



**“It’s Not What You Know, It’s Who You Know”:  
How Social Capital Affects Perceptions of Self Efficacy Among Low Income  
Students**

By: Pamela Samuel

Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelors of Art in Sociology with  
Honors in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

Advised by: Gustavo Morello, Ph.D

Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts  
May 2023

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	4
<i>Introduction</i> .....	5
<i>Literature Review</i> .....	8
<i>College Experience</i> .....	8
<i>Social Capital</i> .....	10
<i>Self Efficacy</i> .....	17
<i>Social Capital and Self Efficacy</i> .....	22
<i>Methods</i> .....	26
<i>Participants</i> .....	26
<i>Recruitment</i> .....	27
<i>Interview protocol</i> .....	28
<i>Analysis</i> .....	29
<i>QuestBridge</i> .....	30
<i>Role of staff</i> .....	35
<i>Friends</i> .....	44
<i>Michael</i> .....	48
<i>Discussion</i> .....	51
<i>Limitations</i> .....	59
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	59
<i>Appendix</i> .....	62
<i>A: Interview Guide</i> .....	62
<i>B: General Self Efficacy Scale</i> .....	63
<i>C: Coding</i> .....	64
<i>References</i> .....	65

**Abstract**

Given the endless times I have heard “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know”, the value of social networks became the forefront of this sociological study. Throughout this study I investigate the relationship between social capital and self efficacy. I interviewed ten undergraduate, low income students at medium sized school in the Northeast on their social connections throughout high school and college experience. These same respondents then took a General Self Efficacy scale to measure their perceived self efficacy. The study finds that those with higher measures of social capital also demonstrate higher perceived self efficacy. More importantly, social capital seemed to be more effective in providing resources and building self efficacy when there was a shared identity or experience between the student and the resource.

**Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I'd like to thank the Sociology Department for the opportunity and support to investigate a topic so important to me. Every class I've taken has contributed to the spark that started the fire to indulge in a research project so close to my heart. There is no value that can be placed on all the connections I have made, all the advice that I have received, all the admiration that I carry, and all the knowledge that I will forever have. Thank you to the Montserrat Office for their support and guidance throughout my completion of their project. Additionally, a *huge* thank you to everyone at the Academic Achievement and Mentoring Office. For the last four years, you guys have been crucial to my success. Thank you for always reminding me to take a break, extending a helping hand, and truly showing me that when there's a will there's a way. A tremendous thank you to all of my friends who have kept me grounded during tough times, listened to me talk about my project, and joined me in the hours of writing. Thank you for all the support not only during this project, but throughout my undergraduate years. Thank you to my family for the unwavering love and support, for the words of encouragement every time I needed them, and for always having faith in me. Most importantly, thank you mom for everything. I cannot put into words how much you have impacted me, and how much I have felt your love and support through this all.

## Introduction

As of September 2022, around 43.5 percent of college graduates are either unemployed or underemployed. Although there may be factors that have affected the rate such as COVID-19, it cannot be denied that this is an extremely high number for a society that has prioritized both the labor market and education. The United States, which has become increasingly capitalistic and individualistic, has implemented many programs and laws in order to foster an environment that promotes attending college. However, in many ways, politicians are failing to approach the issue of education with the question in mind that is at the forefront of many sociological problems: How do the processes of individual actors affect larger social structures and organization?

Executing this micro-macro link to the issue of high rates of unemployed or underemployed college graduates, the relationship between social capital, the intricate variety of entities and social mechanisms that are employed to make possible the achievement of certain goals that otherwise would be unattainable, and self efficacy, the degree to which a person believes in his/her own capacity to execute behaviors necessary to attain their goals, needs to be further investigated in the context of undergraduate students.

In our modern society, education plays a significant role in the upward mobility of people because education allows better employment opportunities, which is connected to a higher income, and continuously so, better life opportunities (McMahon, 1999; Ozturk, 2008). As proposed by Nelson and Phelps (1996), people with higher education are greater contributors to economic growth. They are able to do so because their education allows them to complete daily tasks more efficiently compared to the average worker, and are more competent in recognizing

what is better for themselves and the economy. Since education is seen as a tool for life improvement and economic growth, it is often interpreted as a social equalizer.

However, education and its effects are not so clear cut. The top colleges in the United States have a majority of their students coming from some of the wealthiest families, while a very small percentage of their admitted students come from the poorest quarter (Aries and Seider, 2005). And amongst the admitted low income students, there is not a homogeneous experience. College is a time for growth and development for all students, but even more so for low income students who often feel at a disadvantage and feel the importance of not only financial capital, but other skills and abilities. Many students at elite colleges referred to feeling as if they had a lack of the “right” linguistic skills, and knowledge of things such as: behaviors in certain situations, strategies for summer jobs, and the appropriate clothing to wear for professional events (Aries and Seifer, 2005). All of these factors not only affect a student’s experience of college, but also their educational attainment and educational achievement. They are also skills that could have been taught earlier by both parents and community connections. These norms, behaviors, and intricate social mechanisms that are used as a means to an end, and acquired from social connections such as family and communities, have been widely referred to as social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Previous research has demonstrated that social capital is positively linked to academic success. However, the mechanisms through which social capital helps students become more successful have not been widely explored. I argue that this mainly sociological concept works as a building block of a widely *psychological* concept, self efficacy, which has direct effects on the behaviors of students. These behaviors then in turn significantly affect how successful students not only in their schooling years, but also once they have entered the labor market.

Self efficacy is defined as the degree to which a person believes in his/her own capacity to execute behaviors necessary to attain their goals. In relation to college students, these personal goals may not only be academic, but also social. As seen in previous studies, social efficacy plays a significant role in the academic and social success of students in college (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998; Komarraju and Nadler, 2013). With this in mind, it is important to understand now how self efficacy is developed during the years preceding college. Specifically, for my research, I want to know the association between self efficacy development and social capital in the years preceding college. Social capital has many different definitions depending on the discipline under which it is being used, so for this project I would like to define it as: a set of shared values, resources, and networks that allows individuals to work together in a group to effectively achieve a common purpose. The existing literature on social capital and self efficacy has been significantly close to being mutually exclusive. I am adding to this literature by gapping the bridge that is currently in existence and proposing to use social capital as a source of building higher rates of self efficacy amongst low income college students.

If we are able to find a connection between social capital and self efficacy, then we are able to improve the academic and social performance of students attending colleges and universities. The previous literature has shown that both social capital and self efficacy have been positive markers of academic and social success in colleges, but does not show any direct association between the two ((Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Gore, 2006). If I am able to show that higher levels of social capital can lead to higher perceptions of self efficacy, which we already know leads to success, this information can be used to support an increase in resources and networks in low-income areas to have higher rates of successful college students which would in turn help boost the economy in the future. I will be conducting approximately 16

semi-structured qualitative interviews with students at a private PWI in the Northeast. My interview questions will ask about the social capital of low income undergraduate college students, and self efficacy will be measured using a self efficacy questionnaire.

## **Literature Review**

### *College Experience*

The *college experience*, which is often so pushed for in America, does not start when students move onto their campus or begin their first day of classes. This experience starts from the very moment that a student chooses to pursue higher education, and is uniquely dependent on many socioeconomic factors. There are of course many factors about the institution itself that may affect one's college experience – PWI or HBCU? State school or private university? 2-year or 4-year program? However, it cannot be denied that low-income and high-income students fall on two different ends of a spectrum relating to college experiences. “Lower income students who go on to higher education [are described] as being “on a trajectory of class mobility, which is experienced as a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority” (Aries and Seider, 2005). The research shows that there are fewer high-income students who reach a higher education institution and have to cope with discontinuities. And this difference is not one that is hidden from the students. As shown in the study by Aries and Seider, “For the lower income students, their lack of such possessions and the money required for such lifestyles seemed clear markers of their difference” (Aries and Seider, 2005). These feelings of inferiority do not end here. Due to the stress and attention paid to details about self-presentation and cultural capital,



many low-income students also develop feelings of inadequacy within the classroom and even struggle to keep up with their wealthier counterparts.

Yet the literature highlights that even amongst low-income students there is not a universal experience. Anthony Abraham Jack conducted a study in which he interviewed 89 undergraduate students at an elite university. In this study, Jack makes a distinguishable difference amongst the lower-income students, “The privileged poor—lower-income undergraduates who attended boarding, day, and preparatory high schools... [and] the doubly disadvantaged—lower-income undergraduates who remained tied to their home communities and attended local, typically distressed high schools” (Jack, 2016). The difference here in the kind of high school that students attended made a significant difference in the academic engagement at the elite university. In the study, one student, “developed what she calls a “go-out-and-get yours” attitude that prioritizes developing a support network that can give specific advice on how to navigate Renowned. She came to see authority figures as facilitators to her academic pursuits in elite contexts who could fill gaps her family could not” (Jack, 2016). This is an example of a difference throughout the lower-income students because, “contrary to extant literature on lower-income undergraduates, the privileged poor generally do not feel nervous, uncomfortable, unprepared, or guilty when engaging professors and other authority figures at Renowned. Familiarity with approaching authority figures in similar environments before college attenuates or removes the shock of the expected engagement style at Renowned” (Jack, 2016). While to some “academic engagement” and interaction with professors may seem like a miniscule aspect of the college experience to be focused on, it is important to understand that relationships with professors and openness to other forms of authority at college, significantly affect overall academic success. Undergraduate students who feel more comfortable around the

faculty are more likely to reach out in times of need, such as extra help with material. These students are also more likely to be more favored and have greater access to opportunities compared to the students with whom faculty rarely engage with.

