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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON COLLEGE READINESS BETWEEN GENDERS

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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON COLLEGE READINESS

BETWEEN GENDERS

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ABSTRACT

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Megan O'Neill

College and career readiness became a point of interest in the education system 56 years ago when President Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and it has continued into the 21st century with the Every Student Succeeds Act (New York State Education Department Office of Accountability, 2020). 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. A case study exemplified the importance of who surrounds the student, showing those individuals may strongly affect the student's drive and knowledge to be college-ready. This research relied on computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to organize, save, and analyze the data collected in interviews, journal entries, and survey responses. The software helped with reducing and displaying data and drawing conclusions. The theoretical framework of social capitalism guided the analysis. The significance of this research is that it revealed an overlooked resource that all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students with low socioeconomic status can leverage to be college-ready.

DEDICATION

I want to thank the members of my support network, who helped me accomplish this amazing endeavor. This journey really was enlightening, and it could not have been done without my parents checking in on me to ensure I stayed on track and wasn't losing my mind. To Dennis and Kathleen O'Neill, thank you. Additionally, I would like to thank my St. John's University cohort, survey participants, colleagues, friends, and community. At this point, I am sure everyone is excited that they will not have to hear about the research and survey results of my dissertation on a daily basis. I want to thank Tuxedo for being a constant companion, sounding board, and inspiration throughout this experience, who reminded me to take breaks and have fun! Albert Einstein once said, "strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value." I hope my research provides the educational community value to help future students.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

College and career readiness became a point of interest in the education system 56 years ago when President Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Interest continued with President Bush's passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and, most recently, President Obama's support for the Common Core Standards and the American Dream Act in 2010. Strong evidence suggests that U.S. high schools are falling short of graduating college- and career-ready students, giving raise 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). The state then publicly displays these results as part of its school report card. In addition, school district school report card results impact school funding. This connection to funding pressures school districts to help students apply to college; however, this 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. A lead researcher in college readiness, David Conley (2008), identified four sets of strategies and skills that students must acquire to become college-ready: key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, key learning skills and techniques, and key transition knowledge and skills. Having a social group to strengthen the key areas Conley

referenced would help address the gaps in college readiness (Conley, 2008). Previous studies have shown students with low socioeconomic status and students from minority populations have less knowledge of higher education and the financial support and other resources available to them (Shamsuddin, 2015). 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. Leaders in higher education have acknowledged the importance of social networks by creating learning communities at the freshman level. Learning communities can help students transition between high school and college by providing a robust support network that strengthens skills like self-reliance and student success (Virtue et al., 2019). To be successful in college, students must be college-ready, so in this study, the researcher investigated how social groups influence college readiness between genders (i.e., males and females).

Purpose of the Study

In this qualitative study, the researcher examined the impact of social networks on college readiness between genders. This study utilized case studies to identify the effects of social networks on individual students' college readiness. Stake (1995) defined a case study as the study of a specific situation that is connected to an individual's experience within a given context. The use of interviews, journals, and surveys allowed this researcher to shed light on the impacts of social networks, such as peers, community groups, school counselors, and families, on individuals' college readiness. The use of a case study highlighted the specific social network supporting the participant's college readiness and the ways it supported them. Relationships may be more impactful than academic success in determining college readiness. Peer groups, such as learning

communities, bolster student persistence, grade point averages (GPAs), and adaptability to higher levels of academic rigor and to college campus life (Virtue et al., 2019). Francis et al. (2018) found that students valued having family available for emotional support throughout college. This current study identified the social group that influenced the participants and identified any patterns or differences pertaining to college readiness that emerged between genders.

Theoretical Framework

In their theories on social capital, Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu have theorized on how social networks impact college readiness. Robert Putnam (1995) explained that the underlying concept of social capital involves personal connections, which function as a value-added resource for social and economic issues because they supply members with collaboratively produced capital they can use to achieve individual objectives. In this study, the value-added resource involved the emotional support and knowledge that the participants received from their social network that helped them stay in college and overcome challenges. Bourdieu (2011) asserted that a network of relationships or membership in a group promotes material or symbolic profits. Accumulating social capital involves making social connections that yield resources not available to an individual. A social network can include family, neighbors, and coworkers, and it can be temporary in nature or long-term. Bourdieu explained that social capital could include gifts, words, or other items. In this current study, the researcher examined college students' social networks and their impact on college readiness. Chapter 2 expands on the theoretical framework in more detail.

Significance of the Study

According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, only 72% of 2018 high school graduates went straight to college in New York state (2021). Researchers in this study explored whether pressures from social networks directly affected the students' decisions to attend and stay in college. They aimed to discover ways to increase graduation rates among students and to measure the influence of social networks on college readiness. School districts guide students on academics, college applications, and financial resources; however, not all students receive the same college preparation. Some students take remedial courses in schedules with no room for advanced courses. In addition, financially disadvantaged students may not take necessary standardized tests or apply to multiple colleges due to money constraints. This current study could shed light on an overlooked resource that all students can utilize, especially students with disabilities, English language learners, and students with low socioeconomic status, by concentrating on the social support network that works best for the individual student.

Connection With Social Justice

The high school graduation rate for New York State in 2018 was 80% among both genders, however, when examined closer the graduation rate for females in 2018 was 84% compared to 77% for male graduates (data.nysed.gov, 2019). More information is needed regarding how social networks influence students' college readiness and how schools can leverage these factors to help all students succeed. The cost of students required to take noncredit bearing courses (i.e., pre-algebra, developmental writing) are projected to cost $7 million annually, which represents a financial burden for both

students and higher education institutions (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). In the education field, researchers have predicted college readiness using GPAs, American College Testing (i.e., ACT) scores, and placement exams. GPA represents a challenging metric through which to compare potential students because different school districts calculate and interpret grades differently (Allensworth & Clark, 2020). Some institutions use specific test metrics to rely less on inconsistent GPA calculations, but a need existed for more research on the other factors that help prepare students for college. Still, a test score only represents one moment in time and does not truly reflect the characteristics of an individual. College is unique because students can pick the course of study that interests them, which may serve as an internal motivator that helps students succeed in college. Also, the addition of support networks such as peers, families, and church communities may help students be college-ready. Ma et al. (2019) found that individuals who graduated with at least a bachelor's degree have healthier lifestyles, higher earning potential, and are more likely to be employed. The authors defined a healthier lifestyle as one that includes working out, not smoking, volunteering, and participating in educational activities with family. This research on social networks' impact on college readiness could improve access to this healthier lifestyle and higher earning potential for all students.

Research Questions

The following primary research question guided this study: What has been the impact of social networks on college readiness between genders? Four subquestions supported the primary question. These included the following:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of social networks?

2. How do social networks that were developed and maintained in high school help undergraduate students be college-ready?

3. What are the most effective social networks for each gender?

4. How do social networks help support college readiness for undergraduate students pertaining to contextual skills and academic skills?

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions were used during the course of this research. *Academic behaviors* refers to content knowledge and academic self-management skills. Such academic skills include perseverance, study skills, reflection, time management, and the ability to seek out additional help when needed (Conley, 2008).

College readiness is defined as the amount of preparation required for a student to enroll in and succeed in a full-time course load at a higher education institute that results in an undergraduate degree or transfer to a different undergraduate program. College readiness includes strong academic behaviors and knowledge of contextual skills (Conley, 2008).

Community support refers to support garnered from community organizations. These organizations can be challenging to define because they range from nonprofit groups to informal groups and professional services. Some examples of community organizations include churches, unions, schools, health care agencies, social service groups, fraternities, sports teams, and clubs (Community-Based Organizations, n.d.).

Contextual skills are the skills needed to apply to college and the ability to assimilate into campus culture (Conley, 2008). Applying to college involves navigating the application process, understanding the availability of and ways to access financial aid, and an understanding of how the college system works in order to matriculate (Conley, 2008).

Peer networks, according to Castrogiovanni (2002, as cited in Korir & Kipkemboi, 2014), include groups of similarly aged individuals who share the same activities. Peer groups share information and provide guidance to one another (Stumpers et al., 2005).

Social capital refers to social organizations, such as networks, that encourage cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). The presence of social capital motivates individuals to enforce norms and encourages trust among collaborating individuals. Most especially, social capital allows for coordination and communication with the aim of resolving problems (Putnam, 2000).

Social groups, also known as "social networks," must be cultivated and should be seen as an investment, where members benefit from being part of the group. Examples of social groups include family, class, tribe, and party (Bourdieu, 2011).

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, the researcher examined how the impact of social networks on college readiness differed between genders. Areas of specific interest included contextual skills, community support, and academic behaviors affecting college readiness. 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. Le et al. (2015) found students who were introduced to contextual skills were better prepared to complete higher education. Francis et al. (2018) found that first-generation college students experienced difficulty when applying to college. They also found contextual skills, such as help with filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, knowing which classes to take, and understanding how to contact a professor, benefitted students (Francis et al., 2018). Community support can have a positive or negative impact on college readiness. Some students may feel guilty leaving their families and not contributing financially to household expenses for a short amount of time, and others may have support to help them adjust to the college lifestyle (Galina, 2016). Academic behaviors, such as having content knowledge and good study habits, increase college readiness (Conley, 2008). Although many factors influence college readiness, this study focused on how support networks affected college readiness differently across genders.

Theoretical Framework

Previous theorists, such as Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, and Lin, have all researched social capital. Coleman (1988) defined social capital as productive, allowing for the accomplishment of goals that would otherwise be impossible. Social capital is not

as apparent as other forms of capital, such as human or physical capital, because it exists in the relations among people. Coleman described the need to have closure on social structures to allow for trustworthiness, which results in repeated responsibilities and expectations. In this study, the researcher analyzed the social network surrounding the participant to see how the college-ready individual had benefitted from one social support or many, which would confirm Coleman's theory on networking closure. Coleman conveyed the importance of family support on a child's intellectual development, but the author did not explain how a lack of connection between the parents and a child could impact educational outcomes. Coleman asserted that a child's development does not solely rely on the family but can come from external supports.

Putnam (2001) added to the concept of social capital by explaining it can involve formal and informal memberships. The author explained formal memberships are organizations that have a chairman or president and membership dues, and informal memberships are groups that meet naturally, regularly, or even superficially (e.g., acknowledging someone in the hallway). Putnam asserted that trust and social capital declined after the 1970s but also noted a correlation between states with a high social capital index and how well education works in those locations. Bourdieu (2011) believed that social capital depends on an external force provided to the individual, which influences their action.

