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Beyond Getting In and Fitting In: An Examination of Social Networks and Professionally Relevant Social Capital Among Latina/o University Students

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Abstract

Social network analyses, combined with qualitative analyses, are examined to understand key components of the college trajectories of 261 Latina/o students. Their social network ties reveal variation in extensity and the relevance. Most ties facilitate social capital relevant to getting into college, fewer engage social capital relevant to strategizing success in college, and even fewer provide social capital benefits useful for planning career/professional trajectories.

Resumen

Análisis de redes sociales combinados con análisis cualitativos se examinaron para entender componentes clave de las trayectorias universitarias de 261 estudiantes latinas/os. Sus enlaces en redes sociales revelan variación en extensión y relevancia. La mayoría de los enlaces facilitaron capital social relevante a entrar a la universidad, muy pocas engancharon capital social relevante a estrategias conducentes al éxito en la universidad, y aún menos proveyeron beneficios de capital social útiles para planear trayectorias o carreras profesionales.

Keywords

social capital, social networks, college access, college choice, college persistence

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Introduction

The social networks of Latina/o students are central to their lives and are resources that could be activated and expanded to facilitate successful postsecondary and career trajectories. Family, relatives, peers, teachers, counselors, school staff, and other close social relationships of Latina/o students play a fundamental role in shaping their college planning/enrollment decisions (Gándara, 1995; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). In fact, several studies detail the central influence of strong familial and other close ties that underlie Latina/o student college choices and trajectories. Auerbach (2007), Ceja (2004), and González, Stoner, and Jovel (2003) note how parents and siblings negotiate college academic preparation with high schools and inform students' college transition. Turley (2006) uncovers the importance of remaining close to family support systems in decisions about where to attend college. Some research finds Latinas/os are so reliant on their immediate social network in making enrollment decisions that a "chain migration" model of college choice has been offered as perhaps more appropriate than traditional models (Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006).

The present study suggests that to transition successfully through college, Latina/o students must either reconfigure their social networks or create new ones. Therefore, it is important to study the nuances of students' social network relationships and how they operate in postsecondary settings. Our goal is to use a social network approach to examine patterns in Latina/o students' social ties before college and during the 1st year in college, paying particular attention to ties relevant to future careers/professions. Furthermore, shift focus beyond how Latina/o students get in and fit in to college, and address the often overlooked early stages of subtle preparation—as early as precollege—to move on to careers and graduate and professional school. We define *getting in* as the entire precollege process, including both Attinasi's (1989) notion of "getting ready" and the college planning/choice process. We label the process of adjusting to college as *fitting in*. Finally, we define *moving on* as the process of students gradually developing their postcollege professional and career interests, knowledge, expectations, and plans over time, and certainly as early as high school and 1st year of college, when students are exploring career options. Despite the fact that career intentions can shift and change over time, even up until college graduation, it is important to consider the information and guidance students are receiving as they make ongoing decisions to formulate, over time, their future postcollege trajectories.

Theoretical Framework

Social Capital

Social capital is consisted of contacts and memberships in networks which can be used for personal gain (Bourdieu, 1986), and it is typically thought of a resource that individuals exchange and accumulate (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Lin (1999) defined social capital as embedded resources or assets in social networks. These definitions

emphasize the crucial role of creating and sustaining relationships with many different individuals to improve access to resources and/or to attain certain educational and occupational outcomes.

Some researchers criticize social capital theory for its shortcomings (Portes, 1998), and Sandefur and Laumann (1998) claim the concept is modeled in most empirical analyses as either present or absent. In other words, education research typically treats social capital as dichotomous, presuming students either have it or they don't. This often promotes a specific "representation" (Moll, 2000) of Latina/o students and families, usually as deficient (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011). Educationally successful groups are assumed to possess (adequate quantities and types of) social capital by virtue of their success, whereas nonexcelling groups are assumed to lack social capital and would do better if only they acquired it (Cammarrota, Moll, Cannella, & Gonzalez, 2010; Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011). Finally, though social capital is an aspect of social structure, the social capital literature tends to attribute the phenomenon to individuals, often ignoring how social structure variation may affect social capital (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998). Therefore, researchers should pay closer attention to students' existing social networks and to the social structures that constitute social capital—the location and patterning of a student's social networks in a larger social space (Granovetter, 1973).

