A Proposal for Building Social Capital to Increase College Access for Low-Income Students

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Abstract

This article examines the role of social capital in college access for low-income students. Research suggests that low social capital is a barrier for achieving higher education. Furthermore, research shows that increasing social capital provides students with relevant information, strong networks, and realistic goal-setting necessary for college access. Evidence supports both strong and weak networks, specifically family, peer, and school relationships. A comparison of the individual networks reveals that isolated relationships are inadequate for increasing college access. The policy recommendation is for an integration of all three networks to provide a comprehensive framework for substantially increasing low-income students' access to higher education.
Keywords: College Access; College Preparedness, Low-income Students; Social Capital

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Problem Definition

College enrollment and graduation rates among low-income students lag behind their more privileged peers (Brown, Wohn & Ellison, 2016; Enberg & Allen, 2011). Often, low-income students are also underrepresented minorities and first-generation prospective college students. Due to the structure of most institutions of higher education; low-income, underrepresented, and first-generation students find themselves facing tremendous barriers to college access and degree attainment, which has important implications. For example, first-generation students are twice as likely to drop out of college compared to others (Cataldi, Bennett & Chen, 2018). Improving college enrollment and completion is of great social value, as college graduation is associated with many benefits including higher earnings, better employment, and home ownership (Rugaber, 2017). Lack of social capital has been identified as a leading cause of lower levels of college graduation in low-income communities. Therefore, one possible way to increase enrollment is to build social capital related to college access and preparedness.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to intangible resources people inherit or accumulate over the course of their lives. These resources include expectations, information channels, and social norms (Ho, 2002). Some have defined social capital as networks, associations, volunteering, trust, cooperation, empathy, reciprocity, belonging and relationships (Plagens, 2011). Pierre Bourdieu, who is considered the father of the term social capital, defines it in terms of networks and group membership, while James S. Coleman, another early theorist on social capital, suggests it is about learning norms and authority related to success (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). In this case, social capital encompasses accumulated resources, networks, values and relationships that mobilize a student's access, abilities, and success in attaining postsecondary education.

Social Capital and Higher Education

Researchers and policymakers have argued in favor of building social capital for students in order to increase access to higher education. Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman (2013) suggest that social capital is context-specific, existing within families and schools. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), they found that social capital is better represented as two separate factors: one reflecting social capital created in the family and one reflecting social capital created in school. Furthermore, they found that both family and school social capital have unique and positive effects on academic achievement. This suggests that programs designed to increase college success through social capital should target both contexts.

Other researchers have confirmed the importance of context-specific social capital for college access and persistence with a variety of subpopulations (Brown et al., 2016). For example, studying the relevance of social capital in the college experiences of Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA), Palmer and Maramba (2015) found that caring agents, such as families, teachers, and peers, and supportive organizations like student services, helped develop the social capital of SEAA college students, which increased their college access, adjustment, and success. Furthermore, these caring agents, support services, and organizations facilitated the development of social capital for the study's participants who had the highest poverty rates among Asian American Pacific Islander populations.

Social Capital and Relational Capacity

The lack of relational capacity is one important aspect of social capital that contributes to the barriers to access and success in higher education for low income students. This lack specifically

hinders them (and their parents) from obtaining information necessary to prepare and navigate through the college-going process. While social capital generally has a positive impact on academic achievement in higher education, it affords certain individuals competitive advantages to resources and status over others (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Relationships and networks that build social capital help individuals otherwise excluded from these opportunities to regain ground. Bernhart (2013) describes the networks created by a college readiness program, AVID, as fostering consistent encouragement, purpose, and connection, which help students develop a stronger sense of norms surrounding college entry. Without these social networks, it is possible that students excluded from existing privileged channels within schools would have no pathway forward for understanding the college readiness process.

Some scholars suggest the charge to build social capital networks falls on students, families, and schools. Students must be proactive in the pursuit of establishing networks with passion, independence, and resiliency (Hennessy-Himmelhebber, 2015). However, these actions alone, when coupled with a lack of knowledge about the college process, are not always enough to adequately prepare students for success in obtaining higher education or prepare their families to support them. For example, in the "tip of the iceberg" theory, Elliott, Brenneman, Carney, and Robbins (2018) liken minority male students' lack of information about college choice to the tip of an iceberg, suggesting students are making decisions about college with only a fraction of the information necessary to make prudent choices. This study links the dearth of information to the absence of contacts, relationships, and networks that provide individuals with information about resources and opportunities available. The responsibility to establish these networks does not solely fall on the student. As shown in a study by Elliott, Brennenan, Carney, and Robbins (2018), parental, peer and school informational networks all have a distinct role to play in terms of the knowledge they equip students with when making important decisions about their higher education.