In this current study, the researcher examined how external support influences an individual's actions related to college readiness. Figure 1 presents the framework that guided this research. Social capital encourages a heuristic viewpoint, so this researcher utilized case studies to learn about the participants' social networks and the impact of

those networks on college readiness. Lin (1999) added to the work of Bourdieu (2011), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2001) and their theories on social capital. Lin identified multiple definitions of social capital and offered the following core definition "investment in social relations with expected returns" (p. 30). In addition, Lin broke down the reasons why investing in social capital improves activities, asserting it allows for the flow of information; deepens social connections, which may impact agents' decisions and roles; enhances social credentials to provide organizations with a guarantee of the actors ability that relates to the organizations benefit; and reinforces identity and recognition. This researcher analyzed participants' social networks to see how social capital helped them prepare for college.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework Flow Chart
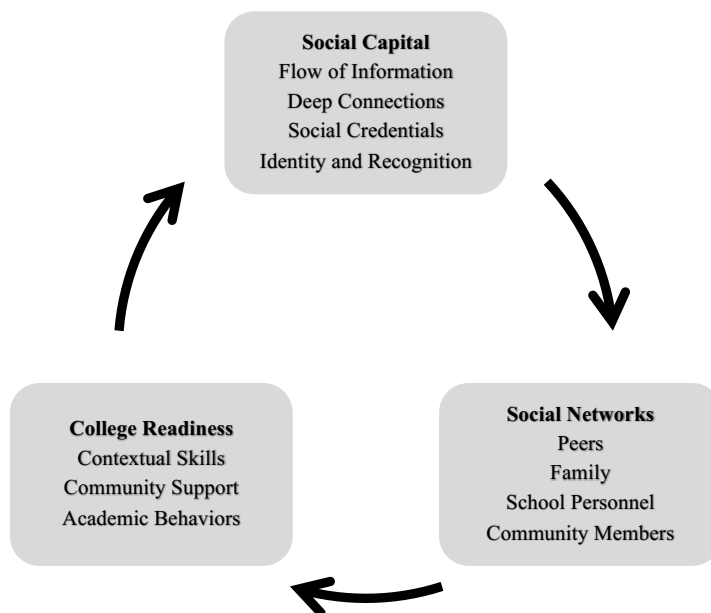
Review of Related Literature

The following sections provide a review of the literature involving the impact of social networks and social capital on individual students. This section focuses on three out of four components summarized by Conley (2008) as being necessary for an individual to become college-ready. Conley theorized that college readiness requires: contextual skills, community support, and academic behaviors. These components comprise the frame for this study of how support networks affect college readiness across genders. The focus of this paper strengthened past studies of social networks and college readiness with an added focus on the similarities and differences that might exist between genders. This literature review included research on how social networks affect college readiness with guidance from Conley's (2008) components and theories of social capital presented by Bourdieu (2011), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2001).

Contextual Skills

Conley (2008) identified contextual skills as necessary for students to succeed in college. The author explained contextual skills refer to a student's knowledge of the application process, resources available to them, and supports needed to succeed in college.

Le et al. (2015) examined a specific program that strengthened students' experiences with becoming college-ready, including their specific contextual skills. The authors investigated whether a relationship existed between attendance in the College Bound, St. Louis Program and participants' academic achievement, college enrollment, and persistence. Le et al. focused on 384 participants who attended three public school districts: Maplewood Richmond Heights, University City, and St. Louis. The school districts represented a diverse student population that was economically disadvantaged.

Half of the students in Maplewood Richmond Heights were African American, and 43%

of the students qualified for free or reduced lunches. In the University City School, 89%

of students identified as African American, and 53% qualified for free or reduced lunch.

In the St. Louis school district, 80% of students identified as African American students,

and 77% qualified for free or reduced lunch. Le et al. reported further demographics as

follows: 66% female, 90% African American, 6% White, 4% other, 3% English language

learners, 2% students with disabilities, and 70% eligible for free or reduced lunch.

In this study, Le et al. (2015) aimed to evaluate the College Bound Program's

effectiveness in preparing underrepresented students for college. The researchers used the

National Student Clearinghouse and District data to perform their quantitative study.

They also created a College Bound counterfactual group to compare outcomes because

they did not have participants with whom to make comparisons. Le et al. revealed that

90% of College Bound participants enrolled in college compared to the control group of

non-College Bound participants, in which only 75% had enrolled in college. The study

showed statistical significance among the College Bound participants and the control

group in the majority of content area courses. For example, 60.5% of the College Bound

participants obtained a B or higher in American literature and composition compared to

41.55% of those in the control group ($p < 0.01$). Additionally, 58.6% of the College

Bound group earned a B or higher in Algebra 2 compared to 41.37% of the control group

($p < 0.01$). Last, 48.82% of the College Bound participants earned a B or higher in

chemistry, and 71.7% did so in U.S. history compared to the respective 28.67% and

50.25% earned by participants in the control group ($p < 0.01$). The findings showed that

students participating in the College Bound readiness program were more likely to attend

a 4-year college, obtain at least a B or higher in a majority of their courses, and reach proficiency on their final exams.

The study by Le et al. (2015) solidified the need for programs to support students who experience disadvantages to help prepare them for college. The College Bound program included components of financial aid advisement, individual counseling to help with college applications, and assistance with applying to colleges appropriate for their abilities (Francis et al., 2018). Martinez et al. (2017) examined another college-readiness program that showed the need for specific college-readiness programs or workshops targeted at high school students.

In a study of 163 ninth-grade English students in a Title 1, low-performing rural high school in the Southeastern United States, Martinez et al. (2017) investigated a guidance program called Preparing for Post–High School Education: Motivated, Informed, and Ready (PPHSE:MIR) to determine how effectively it improved postsecondary education-going knowledge, postsecondary education-going access aspirations, and career and college readiness self-efficacy for students from diverse populations. This study consisted of a control group with 35 males and 40 females (i.e., 75 students) and a treatment group with 33 males and 55 females (i.e., 88 students). The treatment group followed the PPHSE:MIR program, which focused on eight modules over 5 weeks using various teaching modalities (e.g., social media, engaging exercises, and reviewing previous material pertaining to college readiness). Themes for the treatment group included readiness, access, affordability, preparedness, and self-efficacy. The control group had 5 weeks of individualized college readiness preparation. Guidance counselors discussed college and career planning in the students' English classes and

encouraged them to work on an individual learning plan for themselves. Students had access to the guidance counselors as needed.

To measure and analyze progress between the treatment and control groups, Martinez et al. (2017) gave the students a pre- and posttest. The researchers applied hierarchical linear modeling to account for student differences such as gender and race. The researchers determined the PPHSE:MIR had a nonstatistically significant effect on students' access aspiration. Their only notable finding showed that, on average, Latinx students had lower postsecondary education-going access aspirations compared to White students. The PPHSE:MIR did not impact Latinx students' perception of college access. The measure showed the PPHSE:MIR had a negative impact on postsecondary education-going knowledge because students who scored high on the pretest remained close to the same on the posttest. Conversely, the PPHSE:MIR had a positive impact on career and college readiness self-efficacy, with a 100% variance ($r^2 = 1.00$). The findings showed that the curriculum may have required revision to improve the postsecondary education-going access aspirations; however, the specific curriculum did improve students' career and college self-efficacy, especially for first-generation, low-income students of color.

Martinez et al. (2017) showed students who received additional support were more prepared for college success than those in the control group. The authors found high school students needed alternative secondary programs to strengthen their contextual skills and academic behavior and needed a connection to community support to improve college readiness. This research emphasized the impact of social networks on students' college readiness because the experimental group was more prepared than the control

group. Witteveen et al. (2017) also supported the need for strong contextual skills in high school students.

Witteveen et al. (2017) researched the process leading to college graduation using hidden Markov modeling. The authors aimed to find the factors that separate a 6-year college graduate from one who did not graduate. The researchers reviewed coded transcripts of 8,980 first-time freshmen enrolled in a 4-year college creating the "2004/2009 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study Restricted-Use Transcript Data Files." Witteveen et al. found the probability of graduate students taking a high number of credits in a semester was only 23.8 % compared to a 40.5 % chance of taking a large number of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses. A notable difference between nongraduates taking a low STEM course load and nongraduates taking a high STEM course load, however, involved the number of credits attempted. A student who took more than 18 credits had a 19.6% chance of being a nongraduate with a low number of STEM courses but a 42.4 % of being a nongraduate with a high number of STEM courses. Course selection and the balance between STEM courses and the number of credits taken proved the factor impacting college completion. Witteveen et al. found that completers and noncompleters started their first semester in the same way; however, completers tended to fluctuate between heavier and lighter course loads each semester compared to noncompleters who kept their course loads the same. Completers dropped courses to avoid a course failure to keep themselves on track toward their goal of graduating. Use of this strategy showed the importance of contextual knowledge at the postsecondary level. Students could accumulate contextual knowledge

by interacting with members of a community support system who had knowledge of college processes.

Duncheon (2015) stated students need to understand the college processes related to higher education options, financial aid resources, academic requirements, and cultural understanding of the higher education environment. Contextual skills help students to be college-ready. Almeida (2015) investigated previous literature to determine "how . . . low-income, first-generation students acquire college knowledge." The author focused on low-income, first-generation students because they did not have the economic or social capital typical of middle- and upper-income students.

Social capital is not distributed equally, a fact evident when comparing high-performing school districts with low-performing school districts. Students who attend high-performing school districts typically have a college-going school environment where community members expect that everyone will go to college (Duncheon, 2015, as cited in Roderick et al., 2009). Students should be aware of the option for college as early as their freshman and sophomore years so they have ample time to research and compare schools.

Students with low social capital also lack access to and understanding of the financial aid process. One-fifth of eligible low-income students do not file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Duncheon, 2015; King, 2004). Almeida (2015) stated students can increase contextual skills through their relationships with adults and peers. Almeida identified three areas of support: family, teachers, and external agents such as counselors, mentors, and peers. The author asserted the focus should be on the external agents because families of first-generation students may not have the college

knowledge to share, and teachers focus mainly on academics. The notable difference Almeida pointed out between high and low socioeconomic status networks is that those who comprise the low-income network lack knowledge of the college process, so they are unable to assist the students in that network. The high socioeconomic status network includes people who have navigated the higher education system and can provide guidance on how to prepare for college.

Almeida's (2015) participants included 31 first-generation students who attended three urban public high schools in a low-income community. The participants had an average GPA of 3.67 and above-average SAT scores compared to their high school peers, and they all participated in a mentoring program. All participants applied to at least three colleges and were accepted to at least one. Almeida found that almost 70% of participants obtained the most information about college readiness and the college process through their college counselor. The author explained one participant acknowledged her close relationship with her counselor enabled her to obtain valuable information that was not available from her peers. This study showed that a participant's level of involvement in the program dictated how much they got from it. For example, a participant who connected with her counselor during her freshmen year was able to obtain scholarship opportunities throughout her high school career. However, participants found there were not enough counselors for all of the students in their school, so they had to be proactive in learning the college process. Almeida also reported that 25% of the participants obtained the most information from their mentors. These students did so because they felt the counselor was too busy and did not have time for them. The author also found that all participants had peers who were applying to college, which motivated them to take

advanced courses and study for standardized exams. Having older peers helped the

participants know ahead of time about time management pertaining to writing personal

statements for college applications and the possibility of sharing them with other peers to

review.