### *Social Capital*

The term social capital, despite the fact that it originated as early as 1920 (Dika and Singh, 2002), its conception and development is attributed to Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988). Although they varied slightly in their views of social capital, both agreed that social capital can be seen as describing the intricate variety of entities and social mechanisms that are employed to make possible the achievement of certain goals that otherwise would be unattainable. Both Bourdieu's and Coleman's theories of social capital are important and throughout my study I will be using fundamentals from both.

Both of these scholars saw and concentrated on the benefits of social connections and therefore social capital, however they varied in their theories in terms of development and the role that social capital played in the greater society (Rogošić, 2016).

Bourdieu mainly focused on the interaction between three different sources of capital: economic, cultural, and social. According to Bourdieu, social capital is the "aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of essentially institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". His conceptualization of social capital is grounded in theories of social reproduction and symbolic power, where he ultimately sees social capital as a resource and investment of the dominant class used to reproduce and maintain group solidarity and maintain the dominant position. Group membership to this dominant class provides members with the backing of collectively owned capital. As a result of this group

membership and relationship, there are social obligations and connections, and in certain conditions, this capital can be convertible to *economic* capital. Bourdieu's concept of social capital can be broken down into two elements: first, the social relationship that allows individuals to claim resources owned by a collective group, and, second, the quantity and quality of those resources (Portes, 1998). This is a result of Bourdieu's belief that the volume of social capital that one possesses is dependent on the size of the network of connections that the individual holds and the volume of the capital - economic, cultural, and symbolic - possessed by each person to whom the individual is connected with (Dika and Singh, 2002).

To fully grasp Bourdieu's theory of social capital, other concepts central to his work, namely cultural capital, habitus, and field need to be explained further. There are three different kinds of cultural capital: embodied (dispositions of mind and body), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (educational qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1977). Certain kinds of cultural capital are valued more than others, however, they can all be seen as the social assets that promote mobility within a stratified society. The cultural capital of a person is dependent on their disposition and tendencies (habitus) which they bring to the *field*, social positions, configured in the social-relation structure. Therefore, cultural capital can be acquired through others, such as family and community, and is dependent on the situation. This may make some forms of cultural capital legitimate and illegitimate at the same time, just dependent on the surrounding situation. This field is characterized by the "rules of the game", which are neither explicit nor codified. Therefore, this dynamic nature causes dynamic and arbitrary forms of social and cultural capital.

On the other hand, Coleman focused on the relationship between social capital, norms, and social control. This theoretical framework of social capital is the one that has been most frequently cited in the literature related to social capital (Rogošić and Baranović). Coleman's

definition of social capital proposes that it is intangible and has three forms: level of trust, demonstrated through obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self interest. Coleman's theory of social capital makes it inherent in the structure of relationships between and amongst actors. Social capital is defined by its function. It is a variety of different entities which all consist of some aspect of social structure and facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure (Coleman, 1988).

Both Coleman and Bourdieu highlight the importance of social networks, however, Coleman focuses on intergenerational closure, ties amongst parents of befriended children, as a social structure that assists in the provision of effective norms. Continuously throughout his writing, Coleman continues to focus on the role of parents in developing social capital, which has resulted in a significant amount of his work being cited by those who support a community with strict, traditional values, discipline, hierarchical order and order (Dika and Singh, 2002).

To summarize Bourdieu's and Coleman's work with social capital: there is an important distinction made between the two in the ability to acquire social capital. Bourdieu is explicit in his belief that social capital can be obtained from social structures whereas this ability is obscured in Coleman's theory. More importantly, Bourdieu sees social capital as connected to other main forms of capital and therefore as a tool of reproduction of dominance for the dominant class, while Coleman sees social capital as a positive social control that reproduces community characteristics of trust, information channels, and norms. Bourdieu's work emphasizes the inequalities in accessing social capital based on class, gender, and race, whereas Coleman emphasizes the role of the *family* in producing norms that help in advancing life chances (Lareau, 2001).

Social capital is interesting in the context of development of youth and their success because it provides a conceptual link between the attributes of an individual, a micro perspective, and their closest social context encountered - such as the household, school, neighborhood, and other groups of belonging, a macro connection. (Furstenburg and Hughes, 1995). Social capital theory maintains that social relationships are resources that lead to both the development and amassing of other forms of capital. According to Coleman, social capital exists in many forms, but all of these forms overlap in that they create an investment for the person, in which they can later generate social capital as a resource to draw on for enhancement of opportunities. These different forms which are mentioned by Coleman, can also all be recognized as social relationships formed through social structures.

Embodied in these structures are obligations and expectations, which are dependent on trustworthiness, information flow capability, and norms that are accompanied by sanctions. The deployment of trust by social capital is pivotal. In almost any concept of community, trust is what allows members to assess and validate knowledge as it evolves (Schuller and Theisens, 2010). Trust is not only used to assess information within a community, but also information that is provided *outside* of the inner workings. Through this assessment, one is not only able to determine if information is true, but also which information to use, how useful the information is, and *when* to apply the information acquired.

Understanding more about social capital was important for Coleman because the concept of social capital demonstrates how the use of something intangible, often not seen as a resource, combined with other resources can come together to produce various behaviors, and in some cases, different outcomes for individuals (Coleman, 1988). While focusing on the benefits of social capital, Coleman recognized that social capital is extremely fragile because it is dependent

on the social networks that are acquired and maintained by a person - which are not always stable. Moreover, while social capital may be advantageous for some, it also has the potential to constrain others.

As recognized by both Bourdieu and Coleman, social capital can be built and acquired through several sources. However, as mentioned earlier, Coleman focused much of his work on the building of social capital *within* the home, in connection to family members.

Inside of the home, most importantly is the relationship between parents and their children. Social capital is formed inside the home through the physical presence and attention paid to children by their parents. Children with parents who are more present and more involved are more likely to acquire and accumulate social capital. This social capital, or in other terms: the relationships made and maintained in the family are necessary to actually make use of the other forms of capital, such as human capital and cultural capital (Coleman, 1988). All of these forms of capital that are mentioned by Coleman contribute to a person's success, however, social capital is different from the other forms because those who generate social capital often reap only small benefits, which often leads people to underinvest in the creation and sustenance of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Starting with this connection made inside the home, social capital then moves to be created and replicated outside the home, with other members of society and can be used in all different forms of social connections.

Outside of the home, social capital can be created through a number of different social connections. Social capital outside of the home is usually formed through belonging to different groups and communities such as school, religion, clubs, etc. We can see the forming of social capital between individuals who share a social identity, those who share interests, and those who

have shared vertical direction, such as donors and community members (Pelling and High, 2005).

Based on the previous literature on social capital, I would divide social capital into smaller subelements: trust, participation, and social norms. Trust, defined as the expectation of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, is important because it triggers collective action and enhances willingness to take action in the greater context of society (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Pelling and High, 2005; Ostrom, 2009). Trust is significantly important in relation to academic achievement, because as highlighted by Acar (2011) it can facilitate cooperation and collaboration among individuals, leading to improved academic outcomes. This plays into the bigger reciprocity of society the trust allows a community to provide services to each other or make sacrifices for each other with the expectation that the favor will be returned in the future at some point (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Pelling and High, 2005; Ostrom, 2009). Participation in social groups and communities is the basis of social capital as it is required for the development (Onyx and Bullen, 2000). Social norms guide behavioral patterns in a given social context (Onyx and Bullen 2000; Pretty 2003; Ostrom 2009).

The accumulation of social capital is important because it manifests in forms of norms, sanctions, and social interactions that become less costly and allow society to progress (Acar 2011). Social capital plays a role in both adaptation to society and is important for achieving collective goals through social bonds, trust, and reciprocity (Putnam, 1995; Pretty, 2003; Ostrom and Ahn, 2009). Throughout many studies, social capital has even been used to measure the trajectory of success of students. Furstenburg and Hughes conducted a study in which 252 children of teenage mothers were followed and measures of social capital were explored alongside its relationship on youth outcomes. In the study, social capital was measured by the

quantity and quality of social relationships of these children. The results from this study showed that social capital, as they measured it, did appear to improve the odds of socioeconomic success in early adulthood despite the status of the youth 3 years prior (Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995). The study finds that social capital can play a critical role in promoting successful development among at-risk youth, including improved academic achievement, reduced risk behaviors, and increased positive outcomes such as higher education attainment and employment. Social capital can provide young people with access to positive role models, mentors, and supportive relationships, which can help to counteract negative influences and build resilience (Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995).