Silva and Reyes (2013) consider that all relationships and networks are not of equal status in a student's life. They distinguish between strong ties (e.g., regular, consistent relationships such as with family, which usually involve expectation, trust, and some level of norms enforcement), and weak ties (e.g., infrequent, impersonal and typically top-down in natüre relationships, such as with teachers or guidance counselors). In addition to their unique role in students' lives, these ties do not always share equal influence in a student's educational trajectory. Strong ties are usually horizontal, meaning shared between individuals of the same social status, while weak ties are usually vertical, characterized by networks of individuals with different social statuses. Those students who develop both strong and weak ties surrounding the predisposition, search, application, and enrollment processes for college will be more successful than those who only build one form of social network or who have no social networks at all. Researchers have also highlighted the fact that minority students are less likely to forge vertical relationships that increase their access to certain forms of social capital and facilitate the transition into selective colleges (Hill, Bregman & Andrade, 2014). Network composition is an undeniably important factor in closing the socioeconomic and racial gap in higher education access.

Policy Alternatives for Increasing Social Capital

The policy proposal we are advancing here seeks to address the gaps in college preparedness and access in low-income communities. Using research on social capital, we analyze three possible ways to supplement what schools, particularly high schools, are already doing to help students prepare for college. This proposal focuses on three specific types of relationships that help facilitate the development of family and school social capital for high school students: 1) relationships between high school students preparing for college; 2) relationships between high school alumni who are in college and high school students preparing for college; and 3) relationships between parents of high school alumni who are in college and parents of high school students preparing for college. After analyzing the research and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each approach,

we believe the most effective way to build social capital in low-income communities would be to create a social network for both high school students and their families centered on preparing for college that leverages both in-person meetings and an online networking platform.

Policy Alternative 1: High School Student to High School Student Network

One way to support the college success of students from low-income families is to foster networking among high school students with this focus in their lives. Some research suggests that student-to-student networks have a positive impact on educational achievement. According to Ryan (2000), peer interactions influence students' motivation, engagement, information exchange, role modeling, and reinforcement of peer group norms and values, and achievement in school.

Additionally, peer interactions, specifically through close friends, have a strong influence on educational attainment for disadvantaged students. In an analysis of educational attainment of low-income urban minority students using the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) database, Sokatch (2006) found that friends' college plans and wishes are powerful predictors for enrollment in a 4-year postsecondary institution for high school graduates of low-income, urban and minority background. Moreover, these students are 10 times more likely to attend a 4-year college when they see that most or all of their friends plan to go to college or when they hear that their friends want them to go to college.

In addition to peer interactions, social media, such as Facebook, play a growing role in the development of peer networks, often increasing peer network capacity. These social media tools enhance connections that are useful for spurring college aspirations, facilitating the exchange of information about college, and increasing college success (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Social media can also help disseminate information about the college-going process. Through posting of acceptance letters, providing emotional support, posing questions regarding the college application process, and sharing information about college applications, social media has increased the development and dependence of student-to-student support networks (Villareal, 2016; Wohn et al., 2013). For example, having Facebook Friends who are currently attending or have graduated from college can serve as positive examples, specifically building confidence in attaining college success, for students of similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Peer networks, through the growing use of social media, have also become a part of the college application process.

However, there are limitations to relying solely on peer-to-peer networks for gaining information about college access and success. Social media may serve as an extended network for some students, but it does not necessarily have the same impact on other students. While social media played a bigger role for first-generation students pursuing the college-going process, Wohn et al. (2013) found that social media did not necessarily help support the development of confidence and efficacy in the application process for non-first-generation students. A potential cause could be that non-first-generation students had information resources from immediate or other forms of networks, whereas first-generation students significantly depended on social media to access these resources, which impacted their access to the same quality of information when compared to the information gained from accessing mixed networks. Utilizing only peer networks can impact the success of access to high quality information necessary for college success.

