



CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
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Enhancing Social Capital: Policy Recommendations for First-Generation, Low- Income, and Students of Color in Higher Education

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Introduction

For marginalized college students—such as first-generation, low-income, and students of color—higher education has long been a battleground where they have fought for their futures and equal treatment, and it is no different in 2020. Institutions and societal structures that shape opportunity, such as colleges and universities, are being challenged. Amidst the Black Lives Matter movement, COVID-19, and other events; problems of racism and classism have continuously persisted to restrict opportunities for too many students with a new essence of publicity that we haven't seen previously.

College students at the forefront of this battle fight to receive better treatment from academic institutions. Young people are learning how to connect, network, and push back against societal norms (Networking, 2017). Students should not feel the pressure and have the personal responsibility to close the resource gap. They have immense pressure to develop relationships and networks so they can use these connections for their own gain. This concept defines social capital, which means transferring someone's relationships into personal, economic, or professional gain. Achieving this becomes especially difficult when it comes to students not included in the dominant culture—non-white, first-generation, and low-income students—for whom the disparities are increasingly evident. The challenges faced by these students consist of everyday looks from people on the street, the disregard felt in classrooms, and neglect from faculty. As the nation, and subsequently colleges, become more diverse; it is essential that postsecondary institutions provide the same opportunities so that these students can construct social capital like their more privileged counterparts.

Higher education professionals may not know precisely how to help students acquire and cultivate social capital, especially first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color who have the

assistance necessary to establish social capital. The goal of this policy brief is to examine one of the most influential factors associated with college student success—social capital—and to provide policy recommendations. These can range from diversifying staff to implement mentorship, creating more focused initiatives, and allocating more resources to these causes.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital is seen as networks and connections that can be transformed into personal or economic gain. The theory stems from several characteristics exhibited by members of a specific group. These people maintain relationships that lead to gaining access, building trust, and divulging information (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 22). Social capital allows members to further their ambitions, in which they would be unable to otherwise. Over time, social capital has become an integral part of education, specifically higher education, as well as the professional world.

Talking to professors, getting an internship, and finding opportunities become instilled into every college student's mind early in their journey. These tasks seem daunting to many, yet easily accomplishable to others. Social capital is intertwined with these actions as they lead to gaining access and information to propel a student's career forward. One of the drawbacks finds itself rooted in the basis of the concept, exclusivity in a community. College campuses, a community, naturally creates exclusion where the knowledge and techniques needed for social capital are inherited from family members, socioeconomic status, and geographical region (Bourdieu, 1986, 21). The ability to transfer social capital into benefiting one own's goals proves difficult even to those who have someone to help them along the way. Those who deviate from this perceived norm encounter more struggles as their relationships do not develop into beneficial and sustainable ones.

First-generation, low-income, and students of color all want to learn and grow during their college career. These students want the same jobs, desire connections, but they are at a disadvantage institutionally. Many feel devalued by their schools, which coincides with cultural and structural biases appearing in their learning environment (Bland, 2006, 15-18). Colleges do not provide enough resources and programs to cater and assist these types of students. With less opportunities to make personal and professional gains, social capital becomes a foreign concept to these students. This concept can allow marginalized students to receive better treatment so that their opportunities, relationships, and other experiences lead to successful outcomes. In attempts to address these concerns regarding these three types of students, colleges must restructure the foundation of their programs to allow for more successful results.

Colleges Students And Social Capital

Every college student's experience varies because each student brings their own identity and background to campus. Some students fit into the dominant culture that colleges and universities play into; financially stable and usually white. Other marginalized groups have a more difficult time adjusting to college campuses. A student's background can make it easier or harder to make connections and create social

capital. The students described fall into categories in which the structure of higher education perpetuates their mistreatment on campuses. By addressing each student's needs, these students can utilize social capital for their own personal or professional gain.

First-Generation Students

The term first-generation student refers to those who are among the first in their family to venture into tertiary education. Their parents either did not graduate college or stopped school after finishing high school. In the 2011-2012 academic year, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) found that 34% of undergraduates were the first to go to college in their families. For a third of college students falling into this category, these institutions have frameworks in place to help benefit these students (Chen, Nunnery, & Richards, 2015). These practices meant to help do not always come to fruition as studies show first-gen students still struggle on campus.