Much of the literature surrounding social capital and academic achievement has also shown that social capital plays an important and positive role in academic achievement, specifically relating to higher education. A study which conducted a narrative synthesis on the existing literature between social capital and academic success found that the studies included in the synthesis suggest that social capital can have a positive impact on academic success, with the strongest effects found for bridging social capital, which refers to connections between individuals from different groups or backgrounds (Acar, 2011).

Mishra (2020) conducted a study on the relationship between social capital and academic success in higher education, with a special focus on “underrepresented students”. The study, along with many other supporting articles, found that social networks can provide valuable resources and support to students, including information about academic opportunities, emotional and practical support, and access to mentoring and role models. Mishra highlighted the importance of social capital in promoting academic success. The article finds that social support, both formal and informal, is also an important factor in academic success. Formal social



support includes programs and services offered by universities, such as academic counseling and tutoring, while informal social support includes support from family, friends, and peers. Furthermore, the review suggests that underrepresented students, such as those from low-income backgrounds and minority groups, may benefit even more from social networks, social capital, and social support due to their often-limited access to resources and opportunities. Thus, efforts to strengthen social networks and social capital can be particularly important in supporting the academic success of underrepresented students.

Having mentioned that Coleman emphasized the importance of social capital *within* the home, how family social capital affects academic achievement cannot be ignored. A study conducted in Bangladesh with students in secondary schools, their teachers, and their families showed that both family and school social capital have a positive effect on students' educational aspirations. However, family social capital was found to have a stronger impact than school social capital. This is because family social capital involves long-term investments in children's education, while school social capital is more immediate and may not be sustained over time. The study also suggests that policymakers should focus on improving family social capital, such as promoting parental involvement in children's education, in order to increase educational aspirations and attainment (Shahidul et al., 2015).

### *Self efficacy*

Self efficacy can be defined as one's belief in their own abilities to have and execute behaviors necessary in order to be successful. First coined by psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977, he explained the concept in the context of social cognitive theory and the effects of self efficacy in one's own behavior. Social cognitive theory, an interpersonal theory, also developed

mostly by Bandura, maintains that a person's behaviors, their personal factors, and their environment are in constant interaction; where they continuously influence and are influenced by each other. Social cognitive theory and self efficacy are key factors in the foundation of human motivation, performance accomplishments, and emotional well-being (Bandura, 1997, 2006). In order to be able to execute certain behaviors, humans need to be incentivized, and this incentivization comes from the belief that one can produce desired effects from their actions. There may be other factors and motivators, however, it is all rooted in the core belief that one can cause an effect with their own behaviors.

Many human behaviors are regulated by the thought of achieving a goal. These goals are assessed for practicality [realisticness] by one's own idea of the capabilities that one holds. "The stronger the perceived self efficacy, the higher the goal aspirations people adopt and the firmer is their commitment to them (Bandura, 1991a; Locke & Latham, 1990)." (Bandura, 2023, p. 1208). Those with a high sense of self efficacy are able to visualize successful scenarios and feel more confident in acting them out, while those who perceive themselves as inefficacious are inclined to believe that many scenarios will just result in failure, and therefore, are hesitant to engage. A high sense of self efficacy is also required in order to have perseverance through difficult times. Bandura's initial study relating to self efficacy, tested the changed behaviors of participants who were undergoing therapy for their phobias (Bandura, 1977). Bandura hypothesized that levels and strengths of self efficacy would determine whether coping behavior would be initiated, how much effort would be expended, and how long it would be sustained in the face of adversity. The findings in the study showed that performance [change in behaviors when faced with adversity] matched closely with the level of self efficacy. When a participant had a higher level of

perceived self efficacy at the end of the treatment, they were also more likely to approach, explore and try to deal with situations within their perceived capabilities.

Perceived self efficacy also plays a central role in motivation for humans (Bandura, 1986, 1991). One's actions are guided through the anticipated outcomes, actions, and goals that they have set for themselves. Those outcomes, actions, and goals are based on one's perceived self efficacy. Therefore, when one has successes or failures, they assess how much their own beliefs and behaviors have been attributed to them versus external factors.

Consequently, since humans are forced to deal with a multitude of failures, adversities, setbacks, and frustrations, a high sense of self efficacy is needed in order to sustain well-being. A person with low self efficacy does not have the means to control and navigate the stressors and anxieties that can give rise to depressive feelings (Kanfer & Zeiss, 1983). Social self efficacy, which is defined as one's confidence in their ability to engage in and maintain social relationships, is a key component of battling depression. Those with perceived social inefficacy are more likely to engage in social isolation because of their lack of ability to develop supportive relationships (Holahan & Holahan, 1987a, 1987b). Flourishing and healthy social relationships are key to fighting feelings of depression, angst, and loneliness. Feelings of depression have been found to negatively affect academic performance (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986). Given that self efficacy plays an important role in multiple aspects of human life and behavior regulation, it is important to recognize the role that perceived self efficacy plays in helping one be successful academically. However, to better understand self efficacy and exactly how it works as a building block toward academic success, the building of self efficacy must first be thoroughly understood.

According to Bandura, expectations of personal efficacy are derived from four principal sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977).

Performance accomplishments, which are interchangeably called mastery accomplishments, provide one with feedback about their successes and failures. This feedback works to either increase, following success, or decrease feelings of self efficacy. Performance accomplishment is significantly important during the early stages of a new activity or behavior because early failure can deter a person from continuing on (Bandura 1977). However, once there has been an establishment of mastery, later failures will have a less negative effect on self efficacy levels (Bandura, 1977). Even further, if these later failures are overcome by continuous perseverance, there can be an increase in perceived self efficacy. Once self efficacy has been established within one area, it is also often applied in other areas, both similar and different from the already established task or behavior. Even a brief experience of self directed mastery can improve generalized performance. A study conducted by Bandura (1981) showed that after a person had shown mastery over one of their phobias, they were more likely to face another phobia or difficult behavior face on.

Vicarious experiences work through model learning and providing a point of reference for comparison. Through seeing the behaviors of others and the consequences the behaviors have, people learn the behaviors that they should exhibit in different scenarios. There has been a limited amount of existing literature, as well as inconsistent findings (Kudo, 2015) on how vicarious experiences can affect levels of self-efficacy. As a result of this, there has been a recent uptake in the amount of research being conducted on how vicarious experiences actually help increase self efficacy. The research suggests that the modeling of success through vicarious

experiences may have the most instant and direct influence on self-efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Luzzo, Hasper, Albert, Bibby, & Martinelli, 1999). Throughout this experience, another person, usually one with whom the observer can empathize with, provides motivation to the observer because they provide live and real feedback and strategies about success and/or failures (Schunk, 2003).

Verbal persuasion from important characters in one's life such as significant others, parents, close friends, etc., works as a voice of reason and motivation in order to move forward, or not, with certain behaviors (Bandura, 1982). Verbal persuasion is also another significant source of self efficacy because of its ease and ready availability (Bandura, 1986). As the credibility of the message giver increases, there is usually an increase in the learner's own belief that they will succeed, and therefore they are more likely to try the task (Margolis and McCabe, 2006). However, if the learner is continuously failing the task after verbal messages have been given, these messages will become less effective, and the learner may even begin to ignore the messages completely (Margolis and McCabe, 2006).

Physiological states can be thought of as emotional arousal. This refers to the emotions that the person doing the task feels before, during, and after engaging in the task. If a person feels more anxious, nervous, or scared prior to the task, they may engage in negative behaviors to help them deal with the already stressful feelings. This may lead to escape behaviors, where they do something to completely avoid the task. In order to avoid these escape behaviors, *teachers*. or supportive members, are encouraged to help the learner engage in more relaxative or positive behaviors that challenge irrational thoughts and behaviors (Margolis and McCabe, 2006).

Given the extensive background and relationship between self efficacy and social learning theory, there is also an extensive literature on how self efficacy helps improve academic achievement and outcomes. High self efficacy leads to greater motivation, persistence, and success in a given task, while low self efficacy results in negative feelings of helplessness and a lack of motivation (Bandura, 1977). In the academic context, if a student is more motivated, they are more likely to set higher goals, more likely to persevere despite hardships, and therefore be more successful.

Previous research has found that self efficacy has a positive association with many other things such as academic functioning, children's aspirations, college outcomes, work-related performance, etc. (Bandura, 1996; Bandura, 2001; Gore, 2006; Van Dither, 2001; Stajkovic, 1998). Although self efficacy can be built through a variety of different ways, it can also be affected by various factors such as academic achievement, gender, and cultural background (Van Dither, Dochy, Segers, 2011). Through exercising high self efficacy, individuals can overcome these other factors however, and develop effective strategies for improving performance and achieving success in different domains of life (Bandura, 1997).

Overall, self efficacy has shown to play an important and positive role in the development of academic performance and success. Higher self efficacy has proven to be an indicator of better academic outcomes.