Similarly, dependence on peer networks for college information not only limits the quality of the information, but also prevents students from fully attaining their educational potential and abilities. Based on an analysis of survey data collected from two urban high schools, Hill, Bregman, and Andrade (2014) found that disadvantaged students who relied heavily on peer networks for college information and guidance were less likely to apply to more prestigious colleges. However, when parent and school networks served as important resources for information about the college-going

process, there were no significant effects on college selectivity during the application process. A strictly peer-to-peer relationship, while it can be beneficial for students, limits the quality of college information students receive, which can impact the scope of their college choices. This network approach for building social capital limits the beneficial resources that can be gained from other networks such as family and school.

Policy Alternative 2: Alumni to High School Student Network

Another alternative to raise social capital among low-income high school students would be a mentorship program linking high school students with their former classmates who are now college students. Research has found mentorship programs where high school students work closely with college students—particularly in organized, in-person activities -- offer significant benefits in terms of social and academic capital for high school students (DiMaria, 2015; Luczak & Kalbag, 2018).

Mangan (2015) describes a program for first-generation students in 44 high schools wherein college students from the University of Texas at Brownsville conducted hands on STEM activities with these high school students, leading to critical discussions on topics such as college application, admission, and the pursuit of a career in STEM through these sustained interactions. Similarly, DiMaria (2015) examines another program where 29 high achieving high school students were linked with two mentors from University of North Carolina, Wilmington, who were provided with professional development and training in a program called MI CASA. MI CASA is a support program that links Hispanic students with available resources needed for achieving academically and professionally. This program boosted Hispanic student acceptances into colleges, including Ivy League institutions, and provided disadvantaged high school students with knowledge and role models for successfully applying and attaining postsecondary education.

In addition, in their analysis of a peer mentoring program that used sustained workshops where undergraduate mentors were matched with high school mentees (167 one-to-one matches), Luczak and Kalbag (2018) found that the program significantly increased the perceived level of future success in college for low-income students who do not have any family members that attended college. It also significantly increased the effectiveness of a formulated business plan, and a higher level of comfort on a college campus for all participating students on average, and, most significantly, for the lower income students. Castleman and Page (2015) found that meeting with college-aged mentors, who provided first-hand experience and encouragement, increased college enrollment rates by 4.5 percent for high school students from low-income backgrounds. Such mentoring programs where high school students are mentored by alumni have been found to significantly improve overall aspects for college access, perceived level of future success in college, comfort on college campuses, and sense of encouragement and support.

Though high school students report they are independently seeking information about college preparation and application online, these students, particularly students from low-income backgrounds, lack the contextualization necessary to understand, synthesize, and apply the information to their own experiences (Brown, Wohn, & Ellison, 2016). Therefore, alumni-as-mentors provide a necessary function by translating and contextualizing information found online about preparing and applying to college for high school students.

Many existing programs, though useful, are limited in scope. The systematic pairing of high school students with alumni is suggested for the purposes of relatability between mentor and mentee. As of now, there is a lack of research indicating the benefit of such matching in a high school-to-high school alumni mentorship program. In fact, there are some potential challenges for this approach. These challenges include the number of alumni willing to participate and concerns of safety in the interactions between minors and young adults in college. In addition, a program focusing primarily on sustaining a relationship between high school students and alumni would overlook the numerous

benefits of the inclusion of parental and familial involvement in the college application and attendance process as well as the benefits of peer-to-peer interactions within high schools.

Policy Alternative 3: Parents of Mentors to Parents of High School Student Network

A third option for increasing social capital is supporting the relational capacity of students' parents. Since Coleman (1988) highlighted parental involvement as a form of social capital, the connection between the role of parents and education (e.g., Dika & Singh, 2002; Epstein et al., 2018; Henderson, 1987; Hill & Taylor, 2004) and college preparation (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005) has been extensively researched. Current outreach programs by schools for parents of students preparing for college may be insufficient to overcome the challenges facing parental involvement. However, a program that specifically aims to increase relational capacity by facilitating parent networking may help overcome the barriers to college access faced by families with low social capital.

Increased relational capacity can lead to increased parental involvement in school-related activities. Parents who are the most knowledgeable about school policies are highly involved in school activities or connected to an informal network of parents, or both, suggesting parents with higher relational capacity and/or high rates of involvement have higher social capital (Useem, 1992). Furthermore, the informal networks of parents need not be large nor extensive to lead to increased parent involvement. For example, the average parent networks consist of two or three parents. Furthermore, connecting an isolated parent with one or two other parents may be sufficient to increase parental involvement (Sheldon, 2002). Increased parental involvement in schools generally can be viewed as a precursor to encouraging parental involvement in college readiness programs. If parental networks are already solidified, participation in college readiness programs should be more streamlined.