The Social Network Perspective

The use of the social network paradigm to understand human social group and societal behavior is not new. It figured prominently in Durkheim's (1951) groundbreaking study on suicide—the same work that inspired Tinto's student integration model (Thomas, 2000). The idea behind this paradigm is that individuals are linked to each other through a collection of social network ties that structure larger societal patterns of relationships and that these ties shape how individuals identify and define their membership in groups, communities, and societies, and ultimately shape action. For decades, network analysis has been used in sociology and business (Wasserman & Faust, 1995), and in higher education research (Berry 2008; Clarke & Antonio, 2009; Mollica, Gray, & Treviño, 2003; Thomas, 2000), which has recognized the value of social network approach for studying networks among college students. However, despite volumes of research on social capital, aside from Thomas' (2000) study, there is virtually no research that formally analyzes the social networks of underrepresented college students, such as Latinas(os).

Thus, instead of relying on traditional conceptions of social capital, we take a network approach to better understand the relevance of social networks for Latina/o students in their accumulation and exchange of social capital in their trajectory into, through, and beyond college. Such an approach captures dynamics at the intersection between individuals and larger social and institutional structures within which they are embedded, and it differs from linear analysis which focuses mostly on individual attributes and differences between Latinas/os and other subgroups. Our study does *not* focus on social capital as something that individual students of particular racial/ethnic

or socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds possess or lack relative to one another. Rather, our study adopts a cultural integrity approach (Jun & Colyar, 2002), presenting social capital/networks as inherent in all family, school, and community contexts and recognizing that low-income Latinas(os) have important resources, including social capital, which can be tapped into and triggered (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). We identify how members of this racial/ethnic subgroup actively engage social capital through their networks, and by not treating social capital as a monolithic dichotomous construct, we identify varying forms of social capital and suggest ways to improve access to specific social capital relevant to professional/career planning and decision making.

Literature Review

The Role of Social Capital in College Enrollment and Persistence

As traditionally measured, social capital has been found to influence college enrollment and persistence. Students who lack access to social capital as traditionally measured have decreased chances of attending college (Cabrera, Deil-Amen, Prahbu, Terenzini, & Lee, 2006; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005). However, other studies find close personal networks drive Latina/o student enrollment decisions as they “migrate” into different postsecondary options (Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Further, the quality of students’ interactions with other members of the college community mediates the extent to which their academic and socio-emotional predispositions influence their adjustment to college (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Prior research supports this claim by showing that contacts between college students and faculty have a positive impact on students’ academic performance, retention, and educational and career goals (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980). Research on Latina/o students specifically finds their commitments to the goal of obtaining a degree, and the extent to which they engage in academic discussions and activities on- and off-campus (Cabrera et al., 2006), influence their decision to remain in college.

These findings regarding the value of social relationships and capital for getting in and fitting in to college make clear the usefulness of applying such concepts to understand how students negotiate through college while planning for moving on to postgraduate education and careers. Such a framework may be particularly effective for assisting Latina/o students who are often first in their families to attend college in the United States. As Perna and Thomas (2006) contend, students transition through four stages of success—from college readiness to enrollment to achievement and finally postcollege attainment. Students experience transitions along this pathway in ways that are shaped by their embeddedness within several nested layers of social context (Perna, 2006). For first-generation college students, whose family contexts may lack direct prior experience with college and professional careers, the influence of other contexts may be more prominent for promoting success at each stage, especially eventual transitions into post-college attainment.

None of the above studies explicitly examined the relevance of social networks in the postcollege career planning of Latinas(os). However, such research is necessary. Although progress has been made in increasing the share of Latinas/os who *enrolls* in college, their subsequent educational and occupational attainment is marked by less progress (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2010). While the percentage of Latina/o high school graduates entering college has increased by a third since the 1970's, the percentage completing college has declined (Marin et al., 2008), and Latinas/os are severely under-represented in graduate education and professional occupations. They hold only 4% of master's degrees, 5% of first-professional degrees, and just 3% of all doctoral degrees (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2008). Furthermore, compared to 1990, there was greater segregation in the occupational distribution of Latinas/os and Whites in 2000, with Latinas/os concentrated in non-professional jobs (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005).