Almeida (2015) compared counselors and mentors, showing both aimed to assist

students during the college process; however, students reported being more receptive to

help obtained from individuals to whom they felt connected and welcomed. In addition,

all participants received social capital in the form of information; however, as Coleman

(1988) advised, social capital requires action. Almeida's participants played an active

role by gathering the information shared via their social supports and then either applying

for financial aid or seeking more information. When the participant sought more

information, the social network agent provided additional help. In this current study, the

researcher explored Almeida's findings and built upon them by examining how the

participants interacted with their social networks to become college-ready.

Community Support

Throughout the literature review, the importance of community support for

students' college readiness remained a prominent theme. Francis et al. (2018) conducted

a mixed-method study to find the level at which students with disabilities were college-

ready, what disability services the students received in college, their thoughts on the

services, and their thoughts on family engagement at the college level. Francis et al.

conducted this study in a public university in the eastern region of the United States. The

authors chose participants at random from a survey they distributed through the school's

disability services office. The effort produced 109 individuals who were registered with

the disability services office who agreed to participate in this study. The participants were

67% White or Caucasian and 63% female. Ninety-three percent spoke English as their first language.

Francis et al. (2018) used a 33-question survey with open-ended, closed-ended, ranking order, Likert scale, and multiple-choice questions related to the five areas of interest: college readiness, disability-related services in college, participants' thoughts on these services, suggestions on how to improve these services, and participants' thoughts on family involvement. The participants took this survey online using an online qualitative platform. The results showed 51% of the participants felt really prepared or prepared for college. Those participants who felt that way indicated note-taking skills, time management, resilience, and rigorous courses helped them be prepared for college. The 30% of the participants who felt unprepared or very unprepared for college reported needing better executive functioning skills, literacy skills, and knowledge of their disability. Francis et al. found that the top two disability services used were extended time on tests and a separate environment for testing. Ninety-one percent of the participants reported feeling extremely satisfied or satisfied with the services provided by the college. The survey showed that participants wanted more help with emotional or mental health support, time management support, budgeting support, and assistance with job preparedness. In another finding, 56% of the participants reached out to family for support either daily or a few times per week. Despite reaching out to family, these participants also reported feeling that families did not need to be directly involved in college communication and issues; they felt that it was important to use family as an emotional support, so they could vent and express their emotions.

Francis et al. (2018) studied students with disabilities and showed students needed the support of social networks (i.e., teachers or family) to be college-ready. In this current study, the researcher sought to identify which social network had the greatest impact on college readiness. Marciano (2016) also emphasized the importance of social networks by showing the influence of peer groups on college readiness.

Marciano (2016) examined peer interaction among youths and their peers as they participated in the college process, which included researching and preparing for enrollment. The study included 10 Black and Latinx youth attending the 12th grade in an urban New York City public high school. The author used the snowball technique to acquire participants, yielding six Black females, two Black males, and two Latina females who all participated in interviews over 6 months. The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to see how and why youth interactions impacted college readiness and how the participants communicated these interactions with new forms of technology.

Marciano (2016) utilized one-on-one interviews and focus groups over a 6-month period during the second semester of a school year. The author found the participants wanted each other to be successful and had high academic expectations of one another. Marciano highlighted the importance of reciprocal relationships, which can be connected to social capital. The participants had a shared lived experience and saw their friends' potential to be successful. In addition, one participant explained how having friends who were excited about going to college motivated her to strive to attend college as well. The participant also explained how she had friends who wanted to take a year off before college, but she said she tried to encourage them to go to college right after high school. Personal connections, according to Putnam's (1995) theory on social capital, provide a

beneficial means of combatting social challenges because they provide individuals with mutually created capital they can leverage to fulfill individual goals. Participants in this study communicated with each other using methods such as Facebook and text messaging to encourage one another to complete homework assignments or to assist each other with filling out college applications. One participant encouraged her peer to seek out her individual teacher for more academic support. Marciano showed how peers create reciprocal relationships to become college-ready. These findings strengthen the claim that outside support can help students become college- and career-ready.

Marciano's (2016) research strengthened this current study by highlighting the fact that peer groups should be leveraged by schools to help foster college readiness among students. The researcher in this current study continued where Marciano left off to determine if peer groups or any other social network influence the college readiness experience in a positive or negative way.

Leaders of various college preparation programs have worked to capitalize on community support. Watt et al. (2017) studied the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) college-readiness program to understand gender imbalance within the program. The authors reviewed 207 schools that had implemented AVID for at least 6 years with underrepresented students who had B or C averages and an interest in attending college. Watt et al. aimed to see why males were underrepresented in this college-readiness program. The researchers used historical data and two surveys—the Gender Disparity Questionnaire and the Survey of AVID Program and Students—to answer their questions.

Watt et al. (2017) found that AVID participants were 64% female and 36% male. Male AVID students enjoyed participating in leadership opportunities and staying eligible for sports. The bonds that the students and the AVID elective teacher formed were very valuable and kept the boys in the program. The authors found no significant differences between the strong recruitment schools and the recruitment schools with regard to the number of male and female AVID students enrolled in advanced placement courses. If they did not drop the program, males who enrolled in the program succeeded as compared to females. Male students appeared to drop because of external factors. The study showed that males dropped out because of scheduling conflicts. For example, some wanted to take different courses or be available to work or attend sports after school. Interestingly, males reported dropping in response to peer pressure. They viewed the AVID program as geeky or for smart students. Watt et al. showed the impact of peers on college readiness; one was positive and empowering, and the other one was negative and destructive. These results indicated high school students need appropriate community support to uplift them and redirect them on their college journey. Similarly, Fass and Tubman (2002) and Goyza Ryabov (2009) showed that social networks influence college readiness.

Fass and Tubman (2002) sought to study college students' attachment to parents and peers and the relationship between that attachment and cognitive ability, psychosocial functions, and academic achievement. The study population included 357 multiethnic college students attending a 4-year urban Southeastern U.S. university. The study population was 71.4% female and 28.6% male. The sample was 15.7% European American, 66.4% Hispanic American, 12% African American, 3.4% Asian American, and 2.5% other; 78.2% of participants lived at home with at

least one parent. The authors focused on seven measures: parent and peer attachment, self-perceived functioning and competence, self-esteem, sex-role adherence, locus of control, optimism, and academic functioning. The researchers recruited participants from undergraduate psychology classes and offered them 1 hour of research credit for volunteering to participate. For a measurement instrument, Fass and Tubman used a packet of questionnaires representing each measure and asked the participants to complete them in a classroom setting.

Fass and Tubman (2002) conducted a one-way analysis of variance and showed no significant difference in mean levels between peer attachments across ethnic groups, but they did find a significant difference in mean levels between parental attachment and ethnic groups (p. 565). The findings were inverted for gender, where no significant difference appeared for mean levels among parental attachment, but a significant difference existed for mean levels among peer attachment. Additionally, no significant gender differences existed in mean levels for cognitive or noncognitive psychosocial variables. The authors' correlational analysis of the seven measures showed that there was a significant positive correlation among peer and parental attachment for self-esteem, locus of control, global self-esteem, optimism, scholastic competence, intellectual ability, and androgyny. In their correlational analysis, Fass and Tubman revealed no significant correlation between peer and parental attachment and college GPA (p. 566), but they did find a significant correlation pertaining to high school GPA and peer and parental attachment. Lastly, the post hoc comparisons showed that the low peer attachment and low parental attachment groups were significantly different from groups defined by high attachment in one or both attachment areas, and the high peer attachment and high

parental attachment groups were significantly better functioning compared to all other groups.

Fass and Tubman (2002) provided a foundation for this current research by exploring data relevant to parental and peer support structures. Their findings showed low attachment does not predict academic outcomes at the college level; however, high attachment to social structures enhances it. In this current study, the researcher more closely examined the outside social networks impacting college readiness. Goza and Ryabov's (2009) study on peer networks helped further guide this researcher through their examination of friend groups.

Goza and Ryabov (2009) illuminated the impact of peer networks. They sought to analyze how peer networks affect educational achievement and attainment. The population of this study included 13,738 participants, 51% of whom were female and 49% of whom were male. The authors acquired the data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which included data gathered over three time periods, 1994–1995, 1996, and 2001–2002. Goza and Ryabov used surveys and in-home interviews as their measurement instruments. They administered the survey to students in 132 high schools and middle schools. Participants in both the survey and the in-home interview were included in this data. The authors administered the survey to students who were present for school on the day of implementation. Goza and Ryabov utilized multivariate regression models that were separated into four specific groups: African American students, Asian students, Latino students, and non-Hispanic White students, to predict educational achievement and attainment (p. 1,269).

Goza and Ryabov (2009) showed a significant effect among African American students regarding peer network heterogeneity and GPAs; however, this effect did not improve graduation attainment (p. 1,273). The authors also found that Asian American and Latino students had no significant effect with heterogeneity peer groups regarding GPA and graduation rate. This study revealed that Latino and Asian American students were more likely to do better with peers of the same ethnicity. In another finding, Goza and Ryabov showed that non-Hispanic White students did see positive results in GPA in a heterogeneous setting, with no significant difference in achievement (p. 1274). Goza and Ryabov revealed that African American students were impacted differently compared to Asian American, Latino, and non-Hispanic White students. African American students achieved higher when in a heterogeneous group. Asian, Latino, and non-Hispanic White students did well when the student population was diverse and their peer groups were homogenous.

Goza and Ryabov's (2009) findings provided a foundation for this current research because they acknowledged peer grouping had an effect on student achievement and graduation completion. In this current study, the researcher conducted interviews and a survey to discover the nature of students' experiences with friends and to determine the role of those experiences in their college readiness.

Tierney and Colyar (2005) investigated what level of effort should go into enhancing peer relationships relating to education. Researchers believed education is a social activity and children learn in groups. The authors defined peer groups as closed groups that self-regulate and guide individuals through a set of group norms and values. This closely aligned with Coleman's (1988) social capital theory, where the network of

people affects the individual and the need for the network structure to be closed to allow for repetition and expectations. Students often want to assimilate into the crowd, so utilizing peers to help students become college-ready and learn how to adapt to the college experience is essential.

Tierney and Colyar's (2005) findings highlighted a mixed review of the influence of peer groups among researchers. Cohen's (1977, 1983) research showed that the impact of peers on college aspiration was insignificant, which was strengthened by Kandel and Lesser's (1969, 1970a) research showing a parent's influence had a greater impact than a peer's (Tierney & Colyar, 2005). Conversely, other researchers have found peer groups essential for cognitive and emotional growth, and they have shown peers who have friends with college aspirations were likely to attend college and vice versa (D'Amico, 1975; Newman & Newman, 1976; Rumberger, 1991, all sources cited in Tierney & Colyar, 2005). Additionally, peer networks allow for socialization in higher education and enable students to support one another in academic courses. Peer networks provide students with personal and academic support (Tierney & Colyar, 2005).

Tierney and Colyar (2005) accurately explained why more research is needed in the area of how support networks influence college readiness. In this study, the researcher examined all individuals involved in the participants' social networks to see how their peers influenced their college readiness. The study went one step further to examine how the influence of peer networks varied according to gender. Lastly, the researcher sought to understand how participants used their social networks to gain social capital in the form of social mobility.

