

SOCIAL CONNECTION STRATEGIES OF ACADEMICALLY UNDERPREPARED COLLEGE STUDENTS

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February 15, 2010
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Why study underprepared college students?

- College students are increasingly diverse in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status -- AND in their levels of preparation
- Their retention and persistence are important to each student, his or her college and to the country as a whole

Why study their social connection strategies?

- Social connection (also called integration) and peer relationships are important to retention and persistence
- Also important to identity development
- An aspect of underprepared students' lives that student affairs professionals are adept at influencing

Overview of the Study

Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

Research Questions

1. How do academically underprepared college students describe the formation and content of their social interactions during their time in college?
2. How do academically underprepared college students describe the effect of their social interactions on their college experiences?
3. How do academically underprepared college students utilize their social connections to meet their academic, social, emotional or other needs?

Theoretical Framework

- Chickering and Reisser (1993): learning to form social connections is a developmental task undertaken as part of identity development
- Tinto (1993): Social integration is key to persistence. Many adjustment issues are social in nature. Issues of integration and isolation are important.
- Astin (1993): Peer group interaction is one environmental variable that affects students. Peers are key sources of influence and growth.
- Kegan (1993): College students operate mainly in second-order consciousness, in which relationships are subject. As relationships become object, growth occurs, helping the student cope with the college environment.

Methodology

- Grounded theory: derivation of theory from the rigorous analysis of data
- Uses constant comparative method, memoing, and theoretical sampling
- Well-defined coding process by which the researcher breaks down and reassembles the data to create a theory about the subject of the research

Site of the Research

- Hartwell State College, a predominantly two-year college with many underprepared college students
- Some aspects of community college and some aspects of four-year institutions are present

Sample Selection

- Purposeful sampling: recruited students in developmental coursework through emails, signs, intranet postings
- Was able to use theoretical sampling as well due to the large number of students interested in participating

Data Collection

- Interviews
- Approximately 1 hour each
- Digitally recorded
- Pseudonyms were assigned
- Participants read their transcripts and could add or delete anything they wished

Data Analysis

- Initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding are employed
- Initial: outlines concepts in data and groups them into categories
- Focused: Compares and integrates the properties of categories
- Axial: Expand and describe categories; reassemble into cohesive whole
- Theoretical: Write the theory that has been discovered

Results: Exploring Friendship and the Transition to College

The purpose of grounded theory work is to generate a theory through the rigorous analysis of data.

Overview of Theory

- Central Category: Act of categorizing friendships into levels
- Categories relating to that central category describe the levels of friendships
 - Friends Whose Names Are Unknown
 - In-Class Friends
 - Acquaintance Friends
 - During-College Friends
 - Friendships with Lasting Potential
 - Friends Forever

Overview of Theory

- Properties of each category describe the friendships at that levels
 - Familiarity
 - Activities done together
 - Territorial and temporal limitations
 - Greeting behaviors
 - The origin of the friendship
 - The potential future of the friendship
 - The academic, emotional, and social support received with each level of friendship

Overview of Theory

- Processes influenced by these categories
 - Growth and development of friendships
 - Academic and Social transition to college

Levels of Friendships

Participants classified their friendships into six levels of closeness.

Friends Whose Names are Unknown

- Provided an atmosphere of camaraderie and caring, even with low level of familiarity
- Activities limited to things that happen in class
- Limited in territorial and temporal scope
- Greetings made mostly in class, or perhaps in the hallway

Friends Whose Names are Unknown

- Friendships start in class, due mostly to proximity of desks
- By definition, no real future of the friendship, unless re-meeting occurs
- Camaraderie of working together in class provides academic and social benefits
- Emotional Benefits included sympathy for difficulties

Participant Voices: Friends Whose Names are Unknown

- “When they leave here, nobody talks to each other.” ~ Richard
- “I can’t remember her name now. It was last semester. But, I would sit and talk to her a little bit before class.” ~ Lisa

In-Class Friends

- Students knew the names and perhaps some life details of their In-Class Friends
- Activities limited to socializing and working together in class
- Friendships take place in class
- Greetings still happen mainly in class, but more conversation may occur

In-Class Friends

- Friendships start in class, due to proximity, end when the class ends
- Academic Benefits include friends using each other as checkpoints, to remember class-related due dates and homework information
- Social and Emotional Benefits included camaraderie, similar to Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, but better/more

