

# Sharing the Burden of Student Success: Social Capital and Problem Normalization

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*One barrier to student success and retention is failing to seek help before a problem becomes unmanageable. This paper describes how the implementation of a social capital development program integrated with institutional problem normalization may lead to student success and retention. Through the implementation of these two small, cost-effective interventions, institutions can increase student success and retention by helping students reduce stigma around seeking help, facilitating communication, and addressing problems before they become unmanageable. A five-part example is introduced to develop institutional problem normalization, and the shared burden of student success is demonstrated.*

## Stigma Around Academic Help-Seeking Behaviors

Students in higher education potentially face a large number of problems, many of which can be overcome simply by talking with someone. Arguably, most, if not all, students will encounter some type of problem during their studies, but why do some students successfully navigate problems while others are derailed and drop out or are dismissed? I have witnessed many students, regardless of seniority, GPA, and background, successfully navigate issues large and small. I have also seen many students struggle to face similar issues. One reason for this difference may be whether students address the problem while it is still navigable.

Many students do not seek help because they associate help-seeking with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Further, there is a stigma around seeking help and using academic support services, meaning that students may feel judged for needing such support (Bornschlegl & Caltabiano, 2022). The developmental concepts that help explain a lack of help-seeking behavior include (a) involvement or

time spent doing educational activities (Astin, 1984); (b) engagement or purposeful student–faculty contact and active and collaborative learning (Kuh, 2001); and (c) integration or how much a student comes to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and how closely they follow the rules of the institution (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993). More specifically, a lack of these three elements hinders the creation of the kind of network one needs to draw upon when faced with challenges. To further investigate these seminal concepts, one might use an excellent manuscript by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), who differentiated and clarified the intentions and interpretations of these developmental concepts by conducting interviews directly with their authors.

From the framework that students often avoid help-seeking behavior due to stigma and feelings of inadequacy, I argue that institutions can address this issue with the implementation of two small, cost-effective interventions. By helping students develop social capital and simultaneously normalizing problems, institutions can teach students how to seek help and talk with people around whom they might otherwise feel uncomfortable while driving home the message that problems will happen in higher education and students are not inferior for stumbling.

## **Social Capital**

Most institutions go to great lengths to inform students about resources and support services, and many provide some type of mentor scenario. These useful and well-intended efforts break down when students miss them, forget what was presented in orientation sessions, or cannot easily find resources. Further, mentor programs often have a singular focus or expire after a short time (Schwartz et al., 2018). However, one aspect institutions might do well to focus on is the continuous development of social capital skills. For this paper, I use the definition of social capital presented by Schwartz et al. (2018): “the information, support, and resources available to an individual through connections and networks of relationships” (p. 166). Schwartz et al. explained that developing social capital (a) empowers students beyond their first semester when many mentor programs have ended; (b) allows students to seek help when they need it, which adjusts for needing to remember every policy; and (c) ensures students can navigate on their own terms, which reduces enabling and strengthens autonomy. So how do we build social capital in our students? We teach them, of course.

### **CONNECTED SCHOLARS PROGRAM**

Schwartz et al. (2018) suggested low social capital had a negative role in college persistence and completion. The Connected Scholars Program (CSP) is an intervention designed to help students learn about the importance of social capital in reference to success in higher education. Specifically, it was designed to teach students skills

for creating, growing, and maintaining social connections, which provided additional resources to rely upon when difficult situations arose.

Schwartz et al. (2018) conducted a study on first-generation college students in a summer bridge program that included four 1-hour workshops designed to promote skills related to social capital. The goal of this program was to empower students to learn how to create social capital and then create a network of social support as opposed to relying on just one or two people on campus. The results of this study were indicative of the intervention having a positive impact on key areas in student success (e.g., interaction with professors, GPA, and persistence).

A unique aspect of CSP was that students actively sought out and recruited their own mentors as opposed to being assigned to one. Students learned how to make connections so they might draw upon them when needed. A major goal of CSP (Schwartz et al., 2018) was to instill in students the importance of building relationships in a higher education setting and stress the role of purposeful relationships with campus professionals in promoting success. They found that building a network of support can help students be successful.

Whether an institution decides to adopt the CSP model or to create something different, teaching students the importance of talking with others is an essential element in the path to success and retention in higher education (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2018). Further, it is practical and useful to teach students how to develop and use social capital (Schwartz et al., 2018). Consequently, building from the work of developing social capital, I argue the importance for institutions to take a piece of the responsibility through normalizing problems as an institution.

## **Problem Normalization**

In my work delivering recruitment presentations for a university admissions department, I have occasionally witnessed a rising senior or soon-to-be high school graduate looking overwhelmed, intimidated, nervous, or just plain uncomfortable. Because of this, I have added a few statements to my presentation to the effect of “no one gets through college alone” and “it is perfectly normal to ask for help.” My intent was to tell the prospective student that this institution understands that nobody is perfect, recognizes mistakes will happen, and wants the student to talk with the employees to navigate missteps.