First-gen students may not know the procedures, policies, and "hidden curriculum" found at colleges. The "hidden curriculum" consists of the intangible features of schooling. These unwritten and unofficial lessons in schools instill values and perspectives into students (Hidden Curriculum Definition, 2015). The dominant culture already has previous knowledge about networking, establishing social capital, and knowing what to look for on campus. The "hidden curriculum" further divides these marginalized students because without the guidance of family members or acceptance of advising staff; they lack the ability to achieve the same status as their counterparts.

A drawback of these situations materializes as first-generation students, who receive more financial aid, end up not utilizing medical services, academic advising, and other centers on campus to serve them ("National Data Fact Sheets," 2019). These services provided by the university act as gateways for students to meet new people, build rapport, and expand their social network. By not having parents who graduated college, these students have to work harder to discover and create connections. Their journey to establish social capital contains more obstacles because of the lack of access personally and professionally. These situations present opportunities for universities to provide assistance through policy and programs to make these students as successful as their fellow students.

Low-Income Students

Low-income students include students who have an extreme financial need to pay for college. Their families' income falls below a certain threshold when it comes to financial aid. For instance, 59% of students who classified as low income had a family income between \$10,000 - \$19,999 during the 2015-2016 academic year. Before stepping on a college campus, many of these students come from homes where food insecurity and housing problems are a daily issue. While colleges provide massive amounts of financial aid, studies show low-income students still struggle financially. Consequently, class attendance, grades, and more decline due to the pressure on them (Chen, Nunnery, & Richards, 2015, p. 3).

Goldrick-Rab (2016) sampled 3,000 public college students in Wisconsin, who classified as low income. Their problems ranged from unstable food and housing, as well as taking time off from school and prioritizing work over school to earn money (Chen, Nunnery, & Richards, 2015, 2). A student should not have to worry about the basic needs of life, while trying to balance work and class assignments. Their stress-ridden lives become more fraught when tasked with establishing social capital. The “hidden curriculum” in higher education while known by these students can sometimes be physically impossible. Deciding between sustaining a relationship with a professor or working in order to eat at night, college students’ lives become a series of ultimatums. Social capital for these students becomes harder to establish and maintain because those who have more economic capital are much farther ahead. Bourdieu states that economic capital is the root of all others, so financially strained individuals face more difficulties when it comes to acquiring social capital. Low-income students also consist of a higher percentage of people of color when compared to their white counterparts.

Students Of Color

Students of color experience unnecessary barriers in higher education because of their identity. Over the previous two decades, college campuses have become more diverse, rising from 29.6 percent to 45.9 percent of students of color attending (AAC&U News, 2019). As this trend continues, universities need to listen to their experiences and learn to adapt so they can create a more inclusive environment for these students.

Even at a “diverse” college, the faculty and staff may not reflect these changes. With predominantly white professors, advisors, and staff, students of color may struggle in establishing relationships with their superiors. Research has found that White staff and faculty separate student’s backgrounds from their academic performance and experiences (Luedke, 2017). These actions discourage students of color from pursuing opportunities and establishing social capital in higher education. The cycle stays unbroken if colleges do not step in to fundamentally change how their internal processes work. The exclusionary nature of postsecondary education perpetuates stereotypes of these students. As faculty neglects certain aspects of a student’s identity, they disregard their hardships (Alon, 2009, p. 735). These actions reflect the larger, predominantly white professional world that students of color try to enter. The conditions make it more difficult for them to make connections and transform that into social capital. While some industries and sectors do not reflect this trend, higher education has trouble constructing an environment for these students to thrive.

Policy Recommendations

The disadvantages first-generation, low-income, and students of color deal with through their educational career can be addressed in college. Universities and other institutions have the money, power, and resources to propel students into the next phase of their lives. Three main objectives for campuses should be diversifying staff to set up mentor programs, creating more driven initiatives to help these students, and allocating more resources to students in need. These objectives tackle different obstacles of students’ lives so that they may be able to increase their social capital.

Mentorship

Creating new positions and hiring faculty members with more diversified backgrounds naturally makes a work environment more inclusive. For students of color, especially, they do not create and maintain the same relationships with their professors if they are of a different race, usually white. If there are more staff members of color, students of color have a higher chance of conversing and establishing connections, which leads to social capital. Staff of color tend to look at their academic experiences (Luedke, 2017). This mentality can be deconstructed, and studies on different campuses have shown promising results.

Community colleges have implemented a form of mentoring between men of color within the student and staff body. The structure of mentorship in these cases involves commitment from the student, staff, and administration. The student's social capital increases as the three work together to provide opportunities and connections. Mentoring can help a student navigate the world of higher education. By receiving advice and support from a staff member of color, it can increase a student's chance of success and longevity when it comes to their specific field (Torrens, Salinas, & Floyd, 2017).