A parent-to-parent network changes the paradigm of information dissemination from a top-down approach where information flows from school-to-parent to a decentralized model of parents communicating with each other and the school. While educators and schools have long hoped to increase the parental involvement of low-income populations (e.g., Greenwood & Hickman, 1991), programs have not always been successful in bringing together schools and parents with lower social capital (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The challenges may include limitations of time; lack of accessibility to school facilities; scheduling conflicts for parent-school events; financial constraints; and inaccurate contact information (Williams & Sánchez, 2013). There is also the potential for an insufficient pool of parent mentors who are willing to undergo leadership training and take on additional responsibilities. There may also be varying familiarity and knowledge towards technology, which may impede the facilitation of these parent networks. Lastly, the more centralized models that currently exist should increase the accuracy of information from school to parent by reducing reliance on students as a conduit of information (e.g., fewer letters sent home that are lost in backpacks) and by reducing language barriers (e.g., enabling parent-leaders who share a language with other parents to translate and decode school announcements).

Policy Recommendation: Increase Social Capital vis-à-vis Student *and* Family Networks

While each of the three alternatives presented would individually aid in increasing the social capital of high school students and their families in low-income communities, building social capital is a complex problem and none of the alternatives presented alone would be able to account for the myriad of barriers facing this population. Focusing on peer-to-peer interactions would help develop relationships between students, but it may not be an effective way to disseminate information about college since they may all be faced with limited knowledge and social capital.

Bringing together high school students with college students who are alumni of the same high school could potentially bridge this gap, but the networks would still be limited in terms of the scope of information they could provide to one another (Luczak & Kalbag, 2018; Mangan, 2015). Moreover, a program focused solely on alumni-to-high-school-student mentoring would not be able to address familial barriers such as being asked to come home too often or misinformed expectations about college majors or grades. Finally, a parental mentoring program would benefit the high school students and their families in many ways but also faces challenges such as time constraints, language barriers, status barriers, issues with technology, and student discomfort with asking their parents questions about college life that would limit the impact of the network.

Low-income students lack comprehensive resources for increasing their social capital. As such, we believe the most effective way to build social capital around college access and readiness in low-income communities would be to incorporate all of these elements into one multilayered program. Therefore, we propose the College Access and Readiness Community Network (CARCN) for supporting and increasing social capital of low-income, underrepresented students.

CARCN: A Prospective Policy Approach for Improved College Access and Readiness

The College Access and Readiness Community Network (CARCN) is designed to build social capital around college access and readiness using high school student peer-to-peer, alumni-to-high school student, and parent of alumni-to-parent of high school student networking.

The program design employs a program coordinator, alumni mentors, and parent mentors in developing the different networks. A program coordinator, most likely a guidance counselor or equivalent, in conjunction with student volunteers, program mentors, and college students and/or faculty, would engage the school's own alumni, who are currently in college, and their parents as mentors within these networks. Both alumni and parents would have to complete an application to participate in the program, which would include an agreement to participate for a minimum number of mentoring hours. After the preliminary selection of mentors, alumni and parent applicants would also need to pass a background check and attend a mentor-training program.

At the high school level, incoming ninth graders and their parents and/or guardians would submit a questionnaire that would be used to match them to mentors. High school students would then be organized into small groups of five, with two alumni mentors. In addition to having alumni mentor the students, these small group networks would provide students the opportunity to closely interact with their high school peers, which is also crucial to building social capital. Similarly, as part of the parent network, parents of high school students would complete a questionnaire and be assigned to a small parent network group with the flexibility to reach out to other mentors as needed. Each parent group would consist of two approved and trained parent mentors and a small number of program parents. Program coordinators would assign discussion groups based on similarity of interest, and when possible, include parents with children of different ages. Parents would attend formal events and have structured engagement; content for which would be developed in the program curriculum. However, the group discussions are intended to be informal and can be facilitated through an online discussion board or other similar technology that allows group members to post messages to the entire group. Parent mentors would be responsible for monitoring message boards, answering questions from and advising program parents, and sharing information such as announcements or reminders from program coordinators.