By examining the patterned networks within which students' social capital is embedded, we may be better informed in attempts to improve these outcomes. Facilitating the acquisition of what we define as professionally relevant social capital during the early stages of college (and the early part of the moving on process) could better propel Latina/o students along a trajectory of future success. Although no study has directly associated concrete future/career planning with measured success outcomes, some research does suggest that students who perceive a direct link between their education and future job have higher levels of confidence and effort and a greater likelihood of completion (Cabrera et al., 2006). Thus, mapping and examining the characteristics of Latina/o students' social networks and their professional relevance constitutes a valuable contribution.

Method

This study asks two primary questions: (a) what are the patterns in Latina/o students' social ties during their transition into and through the 1st year in college and (b) what is the size of the network and the content of the exchanges between the Latina/o students and each network tie?

Sample

The study sample consists of two cohorts of 1st-year college students enrolled at a large selective university in the Southwest who had participated in a summer bridge program that has historically served Latina/o students. The sample is representative of the larger Latina/o student population at this predominantly White university. Participating students were enrolled in the bridge program on a first-come first-serve basis, therefore socioeconomic backgrounds and academic preparation levels varied. Nearly all participating students are of Mexican descent, in-state students, residing on campus. Approximately 75% are from mid- to low-income families. More than 66% are first-generation college students, and less than a third attended high schools in which the majority of graduates attended 4-year colleges.

Data and Data-Collection Procedures

The data for this study come from a total of 261 Latina/o students who wrote essays and a smaller subset of 61 of those students who participated in semistructured interviews just before they matriculated and then again toward the end of their 1st year of enrollment. Essays were assigned as part of students' course requirements during their participation in a summer bridge program, and the first round of interviews were conducted during the duration of the bridge program. The students interviewed were chosen to represent a diverse demographic and academic cross section of students. Both the essays and interviews asked students to write about and talk about their experiences in the getting into college stage, the fitting into college stage and their initial ideas and goals about the moving on stage—their major and career plans. Specifically, questions were included about the support and information students received from various school, home, and community sources regarding college going, issues in transitioning into college and intended majors, fields of study, and career aspirations. Interviews were conducted on campus by an underrepresented minority faculty investigator and a team of multiethnic graduate students. Interview questions focused on who influenced students' initial and ongoing choices about college and career, and also on student experiences with peers, faculty, staff, family, and finances during their 1st year of enrollment.

Data Analyses

Essays were submitted electronically by the students, and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We entered the data into *NVivo*, a qualitative analysis package, to facilitate the mechanics of the analysis. We then analyzed the data both inductively and deductively (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) to generate original coding schemes.

Overall, we engaged in three stages of analysis. The first stage consisted of a basic round of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the essays and interviews, and we developed nine distinct categories of social ties: family networks (⊕), academic networks (●), post-secondary network (+), club/organization network (▲), alumni network (■), friendship network (▼), graduate network (◼), professional network (⊗), and media network (◆). Family networks include relationships with parents, siblings, extended family members, and other friends. Academic networks include students' ties with high school teachers and counselors and with university representatives. Postsecondary networks include the social ties students develop with university/community college staff in various positions (e.g., mentors and community college representatives). Club/organization networks represent those ties that students form while participating in extracurricular activities, in community and in university organizations. Alumni networks include ties with university alumni. Friendship networks include students' relationships with their peers in high school and in college. Graduate networks include, for instance, ties with faculty and with graduate students. Professional networks represent students' ties with individuals working in the university, in the

private sector, and/or in the government. Finally, media network includes students' sources of information regarding college (e.g., Internet, Facebook, and the TV).

In the second stage of analysis, we entered these categories into a social network analysis software (UCINET) to map those ties into visual sociograms for each of the 261 students. For each student, a unique sociogram was generated to identify the social ties she or he had built to support her or his college trajectory and career intentions at two different points in time: (a) while in high school and (b) at the end of their 1st year of college. We paid specific attention to the social relationships and communication exchanges noted by the students—their reported social ties. By considering both the source of the connection and the purpose of the interaction, through an iterative observation process, the sociograms were developed with a focus on two aspects of students' social networks: (a) the extensity (or size) of students' networks and on (b) the content of the exchanges between the students and each network tie mapped in the sociograms. Researchers (i.e., Lin, 1999) argue that extensive networks can increase access to better social resources (diversity and quality of resources embedded in the networks), which in turn may (or not) bring profits or gains to individuals. Sociograms were then grouped according to the four distinct broad patterns that emerged.