Conley (2008) identified academic knowledge as one of the four factors of college readiness. If students do not have the required academic skills needed for college, then they will struggle to graduate, or they may need to sign up for remedial noncredit college courses. More research was needed on what structures can help students strengthen academic behaviors ranging from organizational skills to studying and content knowledge.

McDonald and Farrell (2012) performed a qualitative study of 31 students with disadvantages in an Early College High School. The authors aimed to examine the three constructs of college readiness: academic preparedness, social preparedness, and personal preparedness. McDonald and Farrell found that students equally needed all three factors to succeed in college. The authors showed that smaller groups and learning communities positively impacted college readiness for underserved students in college. The researchers showed that participation in Early College High School helped students adjust to college-level work and strengthened their college experiences.

Edgerton and Desimone (2019) explored the gaps in college and career readiness programs and the consistency with which standards are put into effect. They researched 42 school districts in Texas, 42 in Ohio, and 89 in Kentucky. They intentionally chose one elementary school and high school in each district and ensured that public, private, and charter schools were represented during this study. In their main finding, the authors reported that college- and career-ready standards were not being implemented consistently throughout the participating school districts. Some districts had very vague policies, and others had more detail. This discovery revealed students' experienced inconsistent content instruction among districts. Ensuring equitable adherence to

standards through rigorous content instruction among school districts would allow students to gain deeper content knowledge and better college readiness. Edgerton and Desimone (2019) pointed out the rigor and content inequities among school districts in Texas and Ohio. This important finding showed some students at an academic disadvantage, which affected their college readiness. Academic preparation played a critical role in college readiness, so teachers with low standards undermined their students' ability to rise to that level.

Kurlaender et al. (2019) reviewed current literature relating to four components: aspirations and beliefs, academic preparation, knowledge and information, and fortitude and resilience. These components resembled Conley's (2008) four factors: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. The purpose of this section is to highlight the academic preparation component and social support contributions that can help students prepare for college. Kurlaender et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of a college education to individuals and society alike. Individuals with a bachelor's degree earn approximately 70% more over the course of their lives than those with only a high school education (Baum et al., 2013).

Kurlaender et al. (2019) found that students with access to rigorous course work in high school had better postsecondary and job market outcomes compared to their peers. In addition, they found that students with weaker academic skills in a more rigorous course were more prepared for college than peers who did not experience a challenging course load. Social capital influenced what courses students took at the secondary level. High schools allowed students to self-select courses; however, students whose families enjoyed social, financial, or academic advantages were able to guide their

children toward college preparatory courses. In their research review, Kurlaender et al. found that interaction with high-achieving peers may have a favorable impact on student outcomes. The authors showed students who have better early academic skills may have been exposed to quality educational environments during the formative years, allowing them to build a strong foundation and receive academic intervention and encouragement from families and teachers. Notably, prior academic performance, as measured by a student's GPA, emerged as the best predictor of college readiness.

Kurlaender et al. (2019) showed social networks that provided guidance to students shaped their academic skills. Students who chose to enroll in rigorous coursework were frequently supported and motivated to do so by members of their social networks, including friends, school counselors, and family members. Kurlaender et al. provided data on which this current study could build by acknowledging that social networks promote academic achievement. These networks do so by encouraging students to take appropriate course loads that will prepare them for college. In this current study, the researcher investigated the participants' social networks to see how they guided the participants in their coursework selection and if they helped the participants maintain their GPA. Kurlaender et al. showed that social networks include friends, school personnel, and families.

Tierney and Auerbach (2005) continued the focus 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, starting in the early

20th century, when many viewed family involvement as harmful to a child's educational growth. This view was especially prominent among immigrant parents who did not foster assimilation. It continued into the 1960s and 1970s among families of low-performing students who experienced inadequate parenting and low expectations. 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 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 supports 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.

Conclusion

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.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This qualitative study focused on how the influence of social networks on college readiness differed across genders. In this study, the researcher utilized case studies to explore social groups' effects on individual students' college readiness. Stake (1995) defined a case study as the study of a specific situation that connects the experience within a given context. This qualitative research single case study was considered a retrospective snapshot study. Price et al. (2015) described a single case study as involving an individual, a specific group, or an event. The single event in this study related to the examination of how students' support networks impacted their journey to college readiness. This study was retrospective because, in accordance with a definition by Price et al. (2015), it required the gathering of information about a prior event. In addition to being retrospective, the researcher considered the study aligned with the Price et al. definition of a snapshot because it focused on one specific period in the participants' lives. The specific period addressed spanned the college readiness preparation period, normally occurring between ninth and twelfth grade. The researcher deemed the case study approach the best way to investigate the topic because this approach allows for an exploratory assessment of the participants and their experiences. In this case study, the researcher utilized interviews, journals, and a survey to shed light on how various social groups affected individuals' college readiness and their motivation to attend college. The researcher expected the case study would illuminate at what level those surrounding the student impacted their drive and ability to become college-ready. The researcher aimed to discover if relationships could be more impactful than academic success in determining college readiness.

Research Questions

The following primary research question guided this study: What has been the impact of social networks on college readiness between genders? Four subquestions supported the primary question. These included the following:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of social networks?

2. How do social networks that were developed and maintained in high school help undergraduate students be college-ready?

3. What are the most effective social networks for each gender?

4. How do social networks help support college readiness for undergraduate students pertaining to contextual skills and academic skills?

Setting

The study took place at a private catholic university in a northeastern metropolitan region of the United States. This institution had approximately 20,000 full- and part-time students with multiple campuses throughout the world. It offered over 100 areas of study and enrolled a diverse student population from all over the world, reflecting many ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. This institution of higher education offered many programs and services to support its diverse student population, such as the department of student wellness, campus ministries, athletics, alumni relations, the equity and inclusivity council, student support services, academic support services, and financial aid services and scholarships. In addition, this university offered programs that connected secondary education with postsecondary education, such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs and College Bound: Liberty Partnerships Program. The latter included academic support, mentors, and financial literacy

workshops. Students' educational experiences included home school, public school, and private charter school, and students' financial situations ranged from low to high socioeconomic status.

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. Convenience sampling involves selecting a sample of people from a population depending on the group's accessibility (Salkind, 2010). In a nonprobability sampling method, the researcher concentrates on a sample that is easy to utilize (Salkind, 2010). 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.

Purposive sampling involves the conscious recruitment of participants based on individual characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016). Students signed up on a Google form and were contacted to set up interview times based on the information they provided. The researcher selected five participants, two females and three males, to participate in both interviews and the journal activity. Additionally, the researcher created an open-ended survey to gain more participants. This method yielded an additional 13 participants. By interviewing and surveying these students, the researcher aimed to identify common themes related to how they prepared for college and what factors helped them stay on track to graduate. The participants represented a small population of various majors.

Data Collection Procedures

To begin data collection, the researcher approached the associate professor coordinator of the first-year writing course and asked them to provide access to the participants after the researcher had received approval from the school's institutional review board (i.e., "see Appendix A"). The researcher also contacted other professors who taught introductory courses at this institution. The data collection process began when these professors disseminated a recruitment letter with the survey link to the undergraduate students in their classes. After interested participants completed the Google interest survey, the researcher contacted individuals to set up interviews (i.e., "see Appendix B") and clarify the research study. Once the first interview was completed the participant received a daily journal prompt (i.e., "see Appendix C") for two weeks, excluding the weekends. Additionally, the researcher distributed another open-ended online survey (i.e., "see Appendix D") to the students in lieu of participating in the interview and journal process. The data collection methods used included interviews, document analysis, and a survey.

During the interviews, the researcher aimed to collect descriptions of the interviewee's daily life in order to interpret the meaning of their lived experiences (Kvale, 1983). In addition, researchers use interviews to capture patterns and themes using a semistructured format with general questions centered on themes (Kvale, 1983). Interviews contain various questioning techniques such as following up, probing, and specifying. Questions can be direct, indirect, and structured (Kvale, 2007). Seidman (2006) explained how the most important part of the interview process is listening, insisting that listening is more important than asking questions. Seidman described

listening in three levels: listening to what the participant is saying, listening to the participant's inner (i.e., unguarded) voice, and listening actively, which involves staying on time, being aware of the participants' energy level, and noting nonverbal cues. Open-ended surveys allow participants to formulate answers to open-ended questions based on their own cultural and social experiences rather than the researcher's experiences (Neuman, 2000, as cited in Creswell, 2013). The researcher analyzed interviews, documents, and open-ended survey responses to identify repetitive patterns and themes.

Researchers can review several types of documents in a qualitative study, including agendas, meeting minutes, diaries and journals, application forms, and photos (Bowen, 2009). The document analysis for this study involved a daily journal kept by participants who detailed their social network interactions over the course of a specific time period. Journals in case study research help researchers examine the central research question in a qualitative study (Mills et al., 2010). During the document analysis, the researcher aimed to obtain insight, extract meaning, and establish research findings from the participants (Bowen, 2009). The document analysis helped to produce rich descriptions of how the participants' social networks influenced their college readiness. The findings from the document analysis helped guide the second interview with the participant by either contributing to the development of more specific questions or prompting the researcher to ask for clarifications on the findings from the journals. The analysis strengthened the study by showing convergences or by showing the need for further investigation (Bowen, 2009). Convergence among the participants' journals, interviews, and survey responses lends credibility to a study.

The researcher conducted individual 30- to 45-min 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 researcher requested to record the interview to accurately transcribe at a later time. The researcher also took notes during the interview to record participants' responses. The first interview took place at the beginning of the fall semester at an agreed-upon time between the participant and researcher. The researcher sent a reminder email to the participants with the time and access link needed for the interview. The interview had no set minimum time but had a maximum time of 60 min. 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; however, the first review identified important information related to the research on how social groups impact students of different genders to see if similarities or differences existed. The researcher then reviewed the journals again to conduct a thematic analysis in which the researcher sought patterns and repetitive themes.

The researcher conducted the 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.

The initial coding categories included characteristics, social supports, academic

skills, and contextual skills. The researcher chose these coding categories because they

helped the researcher identify any correlations between participants and their college

readiness experience. The researcher collected data via individual interviews, personal

journals, and open-ended survey questions that participants responded to electronically.

Each major coding category contained more specific subtopics. The researcher kept a

running count for each source in each category.

Trustworthiness of the Design

The term *trustworthiness* refers to the claim that a researcher's findings are

significant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The trustworthiness of this study was supported

through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability methods. In

accordance with Guba and Lincoln (1981), this researcher ensured creditability using

prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking. The triangulation of

multiple data sources, such as interviews and documents, can validate findings. However,

triangulation results in three outcomes: convergence, inconsistency, and contradictions (Mathison, 1988).

To ensure creditability and dependability, the researcher adopted multiple methods. The researcher employed member checking with the interview transcripts and with the coding matrix to ensure accuracy, confirmability, and transferability of the data. Furthermore, the researcher engaged in member checking to decrease research bias and assess the trustworthiness of the qualitative results (Birt et al., 2016; Doyle, 2007). Member checking was available to participants who were interested in reviewing the transcripts, interpretations, and conclusions of the data acquired during the interviews. This research involved interviews with multiple individuals at two different time periods to find convergence in the data. The researcher conducted two interviews with each participant to increase credibility and to increase prolonged engagement, which would create a trusting relationship. Participants had the option at any point to refuse to continue with this research study, which allowed for the most honest participants to take part (Shenton, 2004).