Developing the relationships between mentors and mentees is critical to the success of the program. For this reason, CARCN would incorporate structured in-person events for mentors and mentees. For example, there would be a kick-off event once students and their families are matched with mentors to introduce the program, establish relationships, and provide an opportunity to get to know each other's particular interests and background. Meetings would be designed to develop the

relationship between mentors and their mentees, and meeting times can be designated depending upon school preferences and student needs. During Thanksgiving break might be a time college and high school students are able to meet in person since college students typically return home for a few days for the holiday. Mentors, mentees, and schools can work together to determine how many in-person meetings will be feasible throughout the course of the program.

However, this limited amount of contact would not be enough to build successful relationships. Thus, an online social network would also be created to facilitate conversations between mentors and mentees in between in-person meetings. The online component would leverage existing school technology and be facilitated and monitored by the program coordinator. For instance, programs could utilize Facebook groups that offshoot from the school's main page or a district online forum could be used to host the online conversations. Students and their families could pose questions to mentors at any time on any related topic. This online component would provide mentors and mentees with continuous contact and aid in developing and strengthening relationships. We suggest that coordinators implement some kind of structure surrounding online engagement as well. This could take the form of specific days or weeks that mentors would be required to check their mentee group messages and/or have "live" online discussions centered on certain preset topics or topics of their choosing.

A program curriculum would be developed to address previously researched gaps in knowledge and experience for low-income high school students interested in attending college. In addition to addressing the specific questions and concerns from high school students and their parents, the CARCN's program would follow a specialized curriculum that both the online interactions and in-person meetings would be based on. The curriculum would include topics such as:

- High school and college course selection;
- Career exploration;
- College selection and application process;
- College culture and environment;
- Financial aid (e.g. federal student aid (FAFSA)) and scholarships;
- Socioemotional support for students (e.g., mental health, self-care, time management, family dynamics, and making good life choices that are specific to students); and
- Socioemotional support for parents (e.g., changing family dynamics and how to better support their children as they attend college).

While the curriculum would have several foundational units like those listed above, the program coordinator would have the flexibility to tailor the program to the needs of the community, and mentors would manage the bulk of the information sharing. Mentees would have ample opportunity to ask questions outside of the curriculum as necessary.

Program evaluation would also be a significant part of CARCN. After every school year, a formal assessment would be completed to evaluate the progress of the program. Through the process of implementing CARCN, participating members will complete evaluations at different stages of the program, providing feedback for continuous improvement. Some examples of metrics would include change in perspective on likelihood of attending college and parental involvement in the college-going process, college selection, and matriculation into college. Mentees and mentors would also have the opportunity to evaluate each other. Any information gaps or issues would then be addressed by the program coordinator and would inform the current and following year's curriculum. Similarly, before graduation, every high school student would complete an overall evaluation of the program. Again, this overall assessment would be used to make changes in order to improve the effectiveness of the program. CARCN would be assessed using the feedback gained from the continuous and yearly evaluations and through quantitative (e.g., the number of college applications, acceptances, and enrollment) and qualitative data (e.g., student and parent interviews

and focus groups) analysis. Long-term data on retention and graduation of college mentors and high school mentees would also be collected as the cohorts move through college.

CARCN: Strengths and Weaknesses

While we believe that CARCN would be the most effective way to build social capital within low-income communities, we recognize that there will be challenges to actually piloting such an ambitious program. The first challenge is the use of an online platform to facilitate communication between the student and parent mentors and mentees. It would be cost prohibitive to build a platform from scratch, and as technology changes, so does the use of technology. For this reason, our proposal focuses on using existing technology hosted by the schools. Some schools have Facebook groups where they post information and others have online forums. We want to leverage these existing tools to save money and to make sure families are not forced to download and learn a whole new platform, which may negatively impact the success of the program. Especially in low-income communities, not all families have access to computers and the Internet. Therefore, we propose that the program coordinator find alternative strategies to engage participants with limited resources, such as opening the school computer lab for public use in the evenings, using computers offered at the local library, phone calls, paper newsletters, or more frequent in-person meetings.

A second major challenge is effectively building strong and lasting relationships between mentors and mentees. Although the program promotes various forms of interactions, effective relationships need to be developed through time and effort. If the program were only online, this would be very difficult. However, the incorporation of in-person meetings and other events can help build those relationships. In addition, allowing flexibility for participation in online interactions and discussions will encourage communication among the various networks, which will further strengthen the development of relationships between mentor and mentee.