The third phase of the analysis returned to a qualitative coding of essay and interview data using axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to create structured rankings of concepts and subconcepts while considering the network patterns within which students were embedded. Selective coding helped to identify the main themes by which we organized the final stages of the analysis and interpretation of the data, paying particular attention to the purpose and value students attributed to certain types of ties and interactions. It is important to note that, although students were interviewed during their 1st year of college, a better understanding who and what informs students as they develop their career plans and intentions is still relevant at this stage. Choosing a major and planning for future professional and career trajectories happens over a long period of time, and the early years of college are a crucial stage in that process.

Limitations

Students volunteer for the bridge program, so selection bias is an issue. Also, we rely on each student's (ego) report of resources made available to him or her by others in the network, rather than examining such resource characteristics directly. Despite these limitations, our study provides insight into the ramifications of such bridge-program affiliation on social network development. This could be useful to improve the implementation and effectiveness of such programs.

Findings

The Shape of Students' Social Network Patterns

Table 1 shows the four student cases—Jonas, Martina, Carla, and Lorenzo—selected to illustrate the key features of the four network patterns that emerged from the

Table 1. Emerging Patterns in Latina/o Students' Social Networks

Student	Intended Major	Network Pattern	Family Ties	High School Ties	College Ties
Carla (mid-SES; non-first generation college)	Premedicine	In a good place	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Fitting in Moving on
Lorenzo (low SES; first generation college)	Computer science	No place	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Fitting in Moving on
Jonas (mid-SES; non-first generation college)	Undecided journalism or political science	All over the place	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Fitting in Moving on
Martina (low SES; first generation college)	Sociology	In an in-between place	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Getting in Fitting in Moving on	Fitting in Moving on

Note: SES = socioeconomic status.

analytic synthesis of the individual sociograms and qualitative data. Family ties, high school ties, and college ties emerged as overarching ways to categorize student responses, and network patterns varied according to the source from which students accessed social capital relevant to getting in to college, fitting in at college, and moving on toward their future profession. One commonality spans all four patterns, and that is the existence of strong ties relevant to getting in. Ties relevant to fitting in were strong across three of the four patterns, particularly during students' 1st year of college. Notably, ties related to fitting in were weak prior to enrollment, leaving most students unprepared to anticipate fitting in challenges and strategize to face these challenges before enrolling (see Table 1).

The illustrative sociograms presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3 also use the four student cases to visually demonstrate the dimensions along which social network patterns varied among all students in the sample, including their networks in high school (see Figure 1) and in their 1st year of college (see Figure 2). Students are represented by the points (red dots) and their social ties by lines (black lines). Figure 3 specifically maps ties (both high school and college) through which professionally relevant social capital appears to have been exchanged—capital relevant to moving on—choosing a major and developing professional graduate or career plans. Taken together, the figures portray students with social networks that are overwhelmingly connected to them getting in and fitting in to college, but largely absent are ties that will help students make more informed decisions about how to best prepare for their future as they anticipate moving on professionally (see Figure 3).

