

The Different Social Networks That Impact College Readiness Between Genders

By Megan O'Neill, Ed.D.

Abstract

Strong evidence suggests that U.S. high schools are falling short of graduating college- and career-ready students, giving rise to calls for more focus on the factors that impact students' success in college and career. The main purpose of this research was to identify the impact of social support networks on college readiness across genders in hopes of producing findings that could help future students become college-ready. The 18 participants ($n = 18$) were 18 to 22-year-old undergraduate students with various backgrounds and genders. This qualitative case study involved interviews, journals, and surveys used to examine how different social networks affected the participants' college preparation.

Introduction

College and career readiness became a point of interest in the education system starting over the last half century with various government initiatives. Strong evidence suggests that U.S. high schools are falling short of graduating college- and career-ready students, giving rise to calls for more focus on the factors that impact students' success in college and career. New York State has implemented an accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act that requires schools to measure all students who graduate high school and attend college (New York State Education Department Office of Accountability, 2020). This act does not guarantee that students are college-ready. Ed Trust, a national non-profit advocacy group that supports all students achieving high academic standards, reported that only 8% of U.S. high school graduates completed a full college and career readiness curriculum (Bromberg & Theokas, 2016), and one-third of U.S. high school graduates completed a college-ready curriculum.

School districts and school counselors have stepped in to assist with these gaps; however, the school-counselor-to-student ratio is high, and not all students receive the specific support they need. To be successful in college, students must be college-ready; the research question that guided this study was: What are the most effective social networks for each gender?

Literature review

This study examined how the impact of social networks on college readiness differed between genders. Previous researchers have studied components of what prepares a student for college, and this literature review highlights the key components and how they relate to social networks. Although many factors influence college readiness, this study focused on how support networks affected college readiness differently across genders.

Tierney and Auerbach (2005) focused on how social groups affect college readiness by reviewing the literature on family engagement. The authors argued that family engagement is vital to college preparation for underrepresented students, and they showed parents wanted to more helpfully guide their children throughout the college process. The researchers reviewed the history of parent involvement, in the 21st century, families play a critical role in fostering a child's academic success. The term family has traditionally referred to a mother, father, and two to three children; however, that definition has broadened to include extended family members such as older siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Tierney and Auerbach (2005) showed how parental support differed for students from different racial backgrounds, with some types of support (i.e., motivational words) more visible than others (i.e., fiscal sacrifice). Cultural capital and a willingness to invest in the academic sector influence academic achievement (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). White parents with high social and economic status encourage cultural capital by constantly reminding their children of the value of education and its impact on long-term financial gain, and students with lower socioeconomic status must rely on school counselors (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Social capital is disproportionately dispersed in society, giving social mobility to families that have invested in educational growth as a way to increase cultural capital. Families with high social and economic status invest now by showing their children how they can invest in themselves to achieve social mobility by furthering their education. Conversely, families with low social and economic status may not be able to pursue such goals due to financial constraints (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

Tierney and Auerbach (2005) showed that students had higher rates of achievement, attendance, homework completion, graduation, and college enrollment in homes where parents were more involved with their lives, were supportive, and expected success. In addition, the authors found that high socioeconomic status parents were more likely to seek additional help for their struggling or low-performing child, and college-educated parents could better guide their children in course selection, so they took appropriate level secondary school coursework for a student intent on a college education.

The research by Tierney and Auerbach (2005) provided useful data for this current study by showing the connection between the social network of family and its impact on college readiness. In addition to academic achievement, course selection at the high school level helps to determine college readiness. Families, extended families, older siblings, community members, and school counselors all provide social support that can help students choose appropriate courses, including advanced and remedial courses. These networks can also advise on when students should take such courses. In this current study, the researcher recruited participants who had social networks that helped them choose their educational pathway during the secondary school level.

This current study added to the scholarly research and literature in the field concerning factors of social networks such as peer groups, family, and other social supports that either guided or interfered with a student's path to college readiness. The aim of this research was to enlighten others on which factors, in addition to academics, contribute to college readiness and completion. These factors include the social fabric that can serve as the driving force for an individual seeking a college education. In this study, the researcher aimed to show that educators should include a combination of factors (e.g., academic coursework, classes in socialization, networking, and mentoring) in the curriculum to help students prepare for college. In addition, strong social networks may help bridge the gap between all students at the college level regardless of socioeconomic status, school performance, or gender.