Although there have been self efficacy scales developed for a number of different areas such as exercise self efficacy, cardiac self efficacy, etc., (Sullivan, 1998; Resnick and Jenkins, 2000), throughout this study I focused on using a general self efficacy scale because many of the academic self efficacy scales were too specific. The generalized self efficacy scale (GSE) was developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) in order to assess optimistic self beliefs used to

cope with a variety of demands in life and assess overall self efficacy. The scale has proven to have high reliability, stability, and construct validity.

### *Social Capital and Self Efficacy*

Social capital plays a significant role in conjunction with self efficacy because it can be used as a source of building self efficacy within students. There have been several studies that investigate the possible role of self efficacy as a predictor of students' academic success (Motlagh et al., 2011; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013, Gore 2006). These studies have demonstrated positive and supportive relations between self efficacy and academic attainment and academic achievement varying from high school students to international college students. Motlagh et al., (2011) went even further and found that self efficacy helped develop subskills such as self-evaluation and self-regulation, which are positive predictors of academic achievement. According to social cognitive theory, a student's self efficacy is created through four main sources: "enactive mastery experiences, vicarious (observational) experiences, social persuasions and physiological and psychological states." (van Dinther et al., 2011, p. 97) Given this information, it would be useful to know more about how these sources are seen in an academic context. With this information, self efficacy can be more successfully built among students in college which would also increase their academic and social success as seen in the previous studies mentioned.

The existing literature on the relationship between social capital and self efficacy has suggested that social capital can have a positive impact on self efficacy. Social capital, as described earlier, provides people with access to different resources, support, and opportunities. Particularly amongst students with low socioeconomic status, it was found that social capital can

be particularly helpful in building self efficacy because the social networks created can offer support and opportunities that would help these individuals overcome challenges and achieve their goals (Han *et al.*, 2014).

Although social capital can be a source of building self efficacy, it must be understood that not everyone has equal access to social capital, and that socioeconomic status affects this. It is noted that there may be outliers, however, in most cases, individuals with higher socioeconomic status may have greater access to social capital which contributes to the continuous creation of a dominant class and therefore social inequality, as explained by Bourdieu (Han *et al.*, 2014; Bourdieu, 1986).

This was sound to be the case not only for low income students, but also for *underrepresented* students, and those with a number of disadvantages in their backgrounds. A study conducted by Furstenburg and Hughes (1995) in Baltimore, followed a series of young mothers and their children for twenty years. The children all had young/adolescent mothers and they were all interviewed and followed along as the children went through school. The children in the study were not doing as well as other Black children in other cities, but a majority were better off than the popular perception. As social capital increased, such as family life, parenting practices, involvement in schools, church, community, etc., increased, the children were more likely to have higher academic achievements, better jobs, and less likely to be young mothers or involved in criminal activity. In this study, social capital did improve the odds of socioeconomic success and academic success in early adulthood despite other factors that placed children in a disadvantageous position.

As suggested by Han *et al.*, (2014) efforts to promote social capital and self efficacy should be targeted towards individuals with low socioeconomic status because they generally



face greater challenges and barriers to success. Social capital can provide young people with access to positive role models, mentors, and supportive relationships, which can help to counteract negative influences and build resilience.

The relationship between social capital, self efficacy, and academic achievement does not only hold true for low socioeconomic status students or at risk students. A study published in 2014 examined the intermediate effect of social capital in the relationship between socioeconomic status and self-efficacy among first year university students in Beijing. Their success was measured through academic achievement and retention rates. The study found that social capital had a positive impact on self-efficacy and study success among first-year university students (Han, 2014). As shown by other existing literature on social capital and self efficacy, social capital helps provide the resources to overcome challenges. When there is success despite hardships, this then leads to improved belief that one is able to succeed and therefore, students are more likely to attempt and succeed in their work. Overall, the study highlights the importance of social capital in supporting the academic success of first-year university students and suggests that efforts to promote social capital can have positive outcomes for student achievement and retention.

As previously mentioned, social capital refers to the valuable social networks that are created within communities. It is important to mention that in many cases, social capital is referring to those who can provide access to different resources to help attain a goal that would otherwise be unattainable. However, these resources are not always tangible or necessarily what one person would think of as *necessary* to attain a goal. Specifically for underrepresented students, social capital is valuable because it provides the students access to mentors and teachers who often have access and knowledge about concepts that are foreign to the students.

These mentors and social networks, however, do not only provide access to other resources and opportunities. The social networks and social support can help students emotionally and practically to face challenges and persist through their academic careers (Mishra, 2020).

Social capital works through multiple sources of self efficacy, namely vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states, in order to build self efficacy. This positive self efficacy, along with a high amount of social capital, work together in order to promote better academic performance and success.

## **Methods**

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. All the data was collected at a medium sized, religiously affiliated, private university in a large Northeastern city. Participants included undergraduate freshmen and sophomore students who self-identified as being low income, attended middle and high school in the United States, and were at least 18 years old at the time of the interview. As part of the recruitment process, flyers were made and distributed at offices that are known to be hubs for low income and first-generation college students. Flyers will also be advertised around campus and posted via social media sites.

### *Participants*

Participants are limited to undergraduate freshmen and sophomore students who self-identify as being low income, attended middle and high school in the United States, and are at least 18 years old at the time of the interview. Graduate students and undergraduate juniors and seniors are excluded from the study because their perceptions of self efficacy in relation to academic and social success in college is skewed due to their elongated time enrolled in college and received feedback both academically and socially through lived experiences. As a control for

social capital, participants must have attended middle and high school in the United States. Social capital may look different in different countries, therefore by controlling the place of education for the participants, we are increasing the reliability and validity of the social capital measure in the study. Participants are also controlled for socioeconomic status in order to limit this as a confounding variable for perceived self efficacy and keep socioeconomic status as a constant variable as well.

I interviewed a total of ten participants. Five were female and five were male. Six of the participants were sophomores and four of them were freshmen.

### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and convenience sampling. Flyers that included a brief description of the study and qualifications were posted in hubs for low-income students such as offices that offer support and resources for this group. Students who visit these offices may have a higher social capital based on their knowledge and use of such resources on campus. Therefore, I also posted flyers in other highly frequented areas of the college campus such as the library, dining halls, and primarily freshmen and sophomore residence halls, etc. I also personally reached out to current professors and department heads in the different colleges to ask them to share with their current students in order to capture a wider range of students. Flyers were also posted via different social media websites. Those who expressed interest in participating either contacted me directly via email, or filled out a screening survey via Google Form to ensure that they meet the qualifications for participation and then later coordinated with me. Participants were also encouraged to share the study information with anyone they believed would be interested and qualified for the study. After about four weeks of having posted the initial flyers and having sent out emails, I sent out a second wave of emails

through the multiple offices on campus. I also asked male groups on campus to share with their members, specifically targeting the male undergraduate low income population, because of the lack of male expressed interest in the study. This second wave proved to be helpful as an increased amount of males reached out in order to be participants in the study.

### *Interview Protocol*

The semi-structured interview guides used throughout the study were developed through an iterative and interactive process. The overall topics of relevance were identified based on a literature review, and preliminary questions were developed with the aim of drawing interest from the participants to the themes that would be discussed in the interviews. I then piloted the interviews and questionnaires and solicited feedback from undergraduate sociology honors students. All of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded for later transcription. Interviews ranged from about thirty five minutes to an hour and ten minutes, but averaged at around forty five minutes.

At baseline, participants were asked questions regarding 1) their high school experiences including: relationships with other students, teachers, and parents; 2) the college application process; 3) their college experience including relationships with other students, teachers, and parents; and 4) their expectations and hopes regarding academic success, connecting with other students from similar and/or different backgrounds from themselves. Example questions include: *How do you feel you fit in at Commonwealth College? What is your relationship like with professors at Commonwealth College? What was your relationship like with your teachers during high school? Can you tell me about your support system both during high school and currently?*

At the end of the interviews, students were asked to answer a general self efficacy scale (GSE). The scale consisted of ten general statements correlated to emotion, optimism, work satisfaction, etc. Respondents were asked to answer how accurately the statement described them. The answer choices were: not at all true, hardly true, moderately true, exactly true. The answers had a corresponding score of 1-4, respectively. The total score of the scale is calculated by finding the sum of all the items. The GSE has total score ranges between 10 and 40, with a higher score indicating more self efficacy.

### *Analysis*

After having transcribed all of the interviews using the software Otter, I imported copies of the transcriptions into a coding software, Atlas. Through Atlas, I came up with twenty-five different codes ranging from “staff members, friends, and institutional social capital, to faith, community, and rejection.” I then coded each interview for those codes. Although I began the coding process with many codes, I realized that many of the anecdotes being shared by the students all could be grouped into more general subjects. There were stories of moments that were either helpful or *harmful/negative* to the college experience and academia currently. As I thought about which codes related the most to my thesis, I saw that there were two different kinds of capital that seemed important to the positive aspects of students’ stories: institutional social capital, and the more personal social networks through which students had to navigate in order to attain resources for their own success. Given these two categories, when I was finished with transcription and coding for all of the interviews, I picked the three most abundant codes that reflected these two categories. They were: QuestBridge, Faculty/Staff, and Friends. A full list of codes can be found in Appendix C.