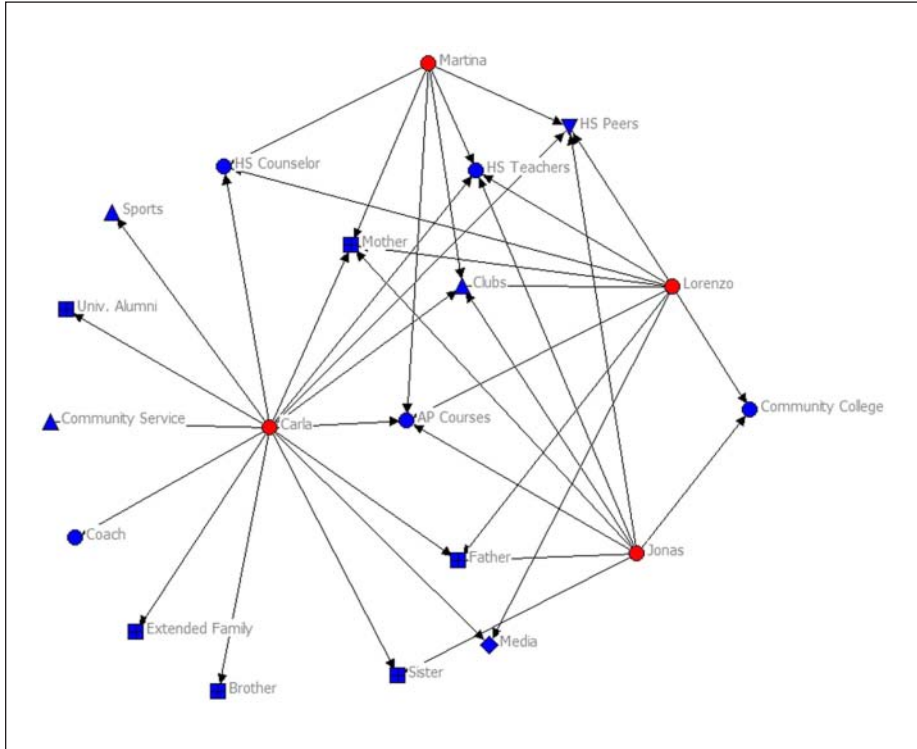


Figure 1. Social Network Map of Students in High School

Interpretations of the Social Network Patterns

The third column of Table 1 features a phrase that captures how students reported experiencing each of the major network patterns that emerged from the data. Lorenzo and Martina represent a majority of the lower SES, first-generation college students. Lorenzo had career plans and professionally relevant ties in high school that dissipate in college as he struggles academically and is unsuccessful in recreating relationships that support his career goals or cultivate feelings of academic and social belonging and integration. He remains isolated in his college environment. This pattern is described as a student who has established “no place” for himself yet. Martina represents students with strong family ties and a good deal of support for getting into college. However, she continues to rely on family for professionally relevant ties that are questionable in their usefulness, and she makes little headway integrating into the university socially or in ways relevant to a future career. Her pattern represents an “in-between place,” negotiating between her family and the college environment to acquire only a limited amount of institutionally based professionally relevant social