Method

In this qualitative case study, the researcher gathered data using interviews, journals, and surveys to examine how different social networks affected participants' college preparation. The participants of this study all attended a private catholic university on the northeastern coast of the United States. The participants used the interviews, journal entries, and survey responses to candidly share information about their experiences and their thoughts about the college-readiness process.

Participants

The researcher selected the specific participants for this study to see how social networks impacted students

differently across genders. Participants included 18 (n = 18) 18-22-year-old undergraduate students contacted through introductory courses offered at the university. This researcher used a mixture of sampling methods: a nonprobability sampling method and a convenience sampling method. The researcher considered the sample in this study a convenience sample because students were asked to participate via an email that their professor shared with them.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process began when professors disseminated a recruitment letter with the survey link to the undergraduate students in their introductory classes. After interested participants completed the Google interest survey, the researcher contacted individuals to set up interviews and clarify the research study. Once the first interview was completed, the participant received a daily journal prompt for two weeks, followed by a final interview. Another open-ended online research survey was distributed to the same students to acquire more student participation.

The researcher conducted individual 30- to 45-minute interviews at a convenient time for the participants via WebEx. Each participant took part in two interviews: one as an introduction and data collection meeting and one after the collection and review of the journal entries to ensure the researcher had interpreted the entries correctly. The interview had no set minimum time but had a maximum time of 60 minutes. The researcher informed the participants of their right to participate in the interview and reminded them they could decline to answer any question they chose and could end the interview at any time for any reason. A second interview occurred after the researcher completed the document analysis. The second interview enabled the researcher to perform member checking that validated the participants' responses.

In addition to interviews, the researcher gave each participant 2 weeks to record the social encounters that have prepared them for college. The journal had some guiding prompts to help the participants understand the expectations of the journal. The researcher reviewed the journals multiple times to identify important information related to the research on how social groups impact students of different genders to see if similarities or differences existed.

The researcher conducted an additional survey using Google forms. The survey consisted of seven demographic questions and 16 open-ended questions pertaining to college readiness and social networks. The survey opened with a paragraph informing the participants of their rights and asking them to consent to the study. The survey was created to solicit more feedback from college freshmen who did not want to participate in the interview or journal processes but still wanted to share their insights. The researcher reviewed the results from the survey using the same methods applied to the interview transcripts.

Limitations

Sample bias may have occurred because this study only involved participants who were in nonremedial courses, had high GPAs, and attended high graduation-rated high schools. The increased demand for support after COVID-19 may have strained participants' social networks and impacted their college readiness experience.

Obtaining participants was a challenge for this study. After a month and a half of trying to obtain additional participants by reaching out to various programs at the college such as the writing center, student government, freshmen center, and student affairs, an additional data collection method was added to obtain more participants. A survey consisting of seven demographic questions and 16 open-ended questions pertaining to college readiness and social networks was created which resulted in acquiring 13 additional participants.

Data Analysis

This section presents the findings from data collected from 18 college students using interviews, journals, and surveys regarding how their social networks helped them become college-ready. Quotations included in this section highlight a deeper sample and reflect a snapshot of the research study. The participant pool was 56% female and 44% male. The majority of the participants were freshmen (61%), followed by sophomores (28%) and juniors (11%). The participants came from homes with parents with educational backgrounds ranging from high school equivalency degrees to doctorates. Of the participants, 78% had declared a major, and 22% were undecided. The findings answer questions about the most effective social network across genders. The participants' social networks included college counselors, assistant teachers, friends, significant others, sisters, athletic advisors, parents, and grandparents.

The female participants reported that during high school, they tended to be more open to social networks and gathered support from various people, such as counselors, assistant teachers, friends, family, and athletic advisors. When asked if they talked with their high school friends about their college experiences, Participant 3 responded, "Yeah, we have a FaceTime every week, and we kind of just give each other advice." She continued by saying her current college supports included "a few people I met online who all went to college before me. From 1 year before me to about 3 years before. They would sometimes tell me of things to be aware of, and what to brace myself for."