To ensure dependability and transferability, the researcher developed thick descriptions of the participants' interviews, journal entries, and survey responses to express patterns of social relationships (Holloway, 1997). In this research study, reflexivity supported confirmability because the researcher considered how the participants' personal experiences might have shaped their ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the researcher kept detailed notes and discussed the results with a valued qualitative researcher to ensure confirmability. The researcher addressed all four

criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study of how support networks impact college readiness for students of different genders.

Research Ethics

The participants received a typed consent form via email explaining the research project and the expectations of the interviews and journals. The survey began with a message that explained the research project and consent. The message also noted the voluntary nature of participation and the participants' right to withdraw at any time during the interview, journal, or survey stage. The researcher assured them their responses would be removed from the study if they chose to withdraw. The researcher asked the participants to sign the consent form to show they understood that participation in this study was confidential and voluntary. The researcher kept all participants' identities confidential and randomly assigned them pseudonyms. The researcher saved all data pertaining to this research on a removable flash drive and kept it in a locked file cabinet when not in use. Member checking involves permitting participants to view the transcripts before they are published to ensure their perspectives have been accurately expressed and to clear up any misunderstandings. Through this process, the researcher allowed all participants to review the interpretations of their data (Shenton, 2004). Lastly, the university's institutional review board reviewed the study to protect all subjects from any harm that could arise from participation in the research.

Data Analysis Approach

In their framework for data analysis in qualitative studies, Miles and Huberman (1994) focused on data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. The researcher interwove these three components of data analysis throughout the research period. Data

reduction involves transforming the raw data into organized material that can be interpreted and understood (Byrne, 2017). Data reduction refers to an analytical method in which a researcher focuses, sorts, discards, and organizes data to develop and verify finished findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction occurred in this research study when the researcher asked the interview questions, designated the codes, and developed the themes. Data display involves organizing the data to promote the drawing of conclusions (Byrne, 2017). Data display for this study consisted of a coding matrix and charts that made the research easier to understand in more detail.

In this qualitative case study, the researcher used a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. The researcher applied Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, to organize, save, and trace data accurately. This software supported the building and linking of codes among themes and helped in the creation of visual models. Frequently used words were identified and categorized using codes and central themes. The researcher relied on a narrative analysis approach to guide the study and develop themes by examining the structure of testimonies as they were presented in story form (Byrne, 2017). During narrative analysis, a researcher takes multiple data sources, such as interviews and journals, and assigns meaning to the experiences of the participants (Oliver, 1998). The researcher deemed narrative analysis as the best approach for this research study because the process involved taking the participants' personal experiences and comparing them to those of the other participants to find meaning related to social networks and their impact on college readiness.

The researcher organized the data using Dedoose Code Tree Version 7.0.23, which allowed for the development of codes, subcodes, and themes. In addition, Dedoose

kept track of the frequency a code had been used and created a visual chart in the form of a code cloud. The program created a color-coded matrix via its code application capability and supported a code cooccurrence table to show how often a combination of two codes occurred. The researcher transcribed the interviews, journals, and survey results and entered them into Dedoose to assist with developing codes and major themes. The researcher used the narrative analysis approach with the assistance of Dedoose to produce the findings of this research study. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions after completing a detailed review of all the data and multiple reviews of the coding matrix to determine what data should be further researched and what information should be left out. The researcher drew conclusions by acknowledging patterns and themes, clustering and counting code words, comparing and contrasting participants' data, and building logical chains of evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Researcher Role

Reflexivity represents an important part of research because it allows the researcher to reflect upon themselves and their role in the study, especially regarding how their personal experiences and culture can influence their interpretations of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Haynes (2012) explained the researcher's role as the awareness of how the researcher's position can influence the research process or outcome.

The researcher in this study was a doctoral student with many educational certifications in the classroom and in administration. The researcher was a White, middle-class female with over a decade of experience in the public education field. The researcher worked for the majority of her career in a low-performing, high-minority,

socioeconomically disadvantaged school district. That experience motivated this current

research study and its focus on how support networks affect college readiness differently

across genders. The researcher believed no intentional bias existed; however,

unconscious bias may drive a study via the lens through which the researcher views the

world. This researcher tried to limit bias by taking moments to ask themselves questions

and reflect on the data collection process and findings to consider if they had skewed

them in any way. The researcher engaged in member checking to further limit researcher

bias by giving the participants the opportunity to ensure the researcher had captured their

perceptions and experiences correctly. Lastly, the researcher had collegial discussions

with their doctoral advisor to ensure they represented the research accurately.

Conclusion

Qualitative research was needed to examine how support groups affect college

readiness across genders. In this study, the researcher examined a nonacademic factor

that could help individuals succeed in college. The next chapter presents a clear, concise,

and organized report of the data obtained from participants at a university in a

northeastern region of the United States.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This research study focused on the social networks that impact college readiness across genders. This chapter 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. 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. Two participants were raised in single-parent households. The participants' majors varied and included informational technology, psychology, English, pharmaceuticals, finance, biology, history, and politics. Of the participants, 78% had declared a major, and 22% were undecided. The findings answer questions about the strengths and weaknesses of social networks, the impact of high school support networks, the most effective social network across genders, and how social networks support students' college readiness by developing context knowledge and academic skills. The participants' social networks included college counselors, assistant teachers, friends, significant others, sisters, athletic advisors, parents, and grandparents.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Social Networks

The benefits of social networks vary according to personal experiences; however, the data showed some commonalities among the participants. Overwhelmingly, the participants' social networks provided support and guidance during the college-readiness process. Participant 3 explained:

45

My parents support me by taking me home on the weekends when I need a break

or am homesick. My friends from high school support me by giving me advice

and being people I can call whenever I need someone to talk to. The friends I

have made in college support me by studying with me and helping me manage my

time.

This remark shows that the participant acquired the college readiness skills needed to be

successful in college by reaching out to friends and family when they needed support.

Friends reinforced learning skills and contextual skills by helping Participant 3 manage

their time and by studying with them. Friends also helped the participants develop

contextual skills. Participant 6 described going to their friend for emotional support:

"Social supports can keep you stable and grounded. For example, going to your friends

for a problem you're having can remove a great deal of stress off your shoulders."

Participant 6's view of social networks resembled that of Participant 14, who also

believed it was important to have people to talk to for emotional support. Participant 14

stated: "They are very important. College can be very overwhelming and scary and to go

through that by yourself is not okay or healthy. I think everyone should have people they

can talk to when they need an outlet."

Social networks, however, do not always have a positive impact on college

readiness. Members of some social networks can unintentionally discourage other

members by offering negative viewpoints that can adversely impact college readiness.

Some participants reported unfavorable actions of students who attended institutions of

higher education. In other cases, participants reported counselors with good intentions

who steered them away from college or parents who pressured them to pick an

undesirable college or major, which resulted in negative feelings about attending or preparing for college. Participant 6 shared a negative reaction to a social support, reporting, "I had no motivation to apply, and my college counselor kept telling me I was only capable of getting into community college." Although the counselor's intentions cannot be known, the participant clearly received a negative message that undermined their confidence in applying to certain schools. This message might have impacted the college-readiness process by stunting its growth.

Friends can also have an unintentionally negative effect on college readiness. Participant 1 stated:

It was a weird double-edged sword at first because I had this friend group, and a lot of whom went to community college right after just to get their associates and then use the credit to go to a different school. And I would go and hang out with people at the community college, and I don't want to speak ill of community colleges in general because it's a great resource, but oh my God, those people were miserable. I thought about going to community college because I was like it is financially reasonable, and then absolutely not . . . but that was disheartening because it was like dorm life seems miserable. It just seems like drug deals and loud music and sticky floors.

Sometimes the participants used friend networks to vent and inadvertently ended up only sharing the undesirable aspects of a situation, as Participant 1's comment revealed.

Members of other social groups, such as parents, can also impact the college-readiness process, despite their desire to be helpful. Participant 5 explained:

I think some parents encouraging their kids to do something that they really have no interest in. Something like that, it could count as negative social support because they're pushing you in the wrong direction. And I guess that's why it's important to make the right kind of friends. And also, some people going to college and then, I don't know, they join frats and sororities. And some people, I don't think that helps them. I think that kind of takes them away from their academics. I guess, yeah. There is such a thing as negative support.

In this research study, the positive relationships the participants described far outweighed the negative ones. The participants described these positive relationships as helping with the "application process" (Participant 14), "motivate[ing] me to keep going" (Participant 17), and "[helping] me deal with the stresses of transitioning into college" (Participant 10). Positive social networks helped participants with applying to college, allowed them to vent their stress and frustrations, and enabled them to continue the college-readiness process. The negative effects mentioned, on the other hand, did not impact many of the participants due to the strengths of their other social networks. Notably, the college-readiness process starts in high school and transitions to college, so it is important to examine the social networks developed in high school to see how they can help future students.

Social networks Developed in High School Impact on College Readiness

Social networks significantly impact college readiness, especially for those students with little experience or knowledge of higher education. This is why secondary schools host college fairs and financial aid nights to raise awareness about the process and expectations. The participants shared their experiences with various social networks

during high school and explained how these networks assisted them in the college-readiness process. Participant 6 explained: "I go to my sister for advice and help; she's helped me with my college application process when I was procrastinating, she helped me write my supplementals the night they were due, etcetera. Participant 6 utilized her sibling while acquiring the skills needed to be college-ready during high school.

Participant 3 relied on friends to learn about college life:

My friends from high school and my friends who I met online. In terms of the high school group, we tend to catch up with each other fairly regularly and update each other about our experiences in the different colleges we're going to.

Participant 6 depended on the family network, and Participant 3 used support from his peer networks to help develop college readiness skills in high school. Another social network available in high school involves school staff members. Participant 12 relied on their relationship with the school counselor during the college-readiness process in high school and still maintained contact with them while in college. Participant 12 shared: "I am still in contact with my high school guidance counselor. She was a great woman who eased my worries then, and she continues to do the same for me now."

A majority of the participants stated that their counselors helped during the college-readiness process during high school; however, they lost touch when they arrived at college. Participant 14 explained: "Our relationship was an in-person one, didn't really leave school, so once I graduated, that was really that." Sixty-one percent of the participants referenced their school counselor as a support during the college-readiness process. Participants said that their family, which helped them during high school, still supported them at college. Family, unlike the friends, teachers, and counselors who

disappeared after high school, remained a constant support during college. It appeared not seeing or interacting with their own social network consistently resulted in the dissolution of the relationship. Even though most of the participants' responses resembled one another regarding who was involved in their high school social networks, differences arose according to gender.

Effective Social Networks for Each Gender

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.