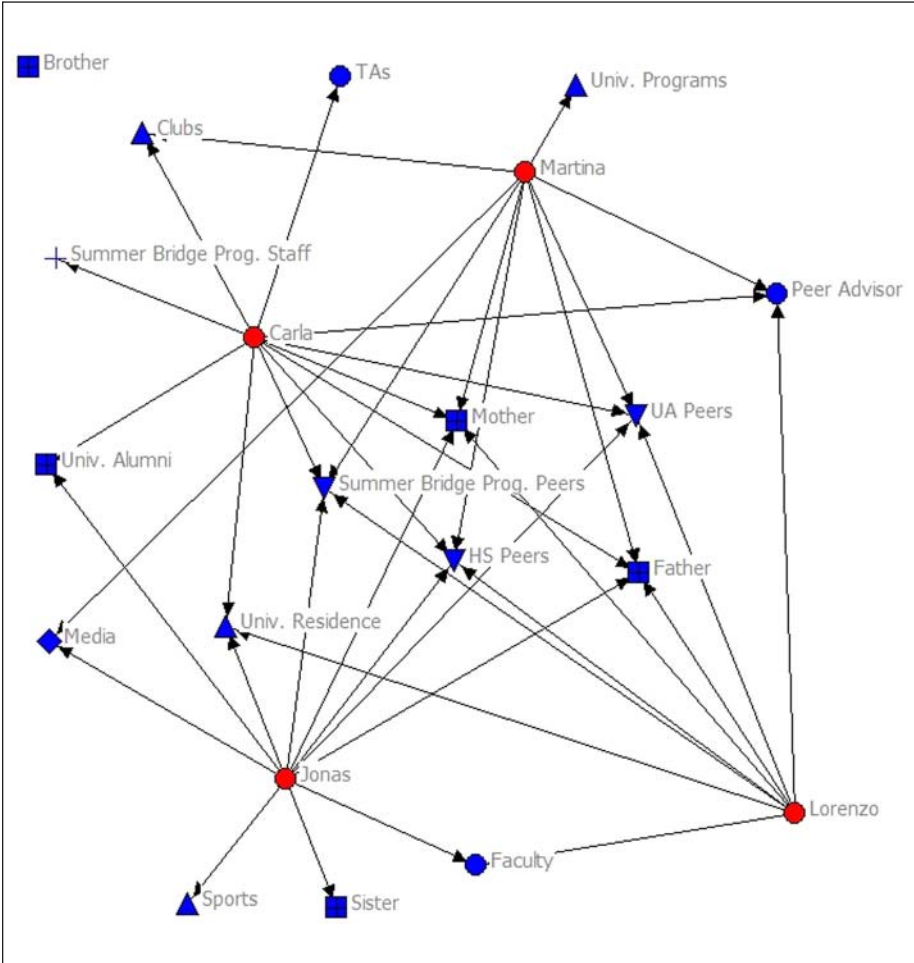


Figure 2. Social Network Map of Students in College

capital. The third case, Jonas, represents a substantial portion of the mid-SES students with college-educated parents. He had a foundation for career directions while in high school and seemed to be progressing well academically in college, but he develops no informed plans for a specific major or career once enrolled. His pattern is described as “all over the place” since he has accessed no source of guidance for his varied ideas about his future. Carla, however, represents a smaller minority of mid-SES students with a network pattern in which professionally relevant capital valuable to the moving on process remains strong across diverse social capital sources—family, high school, and college. Her networks are extensive and diverse, and her professionally relevant

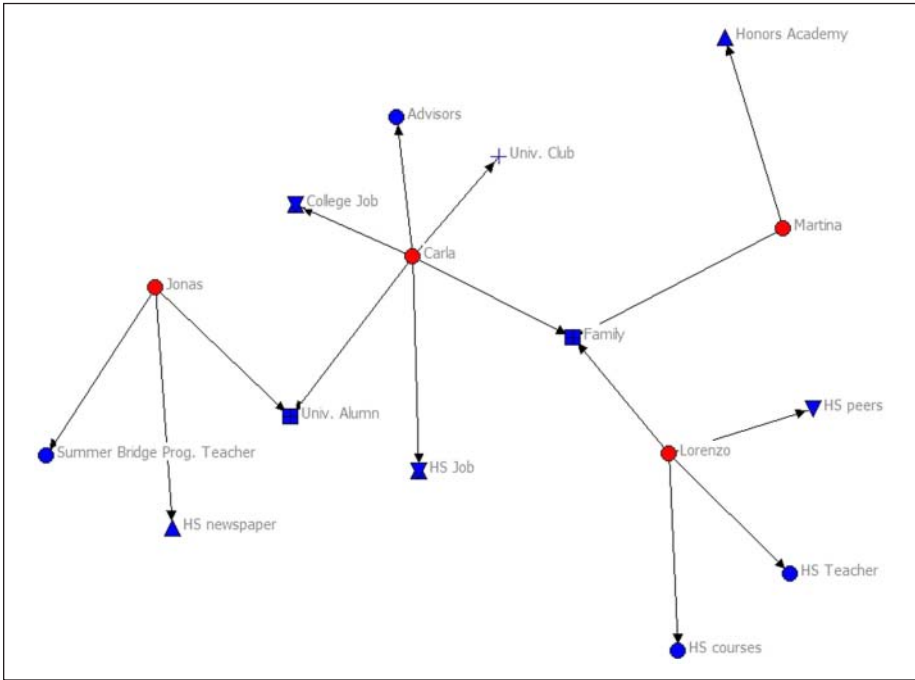


Figure 3. Professionally Relevant Social Networks of Students (High School and College Combined)

ties useful for the moving on process were either sustained or quickly recreated as she transitioned from high school to college. Her social capital relevant to getting in and fitting in are also strong. We refer to her pattern as being “in a good place” both before and during her 1st year in college.