If community colleges can perform these programs on a small scale, large flagship universities like the University of Wisconsin can design and produce well-structured mentor programs for students of color. Not only creating these programs but going a step further by actively advertising these opportunities can attract students in need. If students of color do not know about the prospect of finding a mentor, then the programs will not reach their full potential (Bruni, 2015). Diversifying staff and mentor programs act as examples of more driven initiatives for more disadvantaged students. Other types of programs can be created in order to enhance their social capital.

Expanded/Focused Programs

The vitality of social capital becomes more apparent as time goes on, and first-generation students do not have the same networks or knowledge about higher education. Their information may come from their own research or from their secondary school counselors and teachers. College planning, whether informal or formal, helps any student prepare for their future. Advantaged students, although, go into college with preparation, college-educated parents, and more which translates to more success (Couturier & Cunningham, 2006, p. 57). First-generation students lack the ability or resources sometimes to connect with those who can assist. Higher education can level the playing field by providing resources to students in need.

There are established programs like Upward Bound and Talent Search, which provides first-gen and low-income students with pre-college services. Increasing college awareness, tutoring, and counseling represent some services provided to middle and high school students (Engle, 2007, p. 37). 75 percent of students who participate in this program go to college, when compared to only 40 percent of other similar students. Transferring these programs to higher education can continue the trend, which can lead to widespread social capital becoming a norm amongst these types of students (Engle, 2007, p. 39).

Higher education institutions should design policy for first-generation students to navigate the “hidden curriculum” of college campuses, as well as the general services offered. Expanding upon current programs for incoming students can create a safety net and give them the necessary resources (Couturier & Cunningham, 2006, p. 50). Ranging from multicultural centers, financial aid, medical services, first-generation students deserve to know the vast number of resources they can utilize while on campus. By giving these students this knowledge, it puts them on the same playing field as their counterparts. Social capital can begin to flourish, as students learn how to talk to professors and develop relationships. Social capital becomes nurtured for students of color, more accessible for first-gen students, and attainable for low-income students if higher education takes these aforementioned steps.

Allocation Of Resources

Low-income students have a wide range of responsibilities like paying rent, grocery shopping, and covering bills. Even though these duties fall onto all students, low-income ones struggle to meet these needs because of their financial situation. Economic capital acts as the root of all other capitals; students in dire need of financial support lack the resources to establish social capital, much less sustain it (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 24). By relieving the financial burden placed on these students, it opens up the possibility for them to enhance their social capital and make academic gains. A small portion of Universities have established ambitious programs in order to provide assistance. University of Virginia, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and other campuses cover full tuition for low-income students, which alleviates stress surrounding food and housing insecurity (Couturier & Cunningham, 2006, p. 56). As these students receive more financial attention, access to professors and other vessels of social capital can increase.

To further incorporate these students on campus, as they receive more financial aid, giving them information about career advisors, application processes, and other services can enhance their social capital (Crawley, Cheuk, Mansoor, Perez, & Park, 2019). The exclusivity associated with social capital begins to fade as these students gain more access to programs and knowledge about their campus. The opportunities presented to them can help further their ambitions with the support from higher education professionals. Colleges have a duty to attend to the needs of their student population. With the presence of many low-income, first-gen, and students of color growing on campuses, higher education must help their students win the battle.

Conclusion

As we experience these unprecedented times, education, especially higher education, has to adapt their policies to support the future leaders of our country. First-generation, low-income, and students of color all should have the capacity to enhance their social capital in college. With the stressed importance of networking, campuses and faculty have to produce ways in which students can benefit. Acknowledging and addressing the problems takes the first step in creating effective policy and programs. Through diversifying staff and aiding in mentorships across campus involving staff and students of color can foster social and cultural capital. Expanding programs to incorporate more first-generation students into the inner workings

of college campuses can lead to more established relationships and social capital. In terms of financial resources, increasing the funding to alleviate the pressure faced by low-income students allows them to navigate higher education to enhance their social capital. With the trend of higher rates of diversity on campuses, these groups of students cannot keep being continually disadvantaged (Crawley, Cheuk, Mansoor, Perez, & Park, 2019). The institutions in power need to right their wrongs, for the future is in the hands of younger generations. These policy recommendations, when fleshed out and adapted to college campuses, can positively benefit these affected students.

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