*QuestBridge*

One of the most surprising findings from my interviews was that a majority of the students, six out of ten, were QuestBridge Scholars. This was not something that I screened for. QuestBridge is a national nonprofit organization run out of Palo Alto, California that aims to connect low income and first generation college students with their partner colleges and universities. QuestBridge has fifty partner colleges and universities, a mixture of liberal arts and research universities, all over the United States. According to their website, QuestBridge's mission is to "recruits, develops, and supports motivated low-income students – beginning in high school through college to their early career – to be successful at America's best colleges, graduate schools, and companies", and more specifically, according to the Columbia Daily Spectator in 2021, QuestBridge's goal is to match "high school students with a full-ride offer of admission from one of its 45 partner universities. Targeting students based on data from admissions tests and networks of guidance counselors, QuestBridge aims to reach high-achieving students well before the typical January application deadlines, offering mentoring programs that make the admissions process—which traditionally advantages wealthy students—more accessible for low-income applicants."

Unbeknownst to me, Commonwealth College became a partner school with QuestBridge in 2020, making the high school class of 2021 - and college class of 2025 - the first cohort of QuestBridge scholars at Commonwealth College.

In order to complete QuestBridge's application process for admission into a partner college with financial aid, students must first apply to The National College Match program in the beginning of their senior year, and submit a drafted list of the college partners they would like to attend, ranked. In October, application finalists are then notified, and they submit all of

their match requirements. Students can only be matched with one school and are committed to attending the match school the following fall because the match is binding. If matched, students receive a full four year scholarship. If students are not matched, they are still eligible to apply through QuestBridge's regular decision program in which students receive a generous financial aid package that meets 100% of demonstrated financial need. Students are notified in December whether they have matched with a school or if they must continue through the regular decision application process. Students can either apply on their own, or be referred to QuestBridge by a faculty member.

Of the students that were QuestBridge scholars, all mentioned a significant reason for choosing to attend Commonwealth College was the financial aid and resources accessed through QuestBridge. Kayla [pseudonym], a freshman student, said in her interview, "And I was very happy when I found out that I got into QuestBridge, because I was kind of like, oh, this is like, the, this is like, this is good. Like, it's gonna happen, like, I'm gonna go to college, and I'm going to get a good education like that. So I was happy about that." QuestBridge gave Kayla the confidence, and almost a sense of relief, that she would be able to attend college and get a good education. Kayla grew up in a small, rural, working class, low income community in Southern Indiana where she stated, "there just aren't many educational opportunities there. Or just honestly, like, really anywhere in Indiana, honestly." Prior to her college applications, Kayla knew that she wanted to attend college and study education. So on her own time, Kayla researched the best schools for education in the country and found that Commonwealth College's School of Education, Lynch, was top ranked. Later, through a friend, she "found out about QuestBridge. Like, I got, like, it was like a social media post that one of my friends like, reposted on their story. And so I found out about Questbridge through that." Finding QuestBridge, and

more importantly finding out that Commonwealth College was a partner school for QuestBridge, significantly changed Kayla's feelings about college and her success. Prior to this information, she was all on her own, struggling to understand everything that went into the college process and questioning how far her education would go given the lack of resources in her community. Finding out about QuestBridge through a friend's social media post significantly changed the course of her college career. And she was not alone in this experience. Many of the QuestBridge Scholars that I interviewed recall finding out about QuestBridge through friends, family, or faculty.

Frank, a sophomore on the pre-medical track from Southern California, chose to attend Commonwealth College because QuestBridge gave him the opportunity to apply for free and later granted him a very substantial scholarship that covered most of the cost of attending college. Prior to his junior year, when the college application process began, Frank lacked a relationship with his guidance/college counselor. However, they later became very close and Frank mentioned that she was a "big reason" for him being able to attend college. "She's one that showed me the QuestBridge scholarship. And she mentioned that she was thinking about going to BC as well. So she was able to give me a little bit of background on that." Not only did Frank's guidance counselor provide information about QuestBridge, which later provided Frank with the resources to apply to and attend college, but she was extremely helpful in providing Frank insight with the college that he ended up attending. Their relationship through her advice and guidance, allowed them to become closer and significantly benefited Frank on his journey to college.

Not only were high school staff significant in providing students with information regarding QuestBridge, but other social networks such as family and friends proved to be



helpful. One student, Frances, a sophomore from California, found out about QuestBridge very close to the first deadline. Unlike Frank, Frances' guidance counselor was not very helpful during the college application process. Having attended a large public school in California, Frances believed that the expectation for her and her fellow classmates was to attend a state university. As a result of this, many of the guidance counselors at her school, including the one assigned to her, provided a minimal amount of information. Frances describes the meetings with the guidance counselor to have gone like, "Do you plan to go to college? Like no, okay. Yes. Do you meet all the requirements to graduate high school, or go to a UC? Because like, everyone just went to UC." As a result of the lack of help from her guidance counselor, Frances' family played a significant role in her college application process. When asked about how she found QuestBridge, Frances said, "Um, we, my mom found out through one of her coworkers, who has like a kid who like, had like, exactly the same like path as me, like, didn't get matched, but like, got, like, into a school like ED through it. So then we were like 'yeah, this is a really good opportunity.'" Frances found out about QuestBridge through her mother's friend, and even had someone who had a very similar path in the program. This was very significant and QuestBridge even impacted which college she chose to attend. This social connection proved to be very helpful, because even after finding out about QuestBridge on her own, Frances noted that her guidance counselor was very difficult to work with when getting all the forms filled out for the program.

Nancy, a sophomore from a suburb near Chicago, did not hear about QuestBridge through her guidance counselor or family. Junior year of high school, Nancy was involved in a mentoring program called Matriculate, where she was assigned a mentor who was currently enrolled in college. Nancy and her mentor met about twice a month. Her mentor is, "the one who

told me about QuestBridge, because he's also like, low income, like high achieving. So he got into Harvard through QuestBridge, and then like, told me about the program, guided me through the process.” Although Nancy did not successfully match with any schools through the QuestBridge National College Match program, she did get into Commonwealth College through QuestBridge’s regular decision program. When asked why she chose to attend, Nancy said, “it was one of the schools that I got into through regular decision, and they gave me really good financial aid, and then just comparing to my other options, I like couldn't really turn it down.” Nancy’s mentor provided her with the information, and guidance to get through QuestBridge, which later provided her with the best opportunity to attend a high achieving college in the country.

Similar to the other students, Katie, a sophomore, pointed out that she “heard it from other students that were in very similar situations to me. I connected with them through different clubs and organizations that I was a part of. Only a couple of them in the program had applied to QuestBridge or they were in the program and they recommended it.” Although she too made her college decision based on QuestBridge, throughout her interview, Katie focused on the downfalls of QuestBridge. As part of the first cohort of QuestBridge Scholars at Commonwealth College, Katie believes that the institution was not actually fully prepared to provide students with all the resources promised. Katie says, “we were like, kind of the guinea pigs for it. Which ended up kind of preventing the real resources that we needed from being provided to my class. So like, my class, of course, a lot of them don't want to engage with the administration of Questbridge at all, just because like they've been, they were treated so badly when we first came here. Like the resources we were promised were not delivered.” Both Katie and the QuestBridge official website shared that scholars are supposed to be provided with financial aid for tuition, books and

supplies, and travel expenses. However, Commonwealth College has not lived up to this expectation. As a student originally from Florida, this has had a very negative impact on Katie's experience. Specifically because she is limited from being able to return home. "You can't afford to travel home, over breaks. Which is very depressing. It gets very heavy to not be able to see your family breaks. And you see that everybody else is like, having fun over spring break and you're stuck on campus, so." Despite QuestBridge's stated commitment to helping low income students, we see here how a lack of social support and being away from one's close friends and family can be detrimental to the college experience. Katie comes from a low income single parent household in Florida. This makes it extremely difficult to have the resources to cover all of her responsibilities on campus and still have enough to travel back home to see her family. Yet, it is not easy to be surrounded by other students who can easily travel and stay in close contact with their families, as well as share travel for pleasure.

### *Role of Staff*

Not so surprisingly, staff, both from Commonwealth College and high schools played a significant role in how students felt about being able to be successful. They attributed a large amount of their previous experiences to help and support from high school staff, and currently, many mentioned that the staff at Commonwealth College provided them with many opportunities and resources to be successful both at college and beyond graduation.