On the other hand, we also want to make sure that the relationships between the college students and high school students are structured and safe. In order to protect and ensure safe communication protocols with minors, high school students will be assigned into small groups with more than one alumni mentor to avoid one-to-one mentor and mentee relationships. Additionally, all online communications and interactions will be monitored. We believe this group dynamic and monitoring will reduce the potential for risks and danger. In addition, background checks and a stringent process of screening and professional training, which includes training in state regulations for working with minors, will also help minimize such issues. Parents or legal guardians will also be required to sign a parental consent form so that they are aware of the program's components and their parental rights for monitoring their child's engagement with mentors. While these actions can help minimize the issue of safety, there is no way to guarantee that an issue will not present itself at some point; however, we are committed to protecting the safety of high school students.

The last, and perhaps most serious, challenge to the program's implementation is gaining support or "buy-in" from members within the school district: administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, students, and parents. Having support from various actors of the program will ensure its success, because these actors will be more willing to actively implement the program. It is of paramount importance to gain the support of guidance counselors who will serve as program coordinators and primarily be in charge of the implementation of CARCN. In order to better assess needs and attitudes of guidance counselors, an important component of CARCN involves extensive focus group studies and information sessions with these stakeholders prior to starting CARCN at their school(s).

Another aspect of CARCN is that guidance counselors may become primary allies. This new program intends to re-allocate scarce resources while improving social capital for students. Because of dwindling resources available to school districts, especially those in low-income communities,

there has been an increase in the number of students per guidance counselor, making it difficult for counselors to effectively support their students. CARCN has the potential to reduce the workload burden of guidance counselors and allow them to reach a greater number of students than the system currently allows. Research has shown that guidance counselors work with an unsustainable number of students in high schools across the country. The American School Counselor Association (2015) recommends a counselor to student ratio of 250:1. In New Jersey, guidance counselors are responsible for 350 students, on average, and some states have over 700 to one counselor (American School Counselor Association, 2015). With this program, alumni and parent mentors would act as a "first stop" for gathering information on the college-going process, which would give guidance counselors more time to focus on attending to students who are most in need. These networks would also allow guidance counselors to better support students, and possibly parents, who are often unintentionally ignored due to the large student and family load per guidance counselor.

Although initial efforts for starting and establishing CARCN may be considerable for guidance counselors, additional support can be provided to reduce the workload burden. As part of the initial implementation process and to transition guidance counselors into their new roles, we propose utilizing external resources (e.g., undergraduate interns, graduate students, or even talented high school students) for various components of the program. Such responsibilities include collecting data, monitoring the online platform, and coordinating in-person activities and events. Similarly, external partnerships and resources can be utilized for the development of the basic foundational curriculum. For example, curriculum writing can be done by, or in conjunction with, faculty members from colleges and universities. While guidance counselors already have a heavy workload, the proposed initial efforts are meant to establish, support, and transition guidance counselors into their new roles for full implementation of CARCN within their own schools. Using external resources can provide support for guidance counselors, but can also serve as a potential limitation due to constraints on financial resources for school districts.

CARCN: The Best Solution to Alternative Challenges

Earlier we reviewed program alternatives that seek to strengthen the relationship between discrete single entity-to-single entity networks—specifically, high school student-to-high school student, high school alumni-to-high school student, and parent of alumni-to-parent of high school networks. The CARCN model addresses the weaknesses of each network through its collaborative integration of all three of these relationships.

The structure of the CARCN program provides for rich interaction between high school students. Structuring small mentorship groups of high school students and alumni may give students an opportunity to not only learn from the alumni mentors, but to also share their perspectives and practices with their own peers. Along with other benefits, which include student safety (discussed earlier in this section), establishing small groups of peers will also encourage support and camaraderie amongst the high school students in these designated groups. Interaction among peers in the form of formal group exercises, and even informal communication (e.g., via social media), will serve to grow high school peer networks around the college going process.