Our combined data analyses find three general points. First, some students access a more extended social network in both high school and college with regard to getting in and fitting in, as compared with the other students who have more contracted networks. Carla represents a more extended network, whereas the other cases have more contracted networks. Second, in the transition into their 1st year of college, all four patterns represent continuity in their family and some peer ties but a replacement of ties in most of their other network categories. Third, very few network ties are connected to professionally relevant social capital for facilitating the postcollege stage of students’ trajectories, moving into graduate study and/or careers. Whereas Carla’s case is again the most extended, Lorenzo’s network represents students with a richer set of professionally relevant ties in high school relative to college, and Martina and Jonas are examples of the strong influence of family ties (sister who is a university alum and mother) in the absence of other professionally relevant ties (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

To elaborate, students' networks generated some social capital relevant to getting in and fitting in to college, but in preparing for the moving on component of the postsecondary and occupational trajectory, such professionally relevant social ties were largely absent. Network patterns in which professionally relevant ties dominated were rare among students in the sample. Students' strongest, most influential ties in high school centered on the getting in aspect of students' trajectory. Once in college, students experienced continuity in family relationships, and for some, in their peer relationships. These ties helped the fitting in process by providing a source of motivation and reciprocal obligation. Students remained motivated by the sacrifices of their families and the shared expectations parents and peers held for them. However, with few exceptions, these ties neither provided a good source of professionally relevant social capital nor focused on trajectories beyond the baccalaureate degree. As Martina reveals, she is interested in possibly working with children, but "I don't know what I'm going to do once I get out of college." Figure 3 makes clear that Martina has not yet accessed any professionally relevant social capital via college contacts.

The scarce relationships infused with professionally relevant social capital that did exist in high school were not retained as students transitioned into college. Instead, they dissolved, leaving students with the challenge of reconstructing such networks to facilitate their future professional trajectory. For a minority of students, like Carla, this rebuilding process was not so problematic. She started with a relatively expansive network in high school, acquiring a hospital internship after her appendicitis "initially sparked an interest in health and in a medical career." Also, her family and high school provided opportunities for discussing career options. In college, although her thoughts about her intended major had changed from business to physiology to microbiology, those changes were informed by her success in making connections relevant to her intended profession—medical school with a focus on optometry. She joined the optometry club and has a good, ongoing relationship with her advisor, from whom she gets important guidance in planning her trajectory:

I just was thinking about Physiology, well you can go into a bunch of different things out of that, but then I talked to my advisor, and she told me you can't. . . . I didn't really know my back up plan, and so I thought about it, and I decided that if I didn't get into graduate school for optometry, I could do research or something. And I feel . . . microbiology would be a good major for research and disease and working with all that stuff. So I thought that'd be cool.

As Figure 3 shows, other students accessed fewer professionally relevant ties. However, some of these ties, although weak in frequency and duration, nevertheless greatly influenced student decision making about the future. For example, despite being lost in choosing a major, Martina, who wants to work with children, has a clear "backup" plan to be an interpreter based on one brief conversation with her mother about her mother's friend's daughter, who works as an interpreter.

Other ties might be presumed to be strong, but in terms of content, they neither directed students' thinking toward the actual link between their interests and potential career trajectories nor created a bridge from high school to similar activities in college. Jonas' first potential choice of major was influenced by his role as editor of his high school newspaper staff and his English teacher, who advised the high school yearbook. However, preoccupied with academic struggles, he had not gotten involved in similar activities in college. In fact, he is clear about his interests but evidently confused about how to translate them into a career trajectory. He said, "I basically know what I want to do, but I don't know how I'm gonna get there . . ."

I'm . . . very interested in politics, journalism, that whole thing on a very national, global scale . . . I know that I want to be involved in that area . . . of public policy or government . . . My fallback would be teacher—teach government . . . My sister's a teacher . . . I really enjoy studying about it, learning about it, learning about social interaction between people, political, historical, all that, cultural. So definitely like to study something in that area.

When asked, "What are some of the steps that would get you to your career goal?" he replied, "Not a clue [laughter] . . . I know I need to get moving on that.

First-generation students struggled to form college social networks relevant to career plans. Lorenzo's case illustrates how some students accessed professionally relevant social capital in high school, as he did in computer science classes:

Because of that class I started talking to a teacher . . . He's the one that recommended me to do a double major in what he called "EECS," which was Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. And he said his friend did that. He was like, "Job security everywhere . . . great pay," and things like thaRt. And I loved both the engineering part of that . . . all electronic things, like circuits . . . always taking them apart, and I loved programming, which he introduced to me my junior year. . . . Since then, I knew I was going to major in computer science *and* electrical engineering. . . . I would not have found out about . . . that combination. I would have found out about computer science, sooner or later, just 'cause I'm so in love with it, but I don't know if I would have thought about that electrical engineering part.