As mentioned previously, some of the high school staff played a role in helping students access QuestBridge, which later helped them access private universities, and helped offset the cost of college. However, beyond providing just resources, many students mentioned the role of emotional support that high school staff played in their lives. Kennedy, a freshman student, mentioned how having teachers that were dedicated to her and other students in a small class,

really helped her out. “So I was in like the Engineering Technology Academy in high school. So it was pretty much like we were secluded for our first two years, and when we had like our own specific teachers, and we had, we took an engineering class. It wasn't really like intensive, but it had like a good reputation, and you have to apply to get in. So that was definitely formative for me, I'd say, because the teachers were a lot more dedicated to us. And we had like a little, like more opportunities.” Having a smaller class, with teachers that were dedicated, Kennedy was able to participate in rewarding academic projects and fairs. Since her classes were smaller and students had to apply to the Engineering Technology Academy, Kennedy felt that her relationship with teachers was more rewarding. Teachers were able to see which of the students were putting more effort into the class, and therefore, they would reciprocate more energy into those students and provide them with more help and support to reach their goals. This same sentiment was seen across a number of interviews. Hank, a sophomore, stated that this guidance counselor in high school was very helpful and they had a positive relationship. “Yeah, she she was actually very helpful. And like, in high school, she would help me out with like telling me to apply for like, extracurricular programs, like one of them I did was called Summer Ventures and at the School of Science and Mathematics in North Carolina, cause that's where I'm from and that was a month long program that took place at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. And I got to participate in the research with a Professor at that college. That was my sophomore year of high school in the summer.” Many colleges look for well rounded students who have various extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, volunteer work, etc. Hank was fortunate enough to have a guidance counselor who provided him with information about many extracurricular activities, including an excellent opportunity to conduct research with a professor at a renowned university. Although we cannot say that this one experience significantly changed

Hank's success, it would be a mistake to not believe that Hank's extracurricular activities given to him by his guidance counselor played a significant role in his later success and in his own belief to succeed. Prior to even attending college, Hank was able to have some experience in communicating and working with a college professor. We would all be naive to say it would not impress admissions officers when looking at his college application, that he was able to work on research at the University of North Carolina as a high school sophomore.

What really stood out to me was the story of James, a freshman at Commonwealth College who really harbored on the role that his high school teachers played in his success and engagement. When speaking about his teachers and other staff in the high school, James regarded each one in a positive light and mentioned that they were very supportive in all aspects. I asked him to share any specific experiences that really encompassed the support he received and he shared, "Um, I, when I said I can't do that, like, it's really hard for me to like, remember specific moments on how they helped me accomplish, but I just, there's no doubt that they're extremely supportive emotionally. Um, yeah, I'm not sure if I can remember any instances, any specific instances where they're extremely supportive, on, like, some, some actual action that they did. But I just, I think, what I meant by that is, whenever I needed help to understand specific material, or sometimes maybe I would be getting off track or lazy in class. And, um, they would just like be supporting and make sure that I would understand the habits that I'm, the bad habits that I'm starting to implement early on, and I should change that. And sometimes, you know, that specific that one specific teacher that asked about me, that teacher, I think he had an influential impact on me because even though he was a literature teacher, he would my class, my other class, the class he taught that I was in, he would sometimes have deep conversations like philosophical discussions, and I think that had an impact on me. I think that showed his support

and care because usually teachers don't, don't go so far. They don't actually immerse themselves into the material that they're teaching to actually interact with students. Sometimes they're lackadaisical, or like smug, they're just in there. They keep to themselves. But this particular teacher, Mr. Epstein, is his name. He would be, oh, there's this one time in which he actually cooked for us. He brought his own setup and everything, just to cook for us. And it was, it was just very supportive of him, even though it wasn't, it was emotionally supportive not not that he was like actually helping me like with my actual college applications or anything. We could just feel the love behind his simple action.” James struggled tremendously his first semester at Commonwealth College. He told me that his GPA was “unthinkably bad” and made him doubt whether or not he actually belonged at the university. He is currently working very hard to bring up his GPA, which he thinks will also make him feel better about his place in the greater context of the university. As seen in his previous quote, James believed that some of his teachers do not go very far to immerse themselves in the class and behave lackadaisical. Recently, James noticed that he “never really fell asleep in high school. But in college, I have been falling asleep a lot, especially in lectures, like in both lectures that I've ever had. I've fallen asleep in those classes. Because just because I think I'm the person who will fall asleep at anything if I'm not being if I'm just sitting still. And I'm not being interacted with, I just get tired almost instantly.” James is lacking a lot of interaction with his professors which has caused him to be disengaged, and later affecting his GPA and success in his classes. Although he recognizes that he can be doing more to build a relationship with his professors, he elaborated on his thought process and explained to me his hesitation and difficulty in being more involved with professors. “But I think the main difference is that it just feels a little bit further, of course, and that makes sense. Like, there's more distance between the professor and the individual student, just because they have so many

students to take care of. And, and that makes sense because it has so many students, but in high school that differs because teachers, teachers don't have as many students so they can pay more focus attention upon every single one. Especially since there's no lecture halls in high. Well, at least from my high school, there is no lecture halls, there's not that many students in class at Max 30. So every teacher would be able to pay significant attention to each student. Like they would be able to devote their time or to feel supported and being there. And in contrast to see even in, in, in college, I feel like it's more of a it's definitely more of a student has to be more proactive into finding what they need and what with the help they need. Of course, it's a it's a it's not even something that a student really deserves it's, it's more like a blessing for like, a professor to reach out to a specific student, just a simple gesture is is actually the same. I would say it's like the same equivalent to a high school, my high school teacher putting more attention into an individual student. I don't know if that makes sense right now. And, and that makes sense, of course, but I think that's what the differences between college and high school support... So you're with your teacher for a long time of your high school career. So you know them a lot. And you're more comfortable. So you're able to ask questions more, with more comfortability. So if it comes out easier, and you can get access to more help more easily in comparison to a professor who just is more inaccessible.” James’ relationship with his teachers and professors is extremely important and correlates to his success in his classes. If he is more connected and comfortable with them, then he would feel more comfortable in using them as resources and getting help in the areas that he is lacking. Although James has not completely failed during his time at Commonwealth College, compared to high school, he did struggle because he was not able to form a connection and bond with his professors similar to the one he held with his high school teachers. Therefore, his own belief in being able to ask for help was diminished.

However, James has not only had negative experiences with professors at Commonwealth College. James' favorite class is a class in the school of education, Family, School, and Society. He makes sure to note that it is not his favorite class because of the content, but rather because of the professor. His professor makes the class very interactive and set for discussion. "And I think that that really provides a perspective on being grateful for that, for what I have. And I think that makes me grateful for that class, because I think it actually teaches me a life value, rather than a specific academic, academic material, like math, like, you know, something, something school related, instead of that, it's actually teaching me a life value, which is gratitude. And sometimes we've even had philosophical discussions from that class, because family, school and society entails that type of discussion. And of course, there's no discussion class, or we will be talking. It's the, it's the first class where we actually have an open discussion, kind of, of course, she guides it, but she guides it to that openness, a specific area, where we discuss a specific topic. And I think that's why I like that class because it's interactive, and that's what actually makes it fun and engaging. And I actually don't fall asleep." Given the importance of the professor for James' success and engagement in class material, it is not surprising that his favorite class is one where the professor is engaging and encourages students to have discussions that exceed just academic material. Throughout the study I found that almost all of the interviewees picked out their favorite class based on the openness and engagement of the professor teaching.

Frank's favorite class was a year-long philosophy and theology class, Perspectives on Western Culture. Frank said he really enjoyed it "so much because of the connection that I had with my professor as well as with the other students, just because we were with each other for like six hours a week, for the whole year. Like you get to know them pretty well." Amongst this



class, Frank was enrolled in General Chemistry I and Calculus I, both large lectures. He told me that being able to see the same faces for almost six hours every week and engage in reflection, growth, and growing relationships amongst his peers and professors was refreshing and something that he looked forward to.

Michael, a freshman enrolled at Commonwealth College, said his favorite class was Inequalities in America. Michael chose to attend Commonwealth College because of its medium size, location, and reputation. Size was a significant factor for Michael because he really wanted to connect with professors and other students. “And like in terms of how much I got into, like, learn about my professors, which is like another thing that they branded a lot like, oh, like small class sizes, like you'll get to like, meet your professors. She's [His Inequalities in America professor] like, the only one I've had a conversation with. So I would say that's probably why I enjoyed her. Like, I actually got to like, learn about her and her life.” Commonwealth College was on the larger end of all the schools that Michael applied to. During orientation, he felt that many people advertised that the professors were very open and he really valued being able to form relationships with them. “That's why I got to connect with Professor Spangler. Like she's Jewish and like she talks about that a lot. And I'm part Jewish. So I enjoyed that because we go to a Jesuit school so I was like "oh that's cool that you teach here.” As someone whose identity is different from the institution's, Michael connected significantly with someone who shared a similar identity. This connection was able to make Michael more interested in the class and build a connection with a professor on campus. This was significant for a student like Michael, who had been recently struggling with his mental health and feelings of belonging on campus.

These were only a few examples of how professors were extremely formative in the classes that students considered their favorite. Many of the students also pointed out how many

of the staff on campus were also extremely emotionally supportive and provided many resources to the students that allowed them to feel better equipped to achieve their goals. The willingness of professors to be open and meet with students outside of class and to make students feel welcomed and supported on campus significantly increased the perceived self efficacy of students and their confidence.