As for parental involvement, we suggest that the CARCN program can enrich parental knowledge and networks that support college-readiness for their children. In addition to increasing parent interactions, program coordinators are also responsible for identifying and training qualified parent mentors. An application process would be used for screening and selecting parent mentors. This could increase parental involvement in schools, which has been a significant issue across school districts. The focus of these parent networks is to group parents of similar backgrounds and interests to effectively provide parent access to information on college attainment for their children. Program coordinators would utilize the parent background information questionnaire for determining and creating these parent groups

CARCN: Considerations for Piloting

We propose piloting CARCN in a local school in New Jersey. A pilot program would help bring on state legislators as allies, especially if the program was successful and did not require additional financial resources. This would be especially helpful for school districts already implementing and searching for mentorship programs with similar goals as CARCN. Other allies and potential sources of outside funding that would be swayed by a pilot program are organizations that focus on educational equity, foundations focused on education, colleges and universities, local schools and/or school districts, and companies such as Educational Testing Service and the College Board, especially when backed by the necessary research suggesting potential success. Many of the mentioned organizations and foundations with interests in educational equity and college access and readiness would benefit from CARCN as a specific program to meet a variety of their goals. Funding and technical support from such organizations can then remove management responsibilities from schools and funding strains from districts by perhaps allowing for a paid position (whether occupied by an intern or other staff person). The extent to which a school may be involved in running a program and its many parts will be negotiable and navigated throughout the pilot period and may have different results depending upon the school. Results from these pilot programs, however, can provide feedback for the improvement of CARCN and the ratio of involvement and program management between the schools and funders, as well as a variety of other factors at play in running the program.

Thoughts for Further Consideration

There are a few steps that can be considered to ensure that all students are served and provided with the social capital needed for college readiness. One suggestion is to consider the ways in which teachers serve as role models in the lives of many students, and how many students might be better served if teachers have involvement in, and access to, the networks created by CARCN. Teacher participation can be facilitated through being a part of conversations, mentor to mentee relationships, or identifying and recommending program students or alumni. It can even be accomplished by simply gaining feedback from teachers on particular students' needs and attitudes in relation to college readiness and preparation, which CARCN can incorporate into its curriculum.

Another step that can be taken to provide students with the earliest intervention is to extend the program to middle school students where mentor to mentee relationships are built even earlier. Such an extension can provide students with the potential for a stronger bond, as well as earlier exposure to social capital relating to college readiness. For example, mentors can provide their mentees valuable information on course selection that can increase their likelihood of success in higher education. In addition, special needs students are not to be forgotten in this program, as the difficulties in college access and readiness faced by such students are many. Where high school students may be matched with alumni of their own high school, high school students with special needs and their parents can be matched with college students with special needs and their parents to guide them through the process of college application and explain the various services available to them in higher education.

Conclusion

Graduating with a college degree has important implications. College graduates earn 84 percent more than their peers over their lifetime, are more likely to receive benefits such as healthcare and retirement savings plans, and are more likely to hone the critical thinking skills and soft skills important for success in any career (Heckler, 2018). Yet, low-income students often lack the necessary financial and social capital to pursue postsecondary education. Additionally, first-generation students, who also tend to be low-income, are twice as likely to drop out of college as

their more advantaged peers (Cataldi, Bennett & Chen, 2018). A lack of social capital around the intricacies of higher education is one of the most important factors influencing this disparity in college access and success. Low-income and first-generation students face many obstacles when compared to their peers, including "a lack of knowledge of the campus environment, its academic expectations and bureaucratic operations; and a lack of adequate academic preparation" (Thayer, 2000, p. 4). Building the social capital of low-income and first-generation students and their families would help them overcome these obstacles and lead to higher graduation rates.

While schools currently have a variety of ways in which they develop social capital in students, there is not much focus on how to build the social capital of families and communities. Research identifies an influential role for mentors in increasing college enrollment for low-income, underrepresented youth (Ahn, 2010). It is not the mentor relationship alone that is valuable, but also the mentor's relationship within their own network. In what Bourdieu calls "the multiplier effect," mentors can transfer their cultural capital to their mentee and thus expand their realm of knowledge and access through the extended network of the mentor (Ahn, 2010).

Several alternatives exist as solutions to building social capital around higher education in low-income communities including utilizing mentors in student-to-student, alumni-to-high-school-student, and parent-to-parent networking. However, given existing research outcomes, we recommend a more comprehensive approach that integrates elements of all three approaches together. The College Access and Readiness Community Network (CARN) is an ambitious program, but we believe it has the most potential for substantial long-term positive impacts for low-income students and their communities.

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