going and the career-counseling processes. In our own experiences mentoring students, it has become far too easy to "drive students to the website." This may be an appropriate strategy when providing information on class lists, deadlines, and other administrative guidelines; however, decisions to go to college and about future career paths seemingly rely on personal connections. Further, helping enrolled students make more strategic decisions about their academics in relation to their career aspirations requires a concerted effort by two-year college communities to understand better how individuals do or do not leverage their

social networks to make such decisions. Being prepared for the job market is not simply a factor of what students know. Rather, it is also about how students make use of the faculty and support staff they know to make choices, thus supporting the idea of "knowing whom" in the career capital framework.

Beyond the recommendation to focus on individuals, it is important for those in the field to consider where they can have the greatest influence. For college-going decisions, we recommend that community colleges continue their strong relationships with high schools to inform faculty, staff, and students about the opportunities community colleges offer. More specifically, the role of high school teachers is critical in this process. While it may not be uncommon for college representatives to make inroads with high school counselors, we found them to be low in influence regarding college-going decisions. We strongly encourage community college representatives to find ways to network with high school teachers. This can be done by visiting faculty meetings on in-service days, but it can also be done through other means. Since we know that the majority of high schools offer dual enrollment (Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005) and qualified high school teachers are often among community college adjunct faculty, those part-time instructors may be great advocates for carrying the community college message into the high school classroom. Perhaps the lesson learned about individual connections between teachers and students can also be helped by individual connections between community college and high school personnel.

Regarding career-field decisions, college faculty are the strongest influence. While workplace connections are natural occurrences among career-oriented community college faculty, career opportunity awareness is important for all community college instructors based on their strong position to guide students. Institutional leaders should consider workplace visits for faculty, as time allows, or colleges could consider career awareness workshops as professional development (PD) opportunities, especially at institutions that have required annual PD. Further, colleges can and should consider both the challenges and opportunities of adjunct faculty, many of whom work in the field in which they teach. They are in-place assets who provide insights to students; however, it is difficult to provide part-time faculty with meaningful professional development if they spend minimal hours on campus.

Another important finding is that many of these potential influences for college-going and careers are not under the control of educational institutions. For example, we note the importance of families in the attainment of college-going and career field decisions. As discussed previously, each aggregated and disaggregated list of top influences included a family representative (e.g., parent, siblings, extended family). While the specific type of family member was not consistent in every instance, family was important. It may be helpful for community college leaders to consider the role of family influence, though secondary in influence to educators, when engaging in outreach in high schools, the workplace, and other community settings.

While some of the recommendations above merely scratch the surface of opportunities that community colleges have to inform college-going and career field decisions of students, it was our intent to present these findings to illustrate where the educational community can target their efforts. However, we also recognize this needs further study, which is why we intend to expand our work to different geographic regions and consider the perceptions of individuals regarding available jobs in career fields. In addition, a follow-up study that considers how students engage through online social networks will provide additional context about not only the sources of information but how individuals interact with these agents for informed decision making. The premise of the career capital model is that *knowing whom* is critical to gaining leverage for career advancement. As the boundaries delimiting postmodern careers become more fluid, we must also consider the changing boundaries around the influence of college-going and future professions. The robust social networks that students accumulate prior to completing a community college program will influence career choices. Community colleges can initiate and sustain those critical personal relationships as students position themselves to make the most of their lives.

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Appendix

Selected Items from the College and Career Capital Survey

Students rely on many types of sources to gain knowledge about college. To what extent did you rely upon the following sources for information about going to college?

(Not at all = 1, A little bit = 2, Fair amount = 3, Substantial amount = 4)

___ High school teachers

___ High school counselors

___ High school classmates

___ Mother/female guardian

___ Father/male guardian

___ Sibling(s)

___ Extended family member(s)

___ People in your neighborhood/community

___ Representatives from specific colleges or universities

___ Official web pages of colleges and universities

___ Recruitment materials sent to you from specific schools

___ College rankings

___ Official college tours

___ College fairs

___ Media (newspaper, TV, or magazines)

___ Employer

___ Faith community/church

Students rely on many types of sources to gain knowledge about future career fields. To what extent do you rely upon the following sources for information about future career fields?

(Not at all = 1, A little bit = 2, Fair amount = 3, Substantial amount = 4)

___ College teachers

___ College counselors

___ College classmates

___ Mother/female guardian

___ Father/male guardian

___ Sibling(s)

___ Extended family member(s)

___ People in your neighborhood/community

___ Representatives from specific colleges or universities

___ Official web pages of colleges and universities

___ Recruitment materials sent to you from specific schools

___ College rankings

___ Official college tours

___ College fairs

___ Media (newspaper, TV, or magazines)

___ Employer

___ Faith community/church

Figure 1. College-going webs of influence for community college students. The most prevalent sources of information are located near the center.

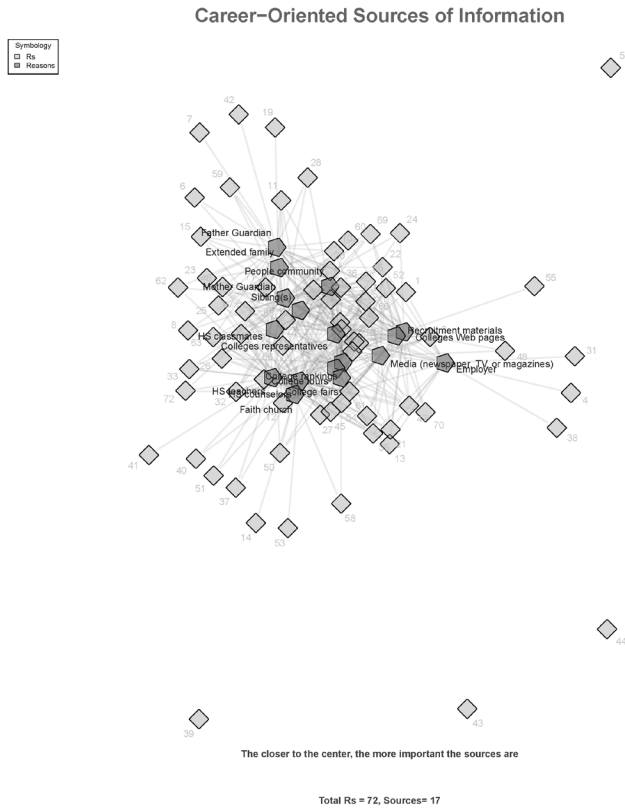

Figure 2. Career information webs of influence for community college students. The most prevalent sources of information are located near the center.

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