Participant Voices: In-Class Friends

- “They’re more on-campus friends because I just see them going into the classrooms.” ~ Rhonda
- “I met a lot of new people this semester. The people I met last semester I don’t even see anymore.” ~ Brittany
- “I kind of stand out in class because I’m loud. . . . I make myself known. If there’s somebody quiet in the classroom I say hello to them. But outside of the classroom, they just get up and grab their books and they leave and then I’ll never see them again.” ~ Kevin
- “I don’t really hang out with a lot of them outside of class but we still talk about our lives outside of class.” ~ Mike

Acquaintance Friends

- Greater familiarity and feeling of established friendship
- Social activities and online relationships found
- People that one would greet to in the hallway
- Time spent together is still limited, often by choice, but duration of friendship is not limited by class or semester schedule
- Territorial limits of the friendship are not as pronounced

Acquaintance Friends

- Friendships began both in and out of the classroom
- Potential future of these friendships were speculated about, but uncertain
- Fewer particular academic benefits at this level, but friendships still concerned academic topics
- Social and emotional benefits included a feeling of support, not just camaraderie

Participant Voices: Acquaintance Friends

- “I don’t see him that often, but when I do, it’s just casual . . . we didn’t become best friends.” ~ Meghan
- “If you have someone that’s in one class and then you see them in three other classes . . . I had this one guy the first day of class , I was like, “Are you following me around?” because we had already had four classes together . . . we ended up sitting beside each other in two of them . . . and that’s how we became friends, just talking that way.” ~ Faith
- “We just kind of make a support system Even though we’re not exactly complete strangers, but it’s not like we know much about each other.” ~ Mike

During-College Friends

- Higher level of familiarity, strength and depth of friendship, commonalities between friends
- Activities done together definitely included student organization and social activities as well as academic
- Greetings happen in and out of class

During-College Friends

- Duration of friendship is limited, but time spent together and locations of friendship are not limited
- Friendships started in class, in student organizations, or elsewhere on campus such as the game room
- Friendships forecasted to end when college ends
- Greater academic, social, and emotional benefits

Participant Voice: During-College Friends

- “I know with friendships like everybody I’ve met through [campus governance organizations], a lot of guys that were in the gym and stuff, these were complete strangers that I didn’t know before I started here. I know for a fact I’m going to be friends with those people for a couple of years or more.” ~ Mike

Friendships with Lasting Potential

- High level of familiarity
- Activities done together expand further into socializing
- Friends see each other purposefully and do not allow school to set the schedule for when they encounter each other
- Few territorial limits to friendships, although on-campus socializing was seen as easier, more convenient, and safer
- Friendships began purposefully
- Future of the friendship is uncertain, but there is an anticipated future
- High degree of academic, social, and emotional benefits
 - Friends at this level step in when a friend is isolating herself, for example

Participant Voices: Friendships with Lasting Potential

- “I came up with the conclusion that you can always tell when someone is going to be a school friend [In-Class or During-College Friend] when they walk up to you. When they walk up to you, you know they are interested in hanging out more . . . if it’s an out-of-school thing [indicating lasting potential to the friendship] . . . you can just tell.” ~ Bethany
- “I think we’ll always be friends, probably not as good as friends [as we are now] but we’ll always still, like, have each other’s backs.” ~ Brittany

Friends Forever

- Exceptionally high degree of familiarity
- Any number of activities might be done together, but getting together off-campus is tough even for the closest of friends
- Territorial and temporal limits do not exist here
- Friendships started everywhere on campus
- Friendships are seen as definitely lasting past college
- Academic, Social, and Emotional Benefits include high level of trust and encouragement through difficult academic and emotional times

Participant Voices: Friends Forever

- Most participants described this level of friendship as “A friend is someone who is always there for you.”
- “You know they’re going to be there.” ~ Rhonda
- Friends “rush back into town for you” ~ Faith, plus similar statements made by a number of participants

The Evolution of

Friendship

The evolution and growth of friendship can be described by three stages.

Growth and Development of Friendships

- Three levels of friendship development
- Beginning, Building, and Maintenance stages
- Level of friendship determines/is determined by how far through these stages a friendship is allowed to progress

Beginning Stage of Friendship

- Friendships began for various reasons
- Tentative, beginning friendships mark the transition to college
- Teachers specifically encouraged friendships to grow through class activities and group projects
- Friendships begin because of “meeting through” and re-meeting
- Friendships may begin early in individuals’ college careers, but may also begin later
- Friendships organized around various commonalities

Building Stage of Friendship

- Friendships that develop past the very lowest levels must go through a building process
- Building a friendship involves “personal learning about their different stories” and said “until you take it to outside of class you don’t really get to know the person as well.” ~ Faith
- Re-meeting encourages the building of friendships
- Classification of friendships begins at this stage
 - Reflective process, not a planning process

Maintenance Stage of Friendship

- Necessary to develop friendships at the three highest levels
- Challenging for a variety of reasons
 - Class schedules change
 - Friends transfer away
- Students did not tend to worry over this
 - Friendships either ended or did not, and this was perceived as something happening to the student, not something the student had an active role in planning

Friendship and the Transition to College

Friendship affects both the academic and the social transition to college.