The concept of institutional problem normalization, as presented in this paper, is rather novel; however, in their study, Bornschlegl and Caltabiano (2022) found reducing public stigma around academic help-seeking behaviors led to greater use of resources. Additionally, Hammond et al. (2015) advocated for institutions to normalize

help-seeking behaviors in the academic setting so students might use academic resources more frequently. Advancing these findings into practical application, the actualization of problem normalization might take many forms at various institutions of higher education. Potential elements of problem normalization include: helping students feel comfortable/safe communicating with employees, instilling help-seeking behaviors in students, encouraging employees to be open and welcoming to students, and creating an institutional culture of encouraging communication. It is worth noting that institutions might address these elements of problem normalization between students and peer mentors/student leaders, as well as with employees.

## **IMPLEMENTING PROBLEM NORMALIZATION**

Institutions need to determine how best to implement problem normalization to match their unique culture and setting. A potential five-step process for institutional problem normalization might include the following:

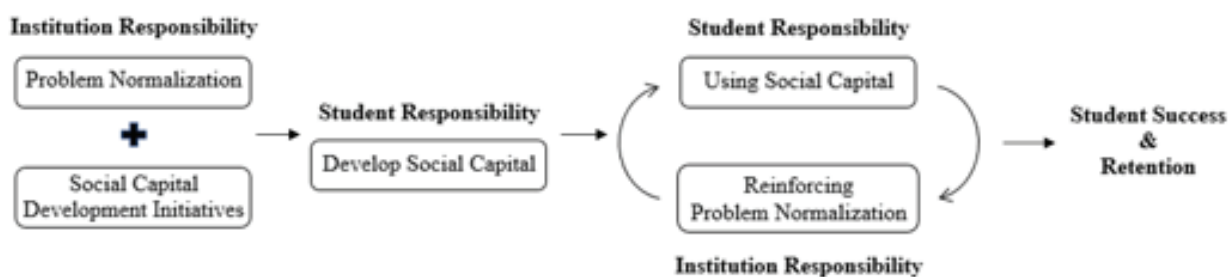
1. Highlight the concept in admissions presentations. For example, explicitly state that problems will happen. This is an institution that understands this and works with students to navigate difficulties. Introducing the concept of problem normalization as early as possible in the admissions process can send a message to students about the culture of the institution. This might help students feel more comfortable in their future studies. This element might also impact enrollment decisions, as students might be more likely to select an institution they perceive as more encouraging or understanding.
2. Address stigma and aversion to help-seeking during orientation by highlighting examples of how avoiding a small problem early in the semester can lead to much larger problems. Help students see that it is actually a strength to seek help and address problems early. As mentioned in Bornschlegl and Caltabiano (2022), students often avoid seeking help because they fear embarrassment or feelings of inadequacy. Providing tangible and relevant examples might help new students see why it is important to seek help, even if it might be uncomfortable the first few times.
3. Recommend that faculty add encouraging statements in course syllabi and in classroom discussions, suggesting how to address issues, seek help, and talk with the instructor. Having faculty include these elements in their syllabi and in classroom discussions reinforces the message that addressing problems and seeking help is encouraged and supported. This step is likely the most difficult, especially on campuses with a large number of faculty, and given the variability of problems encountered. Individual faculty members must navigate the problems and situations as they come, however. Encouraging students to seek help at the beginning of the term is an important first step.

4. Encourage help-seeking behaviors and reinforce the normalcy of encountering problems in trainings for student leaders, tour guides, peer mentors, and others. Having a plethora of voices at all levels normalizing certain challenges and encouraging help-seeking is essential. Student leaders introduce campus norms to new students and can reinforce help-seeking as normative.
5. Coach departments, instructors, and advisors to encourage students to seek help and communicate issues early before they grow. By feeling more comfortable in addressing challenges, students might also be more inclined to communicate beyond just when they encounter a problem. This final step is an institutional reinforcement at all levels. Similar to the suggestion of having faculty members address problem normalization in the classroom, when departments and other entities all throughout campus encourage the same message, campus culture and norms are created.

## Sharing The Burden

Figure 1 illustrates how the burden of student success is shared between the institution and the student. Through positioning the institution as partly responsible (i.e., designing interventions and programs to teach a student how to build social capital and engaging in institutional problem normalization) and the student as partly responsible (e.g., developing social capital and communicating when they need help), the burden of student success is shared. The institution is responsible for creating openings for connections, while the student is also responsible for making and using these connections.

**Figure 1.** *Sharing the Burden of Student Success*



## Conclusion

While the Connected Scholars Program is a specific social capital development program, an institution might shape a similar program to best serve its specific campus and culture. Teaching a student how to develop a network of support in an environment that welcomes and supports growth through successfully navigating problems is essential for success. When the institution and the student share the burden of responsibility, the mutual effort may lead to increased success and

retention. Helping students see that it is normal and expected for them to make mistakes and encounter challenges is at the core of education. Many students learn through mistakes, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings when the instructor is there to guide them (Wilson & Devereux, 2014). Creating an environment where students can experience challenges while also being supported is one way of sharing the burden of student success.

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