Throughout the interviews, students shared that professors, faculty, administrators, and sometimes even entire departments were great resources and supporters. Katie said of her support system, “I feel like it's mostly friends and like my professors have been great supporters because I'm in African and African Diaspora Studies (AADS). So most of the professors are people of color. And they've been great resources and, and support for me.” Given that Katie can barely visit home, which is far away, her main social support is on campus, and consists of much of the staff in her major's department. “But as far as like, my professors, I try to go to office hours for my professors at some point, but there are just specific professors that will say something in class or like a side comment or something like that, that that'll resonate with me or something like that, or express a certain interest or express an interest in what I'm interested in that type of thing. Like my advisor for my research project right now. She is a black woman in I believe in the sociology department, I want to say who is studying food justice, and with black women specifically, so like, we have that mutual interest. And my advisor in AADS has connected us because he knew that. A lot of the content of my courses is interesting. And obviously the professor's passionate about it. So through that I can talk to them about that. A lot of them are relevant to my life and their experiences so I just kind of like bond over that type of thing.” Her support has even extended as far as the Vice President of Student Affairs, with whom she works closely with in her on campus job, “taking the initiative herself, to be kind of like a

mentor or resource to me.” Other faculty members have also shown to be of great support for students on campus. For example, Kayla mentioned that she often visits an office on campus designated for Federal TRIO programs that help first generation and low income students. The office provides each student with their own advisor, assigned separately from academic advisors provided by the university. Kayla said about her advisor, “my advisor at the LTL has been really amazing for me. You know, I only meet with her once a month. But when I do meet with her, I always feel refreshed after I talk to her. Because the things that I experience she affirms that they are valid, and that I'm not the only person who's experiencing those things.” Although only a freshman, Kayla has plans for furthering her education after completing her bachelor's degree and has found that the faculty on campus has been extremely helpful in clarifying these goals and making them more attainable. She also works in the library on campus and found that her supervisor there is also significantly helpful.. “It could be any problem, if she doesn't know how to help me directly, she knows someone who she can put me in contact with to help me. Yeah, and she's also just like, a very bubbly person. And she's written me several letters of recommendation. She's currently in a Ph. D. program here at Lynch. We talk about graduate school all the time, too, because that's something that I am working toward as well. So yeah, I would say (advisor and) the head librarian at the ERC, I'd say those are the two people who support me the most.” Faculty at Commonwealth College have shown themselves to be resources themselves for the students, but they also have been links between students and other people that are better suited to help students with their goals. For example, Drake has plans of attending law school or a Master's program after graduation. Drake is very connected with different offices and professors on campus. “And I feel like because everybody's always telling me to reach out to like, reach out to somebody, like even now. I'm supposed to be reaching out to Dean Martinez in

the law school. And I've been told to reach out to him by Kevin and also Sam. They've been telling me to go and talk to him and different stuff like that. But also, I'm just talking to people that are here already, because there was a point where I was considering the five years program for my master's. So I talked to Professor Barnes, that is in the social work department. She kind of talked to me about it. Also talked to Kourtney who is in the program right now. Um, so I feel like here there's always somebody to talk to, always somebody that you can reach out to. I think it was Danielle that got me in contact with somebody that is a prosecutor for Massachusetts, he's a black guy, different stuff like that. We had coffee, different stuff like that.” Through his social connections at Commonwealth College, Drake was able to extend his professional network and speak to people who could help him reach his future goals.

The staff in high school and at Commonwealth College proved themselves to be prominent pieces of the interviewees feelings of success. Faculty members provide students with support, resources, and connections to other people who are able to help students achieve their goals.

### *Friends*

Throughout the interviews, many of the respondents also stressed the significance of having strong friend relationships and how they contributed to the positive feelings of school and success. The importance of friends were present in reflections of both the high school and college experiences.

Kayla, who is originally from a small community, mentioned that one of the times where she felt really welcomed at Commonwealth College was at a dance hosted by the LGBTQ+ club on campus. “They had a social event at the beginning of last semester. And I went to that. And, you know, as somebody who grew up in a very homogenous community, I've never been

surrounded by so many queer people. And it was lovely. I was like, this is lit. This is lit. This is what life is supposed to be like.” After being surrounded by people who shared an identity, Kayla felt extremely welcome and a sense of belonging at Commonwealth College. This was a significant moment in her college experience that later granted her the comfort and social support to be able to succeed. Another student, Frank, also elaborated on the importance of having peer connections with students that are in similar situations and share identities. “I’m also in, like the Gateway Scholars Program. There’s a handful of professors that also help with first gen low income students and I go to them all the time, they’ve been some of the professors that have been really helpful for me on campus. So that’s a big one, as well as my other friends who are in the same situation. They’re like the first college students in their family and how they’re handling it. So just that kind of that peer connections, as well as Gateway and LTL are my biggest kinds of things that I’ve tapped into.” The Gateway Scholars Program was designed to support first generation and underrepresented students majoring in the life sciences (biology, biochemistry, chemistry). The program selects a group of 30-35 students and allows them to take the same courses required by all of the undergraduate science majors, but in smaller classes and alongside a for-credit weekly discussion section. The smaller class size and discussion is aimed to promote better interaction and discussion amongst students.

Not only do sponsored academic programs have the ability to create friendships, but the clubs on campus have also shown to be a creator of social networks that promote a sense of belonging and support that it is critical to one’s own belief of being successful.

Commonwealth College is home to over 300 student organizations focused on everything from arts and culture to politics, service and social justice. Frank is involved in one of the many cultural clubs on campus that brings together many students from similar backgrounds, and

invites others to learn about the different cultures around the world. Frank shared a moment where a club sparked many friendships and made him feel welcomed with a sense of belonging at Commonwealth College. “I think when I first joined the PSBC, the Philippine Society, it was last semester. And we had like a barbecue outside, at one of the mods (on campus housing with outdoor space) to see our families (fake families created through the club), and just getting to meet all these other people who share the kind of the same, like background that I do. I didn't experience that like any whatsoever freshman year. And so like, I didn't realize that this club was so big. And seeing a ton of people who aren't even of Filipino heritage, and they just love the culture and the atmosphere and everything about it.” Having a cultural club and planned event that brought together people from similar backgrounds hosted a great environment for Frank.

Peers and friends also make great sources to study with and better understand class material. Although many of the professors at Commonwealth College host office hours and are notoriously helpful, students mentioned that they spend a lot of time doing academic work with their friends. James, a freshman, told me that he preferred reaching out to his friends because of the informality and accessibility. “I feel like just friends are easier, like peers, classmates, are easier to reach out to. Because they're right there, they're just a text away. It's so much simpler than writing a whole email that has to be formal, has to be made sure the grammar is correct in an email, make sure I'm being polite in comparison towards a friend where you could just be like, Yo, do you know, do you know how to do this? Or you could just like, link up since in college, it's easy because I dorm.” James mentions an interesting point, that with living on campus, it is very convenient for peers to see each other often and work together.

James also elaborated on how his friends affected him differently in high school and in college. At the beginning of his freshman year, he had a very welcoming experience where he

was able to share dinner and a night out with lots of friends. “And I was actually looking for new friends. I felt like the people back in Cali weren't, weren't the type of people to have that striving, motivating mentality that I need to have for myself. So I feel like in other words, they were a bad influence on me. So in that sense, in that regard, my parents were kind of correct in protecting me from that. But here I was able to let loose of it. And since these are people that have worked hard to get here, so that to get to this college, and to continue on to becoming better. Better people just in general. So I feel like that one dinner, that one night was something that was an experience in a welcoming experience that really has affected me.” It may have been that all of James’ high school did not share the same, or even similar, post graduation goals. For James, his goals of attending college required very specific behaviors and to meet previous goals, which were not always supported by his peers, causing his parents to restrict his freedom. However, while on campus with other students, James saw for himself that he was being surrounded by better influences and people who wanted the similar goals, so oriented their lives in similar ways. Hank shared similar sentiments and said, “But just like the support system around me or my friends that pushed me to work harder and push ourselves, and then like my parents, they set a good example for me to keep working hard academically. That was like the biggest impact honestly.” Hank was really impacted by his peers because they were motivation for him to work hard and achieve his goals, which included high grades, and conducting further research with professors while he worked towards a graduate program.

Friends are also a constant point of comparison. This could be both positive and negative, especially when transitioning into college and moving away from friends at home. Nancy, who was originally from Chicago, shared her experience with me about her relationship with her friends from home. “So my friends all ended up going to schools like public schools in the

Midwest. I don't think they really like cared enough about the prestige of their school or like, went to their school for a specific program. So they are going to like Big 10 schools. And they're all in like sororities. But I'm like one of the only people that didn't go to a public Big 10 school, and like I'm not in a sorority. So a lot of the things they talk about are sorority related. And like I can like, pitch in the conversation. And like, I'm happy to listen, because like, it's fun to learn stuff about sororities, but it's hard to relate a lot of the times because it's like all they talk about now ... Um, I did think a lot about transferring freshman year just because I struggled to fit in or, and like, I was comparing my experience a lot with a lot of my friends who went to completely different schools. So that was stupid. But I was comparing my experience to my friends who were like rushing for sororities, or like, got to go all the time. And like, just didn't have the same demographic that BC does.” The friend making process was somewhat difficult at first for Nancy, so she kept in contact with her friends at home. However, this made her own experience feel more isolating because she was the only one of her friends who went to a school with different demographics and a different social life. This affected her so much that Nancy even thought of transferring schools to one of less prestige with a less liked program. However, after finding friends on campus, and forming a group of support and emotional connection, Nancy felt better and decided to stay.