Another female, Participant 14, looked to the support from a family member who was also attending college:

> If I were struggling with college, I would turn to my cousin. She is currently enrolled at a university; she is still in college, so she can guide me and give me advice I wouldn't know because I have [not] experienced it.

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."

According to the female participants, they relied on various individuals to help them become college-ready. Some utilized family; some went to school staff members for support, and some relied on peers. Participant 12 described going to her father for emotional support:

> Typically, I would go to my dad for advice. There are countless times that my dad has helped me by providing me with advice. Just last week, I was stressed about all the stuff I had on my mind (school, clubs, etc.) He told me that he thinks that I am a strong person and that I am capable of anything I put my mind to. He is always encouraging, and sometimes I feel better after just ranting to him.

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 needed, 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. The remaining participant

stated he went to his best friend for support. 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:

I personally made some friends during the icebreakers at the beginning of school.

Additionally, [reserve officer training corps] is also helping me because it's like

its own community. Talking to these friends helps give me an idea of how to

balance my workload. Ideally, you make both freshmen and nonfreshmen

students. Freshmen friends are good because they're in it with you; nonfreshmen

are good because they can give advice based on their experience.

He continued by saying: "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.

Additionally, Participant 2 confirmed the importance of having friends who were

currently in college: "Except two of the people in this group have started college before I

have, and therefore have firsthand experiences to share with me about what to brace

myself for, and what NOT to stress over."

The female participants also found it important to listen to peers who attended

college before them. They explained that individuals in college helped them acquire the

skills they needed to prepare for college. Participant 6 said: "My career exploration

teacher, she was sort of down to earth in a way where she encouraged to acknowledge

reality; she would have us do activities for adaptability skills and would bring in former

alumni to talk to us." Participant 8 explained she went to her family for support while preparing for college. She valued their input because they had attended college and knew the process. She stated she would go to her "parents and older siblings helped with the process as they've been through it and knew what to expect." Participant 14 used multiple social networks for help acquiring the college-readiness skills she needed; however, she indicated she received help from her cousin, who attended college at the time. She stated:

> If I were struggling with college, I would turn to my cousin. She is currently enrolled at [college]; she is still in college, so she can guide me and give me advice I wouldn't know because I have experienced it.

> Participants described valuing the input of peers who were similar in age and attended college. They explained these individuals could provide relatable and current experiences that the participants identified with. These experiences included emotional and logistical advice pertaining to adapting to college. Conley (2008) stressed the importance of contextual skills as one of the four factors needed to be college-ready. Although advice from teachers, professors, and parents who had attended college could be helpful, the participants preferred the advice they received from their peers.

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."

Providing students with opportunities to build social networks supportive of

college readiness represents a key element of promoting student success. 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.

Social Networks Impact on Contextual Skills and Academic Skills

Contextual skills and academic skills represent half of the factors Conley (2008)

identified as necessary for college readiness. Contextual skills involve the adaptability

skills needed to adjust to a new environment, and academic skills are the content

knowledge needed to learn new material, such as calculus and philosophy. Data analysis

showed the female and male participants responded similarly regarding how they

obtained their skills. Both genders felt unsure about how they did so but believed they did

it on their own. Female participants stated they developed these skills independently but

also gave credit to their teachers and parents. The following four female participants

shared their feelings regarding contextual and academic skills. Participant 3 said:

Probably my friends, because we all used to study together in high school, so it

kind of helped with developing those skills. And then it's also definitely helped

me because otherwise I wouldn't really be doing well in class and stuff.

McDonald and Farrell (2012) showed that smaller groups and learning

communities have a positive impact on academic and social support for underserved

students in college readiness. Participant 3's comment about working with her peer group

to study and stay on track in high school illustrated this point. Participant 4 described

acquiring contextual skills by going to her high school advisor for assistance. She stated:

My high school advisor really helped. She gave me a bunch of tips what I should

do and helped me practice note-taking and things like that in high school, which

we didn't really need because everyone follows the same core curriculum. So if

you know it, you know it.

When Participant 4 stated: "so if you know it, you know it," she highlighted what other

participants felt about having a sense of internal preparation. Notably, she also

acknowledged specific examples of the way her advisor helped. Similarly, Participant 14

commented: "As far as adaptability skills, I think I developed that on my own throughout

my life. But academic skills came from school, I guess."

Although some participants claimed they acquired academic and contextual

independently, others acknowledged external supports. Participant 16 said:

When preparing for college, I became very overwhelmed with how I was going to

be packing up my life and moving into a new place where I was going to live for

the next couple of months without any of my friends or family members with me.

I overcame this by becoming extremely close friends with my roommates and

relating to other people's challenges they were facing as well. I didn't feel alone

here because other people were feeling the same way.

Participant 16 surrounded herself with a support network of individuals going through the

same experiences as her, which validated her experiences and made her feel like she

belonged in college.

Male participants had similar viewpoints on contextual and academic skills as the

female participants. Participant 1 inferred that his school support network provided

academic support to help students obtain college-readiness skills. He stated:

But really, what it was that there was a strong push for the APs. There was a lot of

peer pressure to do all your [advanced placements]. I know in my senior year, I

think the only non-[advanced placement] classes I was in were math and gym. It

was very much the gold standard. And so, I was really exposed to a lot of college

thought and college-level writing and working toward that as a high schooler. I

don't really know. People, they always say [advanced placement] is college-level.

It doesn't feel college-level. I'm here now, and this feels a logical extension of

that. It doesn't feel like this is so much easier than what I did when I was 15. But

regardless, there was a lot of college advocacy and a lot of awareness about

college there.

Two male participants believed their academic grades helped them succeed in the

college-readiness process; however, they did not note who helped them learn these

academic skills. Participant 17 stated: "My grades have been very good, and I think it is

my focus that is allowing this." Similarly, Participant 18 stated: "My grades, studying and

working hard is key."

Academically speaking, the participants only generally mentioned taking advanced placement courses in high school, the SATs, and grades. COVID-19 caused two of the participants to experience frustration due to canceled SAT test dates. A recurring theme that arose during the research involved participants' concerns about scheduling and time management. Participant 4 explained: "College has a lot more freedom than high school and just less structure." Twelve out of 18 participants (67%) commented about class schedules differing vastly from high school compared to college as well as time management being incredibly different. Participant 4 clearly explained the difference between scheduling in high school versus college:

In high school, teachers will follow up and remind you of upcoming due dates, guidance counselors will help you with choosing classes and preparing for the next term or year, and there is a common curriculum that teachers stick to. All classes follow a similar structure, and every day is an 8-hr school day. In college, you make the appointments and the decisions yourself. You choose your classes, professors, the time slots and rely on yourself to get work done on time. Each professor can teach however they want, and there is no common structure to follow. Assignments vary, and classes are significantly longer than the ones in high school.

Participant 14 cited scheduling as an important component of the college-readiness process. She stated: "I am struggling with balancing my school work with my social life. Lately, I have been creating a schedule that has been helping me manage my time." A male participant also emphasized that time management and scheduling, which are contextual skills needed for college readiness, were missing among peers. He stated:

I feel that most students are missing time management skills in college because it

is a total different lifestyle than what they have been doing for their whole lives

with a schedule of showing up to school, doing all classes, and then going home

after a 6-hour day. (Participant 5)

The data collected via interviews, journals, and surveys showed that the

participants felt they were independent and did most of the work needed to be college-

ready on their own. Despite participants describing their social networks, few felt their

social networks had a great impact on their college readiness, explaining they developed

it on their own. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the possible reasons for this view.

Conclusion

The results showed similarities and differences in the social networks between

genders. The similarities included reliance on a family member or another individual to

help them during the college-readiness process. Additionally, both genders valued

support from individuals who were currently attending college, and both expressed a

belief they had relied on themselves to become college-ready. The results also showed

one difference in how members of different genders viewed their social network support.

The female participants had larger social networks to rely on compared to their male

counterparts. Last, institutions of higher education that offered opportunities for students

to create new social networks appeared to help the participants become college-ready

during their first year of college. Chapter 5 presents a discussion, limitations, and

suggestions for further studies pertaining to college readiness according to gender.

CHAPTER 5 IMPLICATIONS AND FINDINGS

In this study, the researcher aimed to discover how the impact of social networks on college readiness differs between genders and to identify which social networks best support the college readiness of each gender. The researcher also examined the strengths and weaknesses of social networks, their effects on the participants' contextual and academic skills, and the influence of social networks created in high school on the college-readiness process. 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.

The purpose of this study was to find what social networks worked best for each gender and to utilize this information to help support future students looking to attend college, especially those disadvantaged by low socioeconomic status, their position as a first-generation college student, or any other defining characteristic that might hinder their college readiness. This researcher intended to conduct a deeper investigation into the social networks that influence students' college readiness to ascertain how schools can leverage these factors to help all students succeed. This chapter presents a discussion of the findings as they relate to previous research regarding the impacts of social networks and social capital on the college-readiness process.

Implications of Findings

Overall, the findings suggested that female participants benefited from multiple social networks, and the male participants benefited from relying on one or two social networks. Having multiple support networks allows the individual to obtain pertinent information as opposed to depending on a single support network that may or may not have the needed information. First-generation college students who do not have contextual support from their families experience this issue because family members have not navigated the college-readiness process. However, if students reach out to school staff or friends who are currently in college, those individuals could help explain the particulars about transitioning from high school to college. This result supports Putnam's (1995) theory that personal connections provide a valuable resource for social and economic matters. Participants expressed a need for help navigating college application requirements, deadlines, financial aid, and course selection that they could not have completed without assistance from members of their support networks.

Research Question 1 stated: What are the strengths and weaknesses of social networks? The results showed more strengths than weaknesses. The participants disclosed the fact that their support networks helped them with the application process and motivated them to complete it. This finding aligns with Bourdieu's (2011) theory that social capital depends on an external force on the individual that influences their actions. In this study, social networks acted as the external force by helping the participants complete the application process and adapt to college life.

Research Question 2 specified: How do social networks developed and maintained in high school help undergraduate students be college-ready? The results

related to this question build on existing conceptual theory that stipulates the necessity for closure in social structures to promote the trustworthiness of social institutions. This trustworthiness leads to a recurrence of duties and expectations (Coleman, 1988). The findings showed that participants lost touch with their school staff networks once they entered college. Participant 14 stated: "Our relationship was an in-person one," and another participant stated: "Their job was to prepare me for college, and they finished." This comment shows that once the participants lost consistent contact with their social network, it stopped benefiting them. Over 50% of the participants relied on their school counselor to help with the early stages of the college application process; however, only one participant stayed in contact with their counselor. Educators should consider these results when trying to improve the college-readiness process.

The third research question was as follows: What are the most effective social networks for each gender? This question relates to the first research question. 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. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the difference in how men and women receive information. This information should be leveraged to support students as they prepare for college. For example, the data from this research study showed male participants tended to rely on their peers and families for help instead of their guidance counselors. Therefore, the guidance counselor cannot serve

as the primary source of crucial information about the college-readiness process for male students because they will be less receptive to it. The best way to support male students is to educate families and college-aged mentors so they can provide the same information guidance counselors offer regarding college readiness. On the other hand, educators should introduce female high school students to a variety of social networks that can help them become college-ready. Then the female students can decide for themselves which combination of social networks they prefer.