Academic Transition to College

- Transition issues arose at various points in students' college careers
 - Transition to college at start of semester
 - Feelings of shock when first grades were given out
 - Transition as life goals (i.e. career choice, major) changed
 - Transition as college grew in size
 - Transition out of learning support into “regular” classes
 - “Oh, wow, this is different.” ~ Bethany

Academic Transition to College

- Unsurprisingly, students found college-level work and learning support work challenging
 - Lolly got a question wrong in math and “felt about this tall,” but talking to friends improved her mood
- Anticipating challenging classes was daunting, “intimidating” ~ Lisa
- Students may not have wanted to be at Hartwell State or in Learning Support Classes, making adjustment more difficult

Social Transition to College

- Starting college means starting over socially
- Negotiating this transition is important to student success (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993)
- Students anticipated the social transition by being nervous, hesitant, or afraid
- Social transition may be difficult for non-traditional students
 - “I didn’t know what to do to make friends with people . . . Plus I’m 42 and they’re, what, 18, 19, 20 at most?” ~ Lolly
- Some students had trouble making friends at first
- Scheduling and logistical issues made forming friendships difficult

Resolving Transition Issues

- Students began to realize that they really did need to be in developmental courses
 - New classes and new freedom helped students feel more positive
 - Social and academic experiences resulting from these classes were positive factors in students' adjustment to college
- Friendships made college a more stable experience, which may contribute to persistence
 - “Everybody here has no idea what’s going to happen next semester, this semester. The only thing they have to rely on, or to latch onto, is friends they make in the beginning.”
~ Kevin

Resolving Transition Issues

- Friendships helped the academic transitions of participants
 - Friends encourage each other to persist
 - Friends provide emotional support over academic traumas
- Developing friendships also improved the social transition of students
 - Some made firm friendships for the first time
 - A chance to “start over” for many participants
 - A chance to make positive choices about friends and activities

Resolving Transition Issues

- Academic and social transitions are inextricably linked, as are academic, social, and emotional support
 - As students become more socially adapted, they find college easier to manage, even when academic difficulties present themselves

Positioning the Study in the Current Literature

My findings both support and contrast the current literature on student transition and relationship-building

Categorizing Friends into Levels

- Students efforts to classify friendships embodied various levels of consciousness (Kegan)
 - Students who were able to assign roles to their friends, especially when prompted, or to discuss unprompted the characteristics of their friendships, exemplified the third order of consciousness
 - Generating, unprompted, a series of roles and relationships in which one positions oneself, was a fourth-order task

Categorizing Friends into Levels

- Students' understanding of their ability to affect their friendships reflected second- and third-order thinking
 - A spirit of “what will be, will be,” prevailed
 - Students did not see their friendships as something they could control

Stages of Friendship Development

- Astin (1993) considers that the student's peer group must be equal to the student, and that the student seeks approval and acceptance from that peer group
- The more students have in common with their peer group, the stronger the influence of that peer group over the students in it (Astin, 1993)
 - Astin's definition of a Peer Group would only include higher-level friendships, but lower-level friendships also benefited my participants
- Therefore, as commonalities are discovered, students may decide that certain friendships are higher-level than others

Stages of Friendship Development

- I found that higher-level friendships enter a maintenance stage
 - Students in this stage pondered their own identity as part of a group of friends
 - This supports Chickering and Reisser's (1993) assertion that part of developing mature interpersonal relationships was to develop the ability to maintain individuality while also being part of a group

Relationship between Friendship and Academic Success in College

- This study supports the existing literature that asserts many academically underprepared college students have been invalidated as learners during high school (Terenzini, et al., 1994)
 - Placed in Tech Prep programs, discouraged from coming to college
- Academic support from friends is crucial
 - Students often credited their friends with their own academic success
 - Friendships provided social support networks, which help individuals confront such difficult situations (Phinney & Haas, 2003)

Relationship between Friendship and Academic Success in College

- Lower-level friendships also credited with academic persistence
 - One example is Friends Whose Names Are Unknown being found in the Math Lab
 - Simply visiting the mathematics lab, the tutoring center, or utilizing other academically focused space on campus also allowed students to feel supported by others
 - Seeking out this type of help is crucial to academic success (Phinney & Haas, 2003)

Relationship between Friendship and Academic Success in College

- Even lower-level friendships can help students feel they are part of a larger community, which is necessary for persistence (Tinto, 1993)
 - Membership, not full integration into the group, is what affects persistence

Relationship between Friendship and Academic Success in College

- Participation in student organizations also credited with academic persistence
 - This is consistent with current literature about the importance of belonging to a larger group
- Student friendships have a positive influence on academic progress (Knight, 1994)
- Interaction between students was also an important predictor of eventual academic persistence, perhaps the ultimate measure of student success in college (Astin, 1993)
- Therefore, it makes sense that students who had academically focused interactions with their peers found those to be helpful.