In college, however, Lorenzo struggled quite unsuccessfully to integrate both socially and academically. He earned "bad grades" in spite of extreme efforts in his classes, and when asked, "Do you feel like you're a part of this university community?" He simply said, "No," and then elaborated, "I didn't join any clubs. . . . I wanted to join . . . but the semester overwhelmed me so I didn't join any." As such, he did not have space to reconstruct the type of professional social capital links he had in high school.

These findings suggest the value of considering models of Latina/o student trajectories that explore more seriously the implications of their social network development. In particular, for the students studied, professionally relevant social networks

dissipated as they entered college, needed to be rebuilt and expanded, and were characterized by ties that lacked a focus on information and guidance regarding future postgraduate and occupational trajectories.

Conclusions and Implications

Findings clarify that analyses of social networks, as applied to Latina/o student paths, should consider not just the expansiveness of networks, but also their organizational context, as well as their socially constructed and experienced content and purpose. By combining qualitative analyses with the mapping of students' networks, we were able to access the meaning and significance of the social capital we seek to measure and understand. The cases we provide, and the themes they illustrate, point to the prominence of getting in as central to students' network patterns and their social capital development. The Latinas(os) who participated in the study had been strongly encouraged in their social networks to attend college. However, their social networks, particularly after they arrive on campus, provide little guidance regarding choice of major and planning for professional, career, and postgraduate options after college. Like a fairy tale, students' networks of support emphasize getting into college, and to some extent, surviving academically and socially once there, as the "happily ever after." However, reality differs from such a fairy tale ending. Ideally, these students should also be experiencing a great deal of support for deciding on and planning their future professional trajectories, even as they transition into college.

Normative frameworks suggest students should not be expected to have their plans for their major and future career materialize until well after the 1st year in college, and critics may claim most students enter college without concrete future plans. In contrast, we find this situation problematic. Latino students in this sample had little access to rich sources of information to develop their future career plans. This is quite unlike scenarios in which students entertain multiple future avenues by exploring and testing out their interests beginning as early as middle school and observe the occupational experiences and talk with a wide range of college-educated adults in family and community networks. Given that Latinas(os) as a group have some of the lowest rates of attainment in higher education and occupations, this is not surprising. In order to facilitate more postsecondary and occupational success, educators should aspire to assisting Latino students in making their trajectory through college more intentional. And acknowledging and capitalizing on the strong family, community, and peer ties on which Latina/o students already rely for other support may be a viable option for translating and advancing career-relevant information and planning.

Implications for Future Research, Professional Practice, and Policy

This analysis is part of an ongoing longitudinal study. As these students transition out of college and into careers and professional and graduate study, the research will continue to interview them to examine these transitions. Effort will include a comparable

sample of students of differing racial/ethnic backgrounds as well, to capture the variation in experiences. In terms of the immediate policy/practice implications of the current findings, we suggest more of a focus on how to not only get students into and through the baccalaureate level, but also to help them move into graduate and professional school and into the workplace. The bridge program in which this sample participated, for example, has generated decades of alumni in the local metropolitan area and throughout the state who represent a potential network pool to which current students can be connected. Many bridge-program alums are in professional and business occupations (e.g., superintendents, owners of companies, congressmen). These networks could be quite valuable in helping students focus their transition into further education and the workforce. Another strategy might be to consciously construct professionally relevant social networks into which students would be formally introduced. A considerable and increasing amount of work has been done on the value of mentoring. At the precollege stage, one national study finds mentors provide students with information that promotes college enrollment (Plank & Jordan, 2001), but rarely are the specific influences of mentors involved in outreach programs evaluated (Gándara & Mejorado, 2005).

The challenge ahead is not only to enroll more Latinas(os) in college, but also to help them graduate with the knowledge, skills, and social capital needed to expand their career opportunities and thrive in the labor market. As students and employers know, and as sociologists claim, a college degree is required for accessing rewarding jobs, but it is no guarantee. Interactions and ties that provide job guidance and personal recommendations are also critical (Degenne & Forsé, 1999). We recognize the importance of enrolling and succeeding in college, but we also need to better understand the important dimension of personal and institutional relationships in promoting guidance, support, and progress toward careers. Professionally relevant social capital has the potential to boost the investment Latina/o students make in their human capital.

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