The last research question was as follows: How did social networks help support the college readiness experience for undergraduate students pertaining to contextual skills and academic skills? Findings related to this question build on the existing evidence presented by social capitalist Lin (1999). Lin described the importance of social capital and how it allows for the flow of information. The findings show how social networks allowed the participants to be knowledgeable in academic areas while also learning the contextual skills needed to succeed in college. Participants believed their academic success stemmed from their own hard work, despite reporting that educators or parents taught them the skills they needed in the academic areas.

The results also build on existing evidence provided by Martinez et al. (2017). Martinez et al. showed a need for alternative secondary programs that could strengthen students' contextual skills and academic behaviors and provide a community connection to improve college readiness in high school students. The participant responses in this research study align with the claims of Martinez et al. as they expressed a need for help acquiring contextual skills related to time management and scheduling.

Relationship to Prior Research

Strengths and weaknesses of Social Networks

Not all social networks benefit their members. Lin (1999) said: "not all bridges (or network locations) lead to better information, influence, social credentials or reinforcements" (p. 36). Lin explained that membership in a social network does not automatically equate to appropriate support for the individual. For example, a student in a social network of gang members may not be influenced in a positive way toward higher education as opposed to having a social network of junior reserve officer training corps students who are all interested in attending college. The results of this study showed social networks have their strengths and weaknesses. The participants participated in supportive social networks that helped them become college-ready. Their friends, family, and school staff members all answered questions pertaining to the college process, reminded them of deadlines, and offered a listening ear when they were frustrated. Researcher Duncheon (2015) explained students must understand the entire college process, which encompasses higher education options, financial aid resources, academic requirements, and cultural knowledge of the higher education environment. Similarly, participants in this study found it valuable to talk to someone who was close in age, currently in college, and who had similar experiences. Input from this kind of connection helped the participants know what to expect from college more than the input they received from a guidance counselor or parent who went to college many years earlier.

The weaknesses of social networks emerged in the data when the participants described well-intentioned advice received as pressure that caused them to disengage in the college-readiness process. Watt et al. (2017) found that male students dropped the college-readiness program because they felt peer pressure. This current research study

produced a similar finding. Participant 1 decided to take a gap year before college because he was not interested in all the pressure experienced while preparing for college (e.g., the need to complete college essays and applications while taking a rigorous course load his senior year). The strengths of social networks include the encouragement and advice that participants received when they were confused or frustrated. When Participant 3's SAT exam was canceled more than one time, her parents encouraged her to keep going. To capitalize on the strengths of social networks, educators and counselors must see how social networks developed in high school impact college readiness.

Social Networks Developed in High School Impact on College Readiness

Secondary school educators and counselors understand the importance of supporting students on their college-readiness journey. They also realize that not every student benefits from having someone in their family who is familiar with the college-readiness process. According to this research, the participants felt their counselors shared information regarding the college process, regardless of whether they were receptive to it or not. The participants also stated that they lost touch with school staff members who helped them start the college-readiness process after graduation, but they maintained relationships with their families and friends. This finding aligns with those of Francis et al. (2018), who asserted it was important to use family as an emotional support so students could vent and express their emotions. Also, one participant in the Marciano (2016) study explained how having friends who were excited about going to college motivated her to take the steps needed to attend college as well. Participants in this current study shared their experiences with members of their friend networks who helped them vent about college frustrations and learn about college culture.

In this research study, the participants noted that they reached out to their athletic advisors, college counselors, roommates, sisters, and parents for support. Interestingly, these social networks played different roles for different genders.

Effective Social Networks for Each Gender

Almeida (2015) identified three areas of support: family, teachers, and external agents such as counselors, mentors, and peers. This current study identified the same support areas. The findings showed that female participants had more social networks compared to their male counterparts. Both genders went to a family member for support. Female participants used multiple social networks based on their needs, but male participants sought out the same social network for support regardless of the concern. This finding aligns with that of Francis et al. (2018), who found that students valued having family available for emotional support throughout college.

A majority of the participants in this study described valuing the input of same-age peers who were currently in college to help them navigate the college-readiness process. This finding aligns with Almeida (2015), who found that having older peers helped the participants learn about time management pertaining to writing personal statements for college applications and the benefit of sharing those statements with other peers to review.

Notably, without social capital, these participants would not have been college-ready. Coleman (1988) explained that social capital requires action. The action involved in this current study involved the fact the participants communicated with members of their social networks and asked for support when they felt confused or lacked knowledge related to college readiness. Both the male and female participants preferred to go to someone in their family or peer network for support, but they differed in that males

tended to lean on family members and peers more than females, who also reached out to members of external networks such as athletic advisors and counselors.

Social Networks Impact on Contextual Skills and Academic Skills

Students need contextual skills to adapt to college culture. These skills pertain to flexible scheduling, complicated class assignments, and sleep and eating regimens. Participant 4 explained how her life went from a structured life with a 5-days-per-week school schedule and set times for meals. At the secondary school level, students make fewer decisions about their daily routines than they do after arriving at college, where they need to figure out what works best for them. Some students struggle with healthy eating choices or going to sleep at a reasonable time. Participants in this study expressed how important it was to find a schedule that worked for them to ensure they completed assignments on time and got enough rest. The participants described an absence of support in preparing for the day-to-day college schedule. Almeida (2015) shared that the way to increase knowledge in contextual skills is through relationships with adults and peers.

Regarding academics, Martinez et al. (2017) showed a need for alternative secondary programs focused on strengthening students' contextual skills and academic behaviors and promoting community connections that could improve college readiness in high school students. Participants in this study did not share information about who supported them in their efforts to succeed in academic areas. However, the participants recognized they needed good grades to be college-ready, and their high GPAs and acceptance into college showed they had succeeded in this area.

Limitations of the Study

This study had three 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. In addition, participants had contended with COVID-19 restrictions during their college-readiness process. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted these participants either by interrupting their traditional face-to-face schooling with virtual instruction or by flexing their typical college requirements to accommodate canceled assessments such as the SATs, NYS Regents, and ACTs. The increased demand for support and after-effects of COVID-19 may have strained their social networks. For example, increased demand for mental illness support may have taken priority over college readiness factors among guidance counselors and teachers.

Another limitation involved respondent bias, which could have played a role in this study because depending on the participants' feelings towards college could impact how they responded to the questions. During the first interview, the participant initially expressed a belief he had gotten where he was independently. However, after further questioning and reflection, he communicated that others did help him. The surveys did not allow for this kind of clarification because the researcher's survey questions did not allow for further exploration in some areas, such as academics and the evolvement of some college-readiness skills.

Lastly, obtaining participants was a challenge for this study. Initially, there were only five participants that agreed to complete the interviews and journal prompts. After a month and 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 and which resulted in acquiring 13 additional participants.

Regardless of the limitations, this research strengthens previous research in the area of college readiness by identifying reliance on the same support networks and by providing a direction for future research on how social networks function differently across genders.

Implications for Future Research

This study identified the social networks utilized by both genders and showed what worked best for each. The study's findings will prove useful for future researchers, secondary school administrators, and college administrators. Government grants exist to help students prepare for college, and this research showcased students' need for supportive social networks they can rely on while preparing for college. Future researchers can build upon this study in more than one way. To decrease the limitations of sample bias and respondent bias that might have influenced this study, future researchers could obtain a larger sample size and focus on interviews as the main data collection method. The use of interviews would help participants reflect on the social networks that helped them become college-ready and allow the researcher to investigate more deeply. This study showed participants valued emotional and mental health support over academic support. Future researchers could study the need for emotional and mental health support while transitioning to college and seek ways to develop these supports in college.

One specific area that stood out in this study involved the participants' desire to learn about college from peers of similar age who were currently attending college. Future researchers should investigate if a positive correlation exists between college readiness and the acquisition of college-readiness skills from similar-aged peers attending college. A longitudinal experimental study of one group with social network supports provided by school staff, parents, and friends and another group with assigned college student mentors could show if support from college-going peers had more of an impact on college readiness than other social networks.

Leveraging one specific support network over others could help all students who are interested in attending college, regardless of academic ability, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. High school students who can see students similar to themselves already in college may find the motivation they need to strengthen their college-readiness skills. Future researchers could solidify which social networks most benefit students seeking to develop college-readiness skills.

Implications for Future Practice

The aim of this study was to address the issue of students who enroll in college but drop out after a few months. To this end, the researcher interviewed and surveyed 18 college-attending students. An important implication that arose from this study was the influence of college-going students on college readiness preparation. College-readiness programs should include support from peers of similar age who come from varying socioeconomic backgrounds and who are currently enrolled in college so that students participating in the programming have access to support from individuals with whom they can identify. Students must feel a connection to those providing support in order for college readiness factors to register with them. One participant in Almeida's (2015) study acknowledged it

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was the close relationship she created with her counselor that enabled her to obtain valuable information from her counselor rather than from her peers. This study current showed that male participants, in particular, sought out their family and peers for guidance even though the guidance counselor had information about the college-readiness process. This means that colleges cannot simply offer resources to their students; they must go a step further and offer relationship-building activities. Colleges offering precollege summer programs could help students experience college culture and learn about how to manage their time and stress prior to attending college. Secondary schools can help support this objective by providing credits to students who attend an approved precollege summer program. Traditionally, higher education institutions offer these summer programs during the day; however, courses should be offered in the evening as well to help students understand the importance of scheduling classes based on their needs.

Additionally, the data from this current research suggests a need to start the college-readiness process before a student's junior or senior year. Embedding a college-readiness curriculum into classroom instruction would make the process more constant and fluid than it is when it begins during the senior year. Math teachers could embed information about financial management, student loans, and scholarships into their courses, and health teachers could embed healthy food choices and responsible sleep schedules into their instruction. If educators spread the information out over many courses, then students would not have to fight for the attention of a guidance counselor. Providing students with opportunities to be more independent regarding scheduling, deadlines, and curfews would also allow them to make mistakes and learn from them

while they still have the safety nets provided by high school and home. Professional development would help secondary education teachers understand the contextual skills needed to be college-ready and develop curricula that allow for the practice of contextual skills. Educators could offer an extra-credit assignment that encourages students to volunteer at various work locations so they can strengthen their adaptability skills by experiencing different environments. Additionally, educators can introduce a project-based team learning activity for students to complete during the quarter that would allow them to strengthen their time management and social skills.

Lastly, educators should focus on educating parents and guardians on what students need when they transition to college. David Conley (2008) stated that students need four key factors to become college-ready. These factors include cognitive strategies, academic knowledge, learning skills, and contextual skills. Families provide the one support network that journeys through the entire college-readiness process with the students. This contact is extremely important for males because, according to this study's findings, they rely more heavily on their families for support than females. However, females would also benefit from these practices because they would impact multiple social networks.