Diverse Friendships

- Students valued their diverse friendships
- Diverse friendships support academic and social transition to college and student success
 - Socializing with members of a different racial or ethnic group than one's correlates with self-reported growth in subject-matter expertise (Astin, 1993)
 - Students discussed their appreciation for their diverse friends, a subtask in Chickering and Reisser's vector, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships
 - Increasing one's ability to form relationships across cultural boundaries is an important part of managing interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993)

Diverse Friendships

- Having diverse friends can also be thought of as belonging to a number of different communities, defined by age groups, racial or ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, or interest groups
 - Having a feeling of belonging to multiple communities is linked to academic success and to having one's social needs fulfilled (Tinto, 1993)
 - Decreasing one's ethnocentrism and forming relationships with a diverse friends group are also related to developing empathy (Chickering and Reisser 1993)

Friends as Sources of Information

- Participants did not identify other students as their major sources of information for matters of academic policy and practice to the degree I had expected
 - Padilla, et al., (1997) found that students must acquire informal, practical knowledge in order to succeed in college
- Participants credited their friends, instead, with their academic success
 - Informal, ad hoc tutoring
 - Study groups

Friends as Sources of Validation

- Participants discussed cooperative study groups and ad hoc tutoring sessions as both the basis for and the fruit of their friendships
 - Such cooperative learning strategies are often employed by academically at-risk students so that they can assist each other while validating each other as learners (Terenzini, et al., 1994)

Relationship between Friendship and Social Transitions in College

- All of the participants discussed their social transition to college and credited the social support they received in college with contributing to their successful social transition to college.
- Consistent with Tinto's (1993) assertion that supportive communities reduce the stress of any transition
 - Participants received social support and developed social networks both in class and in student organizations.

Student Satisfaction and Friendships

- Participants were markedly satisfied with their college experiences
 - May be related to the presence of social support that they all described in their lives (Weir & Okun, 1989),
 - Presence of their social networks may also be credited with how well adjusted socially the participants were (Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1996)
- Participants who said they did not have large, close social networks said that was by their own choice
 - demonstrates the internal locus of control found to be important to students' academic success (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004)

Friendships, Student Organizations, and Student Development

- Several female participants were particularly good examples of the idea that women's development is significantly affected by the degree to which women find their individual voices (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986)
 - Meghan, Maria, and Faith found that student organizations were a place to make social connections and to feel more comfortable in the college environment
 - Taking on leadership roles was important to all three women as well, as they learned to use their voices in college

Implications for Practice

- Early friendship connections are important
 - Quick attachment to a social group at the beginning of a student's college years is important to retention (Tinto, 1993)
 - This is particularly true for traditional-aged college students and also for minorities for whom affiliating with ethnic affinity groups may make the world of college smaller and more manageable (Padilla, et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993)
- Friendships begin with proximity
 - Friendships are made between those who come into contact with each other

Interventions to Create Proximity and Early Connections

- Introduce clubs and organizations early on
- Create spaces where like-minded students can encounter each other
- Use this study as support for requesting funding for such student organizations, social programs, facilities, and other programs that offer students the chance to get to know others on campus

Creating Diverse Friend Groups

- Programs that enhance students' understanding of diverse cultures are important
- Perhaps even more important are programs that encourage students of diverse races, ethnicities, genders, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds to encounter each other and begin to form friendships
- Offer these programs early in students' college careers

Help Students Develop and Maintain Their Friendships

- Practitioners can encourage students to spend time and energy developing these relationships
- Create programs and advocate for learning situations that encourage the development of relationships at the beginning of each school term
- Encourage students to reflect on those relationships to increase their self-awareness and awareness of others
- Encourage students to keep up friendships as schedules change
 - Provide social programming that draws students to campus
 - May help students develop the crucial social support that will increase their likelihood of academic success

Suggestions for Future Research

- Recreate research in different situations
 - Different college types
 - Different ethnicities
- Repeat research with students who are not academically underprepared
- Further research into classification system and how to “upgrade” friendships

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