Participant 4 mentioned her mom helping her out: "She gives me advice when I need it, and she helps with my school work sometimes. Less now, but more during high school, when I was struggling." She also reported relying on her guidance counselor: "My guidance counselor also

helped me a lot. She gave me a lot of information, explained everything to me, and advised me on where she thought I would suit, I guess, where I should apply."

Participant 7 shared her experience with various school staff members. She explained: "My college counselor in high school and assistant teachers" (Participant 7). Participant 11 reaffirmed going to a school staff member for help with the college readiness experience, pointing to the help she received from her "athletic advisor." Last, Participant 13 described similar support. She stated: "My high school resource teacher has prepared me for college by giving me amazing advice."

Female participants did not solely rely on school staff members for assistance with strengthening their college readiness skills. Participant 16 reported leaning on her family, significant other, and roommates during the college-readiness process. She shared the following: "My support systems in college are my roommates, my boyfriend, and my family. My roommates help me when I'm stressed on an everyday basis, my boyfriend is always there to help me if I ever need it, and my parents are obviously not here with me and give me my space but will always be around if I had a question or something to talk about with them."

Male participants tended to rely on more intimate and close relationships, such as parents and grandparents, for support. Seven out of the eight male survey participants mentioned a family member as the person they went to for support. These family members included mothers, sisters, fathers, and grandparents. Like the female participants, the males also relied on individuals who were currently in college. Participant 2 stated:

Because I do know a few people online who are in college, so they're older than me. So, they were in college before I went to college, and they told me a bunch of stuff to expect and, you know, what to brace myself for.

Participant 2 went on to acknowledge he went to his father for advice and credited his professors with helping him create social networks, explaining, "Some of our professors have had us interact with each other in class for assignments."

Similarly, Participant 5 described having friends who were current freshmen and older so they could help with the college readiness experience. Participant 5 also acknowledged the college supported the creation of social networks via orientation and clubs. He stated: "I think that you can also learn about college culture by talking to people who have gone to college." Other male participants confirmed the importance of having a support network that included an individual who is currently attending college. Participant 9 expressed: "My sister, she has been through the college process; therefore, she had a lot of

answers to my questions." Participant 1 supported the same view about listening to friends who currently attended college, saying:

Seeing friends of mine go to school in Boston, for example, influenced my decision to seek a college in a major city as well. I felt like I had a better understanding of what I wanted out of college, where I wanted to be.

These experiences included emotional and logistical advice pertaining to adapting to college. Institutions of higher education have created opportunities for students to create new social networks at college via clubs, orientations, and group assignments. Male participants indirectly acknowledged these efforts:

Yeah, I would say [reserve officers training corps], actually. I can talk to people. I mean, it's mostly emotional in a way, like in a sense, they'll support me. They'll be like, "you can make it through this. Other people have done it before. Your problems are not unique to you." (Participant 5)

Participant 1 acknowledged that his professor encouraged peer-to-peer interaction: "We have done . . . In this specific example in our class, we've done workshops where we would pair up students, and we would read each other's essays."

Applying to college and adjusting to college culture can be challenging, so students benefit from support networks where they can vent and ask questions without feeling embarrassed. Acknowledging the difference between men's and women's support networks can help educators and counselors avoid pressuring individuals into adhering to a mode they find uncomfortable. The results of this study showed both genders valued family and peers who attended college as strong advocates for their college readiness success.

Conclusion

The findings showed male participants utilized family and peers as social networks during the college-readiness process, more than the female participants, who relied on family and peers as well as school staff members, significant others, roommates, and athletic advisors. If participants do not make a trusting connection with the individuals trying to support them through the college-readiness process than the participant may dismiss the support even if the support is helpful. In order to encourage male students, educators should share college preparation recommendations with parents and guardians and introduce female high school students to

a variety of social networks that can help them become college-ready (O'Neill, 2023). Secondary schools can help create peer mentoring programs between college attending students and high school students. Additionally, these mentors can speak to parents to share their insights on how to overcome challenges regarding financial aid, the college application process, course selection and emotional support needed pertaining to the college readiness process.

The participants who had parents who supported them from high school through the transition to college moved along the college-readiness process successfully because they had someone helping them navigate paperwork, deadlines, emotions, and coursework. Schools should introduce parents and students to college readiness skills as early as elementary school. This would enable parents without college experience to gain the knowledge necessary to better prepare their child for the transition from high school to college.

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