Conclusion

This research study showed that students need and use social networks during the college-readiness process. Male participants went to their families and friends for support, so educators and counselors must provide families and friends with the information these students need to streamline information dissemination. Conversely, female participants relied on a wider range of support networks that they leveraged for

information about the college-readiness process. Coleman (1988) theorized that social structures must have trust to function properly. If participants did not trust the individual who has resources, they needed in order to be college ready then the participants would not seek them out those resources. College-readiness programming should foster relationships with students and the individuals who have the social capital needed to help with college readiness. For example, universities could assign either a mentor or a transition counselor to college freshmen to help them adapt to the college culture. Some colleges offer learning communities designed to help students transition from high school and college. Learning communities can provide a robust support network to help strengthen skills like self-reliance and student success (Virtue et al., 2019). More colleges and universities should invest in the learning community concept because it aids in academic growth while also providing social–emotional support.

Although the transitions that occur as a student progresses from elementary school all the way to college do not represent a new concern, educators and counselors must be cognizant of how they can help all students better prepare for these transitions, especially the move from high school to college where the financial stakes are much higher. The best way to provide an adequate education is to examine the supports that work well for a particular subgroup and make those supports available if desired. The universal approach to college-readiness programming does not work for all students, so educators and counselors should leverage the information they receive from their students (e.g., valuing input from current college students). Secondary school leaders should consider recruiting graduated high school students to return and speak to the current upper and lower classman on a regular basis instead of as a one-time guest speaker. A

more regular schedule of speakers could create the kind of closed social capital network that allows for repetition and expectation (Coleman, 1988).

Epilogue

This research study highlighted how social capital has been underestimated as a support for college readiness. 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. The researcher found it interesting that some participants did not initially realize how impactful their social networks had been for their college readiness, with two expressing a belief that they had made it to college all on their own. Further questioning caused them to recognize that others had helped them in ways they had overlooked. For example, when questioned about financial aid or financial preparedness, all participants stated their parents were involved or their school helped with the financial aid paperwork.

Additionally, a few students felt that college preparedness should be introduced during the freshman or sophomore years. This researcher has found that students are not mentally connected to the topic of college readiness until they are already in college. However, college-readiness skills should still be embedded in the high school curriculum and not delivered as a standalone activity after school hours. Educators should intertwine college essay writing, schedule making, and financial literacy with students' core classes so they learn these skills before they feel the pressures of their senior year. Educators must continue to support students to the best of their ability, and this researcher believes

the participants in this study have communicated what students need to be more prepared for college.

President Obama (2009) said: "a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a prerequisite." It is the responsibility of educators to recognize that social networks impact genders differently, a finding that should influence how educators deliver college-readiness information so all students can benefit.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL MEMO

IRB #: IRB-FY2022-346
Title: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL GROUPS ON COLLEGE READINESS BETWEEN STUDENTS FROM HIGH GRADUATION RATED AND LOW GRADUATION RATED NYS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS
Creation Date: 4-2-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Megan O'Neill
Review Board: St John's University Institutional Review Board
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved

Key Study Contacts

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. Interview Questions: establish context

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself?

2. Tell me about your high school? [probe: about the cultural of the school building; were there cliques or bullying; was the school environment supportive (in what ways)]

3. What kind of a student are you? [probe: academic achievements, friend groups, extra-curricular]

4. Tell me about a person who you go to for advice/help. [probe: ask for an example of a time the individual person helped them]

5. What lead you to your decision to attend college? (What was your motivation?) Why/how did you decided to choose this college specifically? In what ways did they help you (filling out applications, pep talks to get you through tough courses, taking the SAT, etc.)?

6. Who helped you decide what courses to take in high school? What courses did you take and why? (i.e., 4 years of mathematics, 3 years of language, electives)?

7. Can you think of a specific example of a challenge you had with preparing/applying for college and how you overcame it?

8. What is your definition of college readiness?

9. How do you build a rapport with faculty, staff or other students? Please share an example.

10. What are you currently struggling with in college and how are you addressing it? Who is helping you and how?

11. What is something you are exceling in during college and what factors are helping you excel?

12. Were your parents/guardians involved with helping you apply and attend college? If so, how did they help? If not, who helped you?

13. Did your school district help with preparing you for college? What do you think the district could do to improve college readiness?

14. Did any external factors help you become college ready? [probe: social group support, financial support, academic support; ask for an example of what/who helped them]

15. What is something you wished you knew ahead of time before applying/attending college?

II. Second interview: Participant reflects on meaning of his/her experience.

1. What are your feelings about college readiness? [probe: ask for example that support their feelings]

2. Do you have support system to turn to when you are struggling with college? Would you explain who they are and in what ways they help you?

3. What do you believe students are missing to prepare them for college?

4. How important are social supports in college readiness (i.e., Parental, community, school, friend groups)? [probe: ask for an example]

5. Did you feel that your social supports (friends, parents, teachers etc.) impacted you negatively for college? If yes, please explain. If no, explain an example how they supported you to be college ready.

6. Are you currently in contact with anyone that helped you get into college and is still helping with college concerns? If yes, please explain. If no, please explain why not.

7. Who helped you acquire adaptability skills and academic skills needed for college, and in what way did they help?

APPENDIX C: JOURNAL PROMPTS

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study; your honest input is necessary to help improve college readiness for future students. This portion of the study is two-fold; it is for you to describe in more detail your college readiness journey and what social groups you use to help you.

Please write a paragraph to one page for each prompt.

1) Now that you are in college explain how prepared you feel for college. Explain with examples.

2) Reflecting upon journal prompt 1 [Now that you are in college explain how prepared you feel for college]; explain who is helping you adjust to college and how they are helping you feel more prepared. Please list all individuals you have contacted to help you figure things out at college and a general description of what you needed help with. (Who have you called/texted/emailed and discussed how college was going? For example, emailing professors for clarification on assignments, talking to RA about dorm concerns, and talking to old friends about how college is going) Describe how you prepared for college when you were in high school. (Did you research colleges, if so, at what grade level did you start? Did you attend tutoring sessions for the SATs? etc.)

3) Write about the role that a certain activity (sports, theater, work, etc.) has helped you be prepared for college. (For example, sports may have taught you how to be disciplined or how to work with a team)

4) Write about your financial aid journey, please express your feelings during it and who you spoke to about college finances. (Did you attend financial workshops at

your school or library? Are your parents paying your tuition; how does that make you feel? Did you apply for scholarships?)

5) Write a letter to a student in high school letting them know something you wish you knew about the college process prior to being in college. Also, include something that helped you become college ready.

6) Reflect upon your high school experience and write about the social groups (church groups, clubs, friends, family, coaches, etc. [please include any not listed there]) that helped you become college ready. Provide an example of how each different group help/motivated you? For example, did your school counselor meet with you to discuss the college process?

7) List your college goals. What do you plan to accomplish this semester and what will you do if you do not meet these expectations?

8) How do your social groups support you currently in college? Provide examples.

9) Did you join any organizations, clubs, or sports in college? If yes, how do they help you? If no, why not?

10) Please explain how you are adapting to college culture. This can include sleep cycle, work cycle, diet, time management, study skills etc.

College Readiness Interview Questions

The Impact of Social Groups on College Readiness

<u>**Consent**</u>

You are invited to participate in a research study about the impacts of social groups on college readiness. This study is being conducted by Megan O'Neill, a Doctoral Candidate at St. John's University.

By participating you are agreeing to give consent to have your answers documented and analyzed for this research study. You have the right to review your answers and the study which can be done by reaching out to Megan O'Neill via email: megan.oneill20@my.stjohns.edu.

Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others.

This study is completely voluntary and you decide if you want to participate or not.

If you agree to participate and then decide later you are no longer interested, you may withdraw at any time without consequences. You may refuse to answer any questions or journal entry and still remain in the study. In addition, nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect your grades or academic standing.

General Questions

- Please type your email address.

- Select your birthdate.

- Please list the name of the high school you attended? (Please indicate the town it is located in. Example, James Monroe High School, Rochester)

- Optional: Which best describes you?

  Asian or Pacific Islander

  Black or African American

  Hispanic or Latino

  Native American or Alaskan

  White or Caucasian

  Multiracial or Biracial

  A race/ethnicity not listed here

  Prefer not to say

  Other: _____

- Optional: Which best describes you?

  Female

  Male

  Prefer not to say

  Other: _____

- What is your major? (Type: undecided if you did not choose one yet)

- What is the highest level of education of your parent/guardian? (Ex. Mother-High School, Father-Master's Degree)

Interview Questions Part I

College Readiness Study

1) Tell me about a person who you go to for advice and help. Please provide an example of a time the individual person helped you.

2) What lead you to your decision to attend college? Why did you decide to choose St. John's University compared to other colleges? How many colleges did you apply to?

3) Who helped you decide what courses to take in high school? What courses did you take and why? (For example, 4 years of math, 3 years of a second language, specific electives)?

4) Can you think of a specific example of a challenge you had when preparing/applying for college and how you overcame it? Did your parents/guardians help you? If not, who did?

5) How do you build a rapport with faculty, staff or other students? Please share an example.

6) What are you currently struggling with in college and how are you addressing it? Who is helping you and how?

7) What is something you are excelling in during college and what factors are helping you excel?

8) Did your school district help with preparing you for college? What do you think the district could do to improve college readiness?

9) What is something you wished you knew ahead of time before applying/attending college?

Interview Questions Part II

College Readiness Study

According to researcher, David T. Conley, College Readiness can be easily defined into 4 areas:

1) Key Cognitive Strategies – memory, logical reasoning, problem solving etc.

2) Key Content Knowledge – facts, concepts and theories (your academic knowledge)

3)Key Learning Skills – critical thinking, communication, time management, group work and

4) Key Transitional Knowledge and Skills – adapting to the college culture

1) What are your feelings about college readiness? Please provide an example that support your feelings. (Are you weak/strong in any college readiness area?)

2) Do you have support system to turn to when you are struggling with college? Would you explain who they are and in what ways they help you?

3) What do you believe students are missing to prepare them for college?

4) How important are social supports in college readiness (ex. parental, community, school, friend groups)? Please provide an example]

5) Did you feel that your social supports (friends, parents, teachers etc.) impacted you negatively for college? If yes, please explain. If no, explain an example how they supported you to be college ready.

6) Are you currently in contact with anyone that helped you get into college and is still helping with college concerns? If yes, please explain. If no, please explain why not.

7) Who helped you acquire adaptability skills and academic skills needed for

   college, and in what way did the help?

Thank you!! - Thank you for participating in this college readiness research project.

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Vita

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Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Science, University of Stony Brook, Stony Brook* *Major: Business Management*
Date Graduated	*December, 2004*
Other Degrees	*Master of Science, Dowling College, Oakdale,* *Major: Adolescence Education, Math 7-12*
Date Graduated	*August, 2006*
Other Certifications	*Professional Certification in TESOL* (2011), Molloy College, Rockville Centre
	Professional Certification in Special Education (2012), CUNY Brooklyn College, Brooklyn
	Professional Certification in Educational Administration (2016), Stony Brook University, Stony Brook
	Professional Certification in School District Business Leader (2022), Hofstra University, Hempstead