Friends were a source of emotional support, welcoming experiences, and even resources and motivation for success.

### *Michael*

There was one interview that really stood out to me, because it was significantly different from the others. Michael is a freshman, originally from a small low income neighborhood in Northeastern United States. He attended a larger public high school that lacked resources and



lacked large social connections. Although his high school did offer *some* advanced placement courses, I didn't really get a lot of like hands on stuff. And we also didn't really have a lot of opportunities to do stuff outside of school. Like we had clubs and stuff, but the clubs were like 15 minutes after school or we met during lunch.” As previously mentioned, clubs were a good source of socialization and feelings of belonging, however, since high school Michael has lacked this. He also lacked the strong relationships that other students shared with their teachers and staff in high school. Other students often mentioned that their guidance counselors were significantly involved in the college application process and were great points of reference. However, Michael shared that, “other than just like giving me recommendations, I would say (his guidance counselor was) not as much (involved).. I didn't even know like compared to some kids that like since I've been here and like talked about like the help they receive.” Given that this was mostly the case for all of the students that attended his high school, Michael was not even aware of the lack of involvement and support from his high school staff until he learned about the experience of other Commonwealth College students.

Despite *talking* to other students at Commonwealth College, Michael has not felt positive about the friend making process at college. “Um, it's definitely been more difficult than I thought it was going to be. Just because, like, of the way that people talk so much about how like, it's such a sense of community, or like, there's so many things to do. Like, there's so many ways to meet people. So like, in, like, in the fall, I joined a lot of clubs. But like, you really only go to the clubs you don't really hang out afterwards or like, it's really hard to meet people through a club. So like that was out. Or like me and my roommate like we talk, we coexist, but we don't have the same like friend group.” From his perspectives, clubs were not very proactive in helping build a social connection and even the person he saw the most, his roommate, did not become a close

friend. Michael further explained to me that he felt out of place often and struggled to make friends at Commonwealth College because of the sense of community surrounding college that was present on campus. Many people had spent years preparing for college, or had family members and other friends that shared the same sense of pride of being Commonwealth College students and/or alumni. Michael did not feel that way.

Michael has also struggled on campus to make connections with professors. During his college application process, Michael prioritized smaller schools because he wanted to make connections with staff. Commonwealth College was on the larger end of the schools that he applied to, however, he still believed that, "I would be able to like get to know my professors because that's something that they branded and advertised, but I don't really think I have, like professors don't really talk about their lives." Although he was able to connect with one professor that shares a similar identity, Michael has found it difficult to have professors that are open and willing to build a relationship. This in turn has also drawn him away from seeking those relationships, so the cycle continues where he feels isolated.

Michael even mentioned that although Commonwealth College advertised many resources on campus for low income and first generation college students, he has not accessed these and has only visited a few of the on campus offices a few times. Michael has felt the resources on campus are not actually in abundance and the offices instead have been very depressing and isolating as well.

As a result of these feelings and overall lack of social connections for years, Michael also disclosed that he decided to take a gap semester to step back and reevaluate his future plans. Michael even planned on taking the spring semester off originally, but during winter break decided that he would persevere through his feelings and try to push through another semester at

college. However, he found that his second semester was not much better, and he was not able to find any resources to help, so decided the best choice was to take a gap semester.

## **Discussion**

The General Self Efficacy Scale (GSE) used at the end of the interview was a way to measure the perceived self efficacy of participants. I will not go into deep detail discussing how self efficacy affected other areas, because I did not measure for that throughout the study. Instead, I just wanted to measure the perceived self efficacy of students against their social capital, which was measured throughout the other questions in the interview guide. The measure of self efficacy was important throughout this study because self efficacy is shown to help develop subskills such as self-evaluation and self-regulation, which are positive predictors of academic achievement (Motlagh *et al.*, 2011). Although I did not measure academic achievement throughout this study, I hope that future research could extend one step further from my research and demonstrate a relationship between social capital, self efficacy, and academic achievement. However, this does not discount the inclusion of the GSE in my study. Given the existing literature on self efficacy, it is clear that a positive relationship between self efficacy and academic achievement already exists. Therefore, I used this GSE to measure if higher self efficacy was also associated with higher social capital, which can be used as a stepping stone to later show an association between all three variables. Throughout the study, I found that the three main variables that I found of importance: involvement in QuestBridge Scholars Program, connections with faculty, and connections with similar peers, were indicators of self efficacy. The students who showed all three, had the highest GSE scores, followed by those with only two

out of the three, then those with only one, then our case who showed a lack of all three, had the lowest GSE score.

The case of Michael, which I elaborated on extensively in the previous section, shows the case of a student who lacked support in almost all of the areas which I found to be present and important for other students. Michael was not part of the QuestBridge scholarship program, which meant he lacked some institutional support on the college application process in high school, and also did not have that source of support when he began his life on campus. Although there were some resources that were advertised by Commonwealth College for Michael to access, he did not feel very inclined to use them, and therefore, felt he lacked support on campus. He also felt that he was not able to make any connections with the faculty because he did not know much about them, and those who did, were not very similar to Michael. Michael shared similar feelings about his peers on campus. There were obviously a vast amount of students available to become friends and available for mingling, however, they varied significantly in their identities and even opinions about the importance of college and other values in life. Therefore, this lack of a common identity, experience, or value, really inhibited Michael from being able to develop social networks and therefore be able to use them as resources, or even have increased access to resources. This lack of social networks negatively affected his self efficacy, which was reflected in his GSE scale, where he scored the lowest amongst all respondents. Even furthermore, the study showed the consequences of this lack of social network and self efficacy on Michael's academic performance. Due to his feelings of inadequacy and being unable to fit in, Michael decided to take a semester off after completing his freshman year. This case further supported that there is a positive relationship between self efficacy and social capital.

Although I did not screen for QuestBridge scholars, the high presence of QuestBridge scholars was an important part of my research. Given that Questbridge is a scholarship program that also offers students many resources throughout high school and college, I was not surprised to find that these students demonstrated higher levels of self efficacy. Performance accomplishments are a key source of self efficacy among college students (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, the accomplishment of being accepted into a highly coveted scholarship program as well as being admitted into a private renowned institution, would provide students with the confidence to later tackle other problems and feel confident in their ability to be able to succeed in college. Through QuestBridge, students are also offered a mentorship program to help with their application, which also allows self efficacy to be increased. The mentorship program, an example of social capital given the advantageous connection, provides students with vicarious experience, feedback, and verbal persuasion, all sources of self efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This mentorship program is a continuous source of support for incoming college students, who then are also more likely to seek resources once they have reached their college campus.

Although Commonwealth College did not have a well established QuestBridge chapter and resource on campus due to its novelty, I found that QuestBridge scholars also expressed accessing many of the other resources that were available to them on campus.

All of the students in my study considered themselves low-income, and although I would not go as far as making a distinction between “poor” and “privileged poor” amongst my participants, the existing literature shows that there was a difference amongst students who had different levels of academic engagement at elite universities. The “privileged poor” students generally do not feel nervous, uncomfortable, or unprepared when engaging with professors and

other faculty members at their university because of prior experience with using faculty as a resource (Jack, 2016).

Given QuestBridge's mission of connecting *low income* and *first generation* college students to higher education institutions, I believe that there needs to be more research conducted on the role of scholarship and mentorship programs in connection with self efficacy and academic achievement. Throughout my research, I did not measure academic success due to a lack of resources and time, however, I would have liked to further know how the QuestBridge scholars were doing academically in comparison to students that were not enrolled in the QuestBridge program or any scholarship/mentoring programs.

The role and involvement of staff in both high school and during college was also a high indicator of self efficacy amongst respondents. The existing literature shows that social capital is positively correlated to self efficacy, so I was not surprised to find that students who had more and *more positive* connections with staff had higher self efficacy. Han *et al.*, (2014). Shows that social capital had a positive impact and self efficacy and study success amongst first year students. My study adds to the existing literature that social capital and self efficacy are positively correlated. However, as a result of my research, I believe that there needs to be more research done on social capital itself and what *actually* classifies as social capital. Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) agree that social capital is a form of social connection that allows one to access resources and help reach a goal that would otherwise be unattainable. However, this definition of social capital is not exactly clear on what *resources* are.

Throughout my study, many students mentioned that their teachers and faculty were often supporters and provided them with emotional support. I would argue that this is one of the most

important resources that college students need to access throughout their time in college, especially students who move away from home and live on college campuses.

Many of the students that I interviewed also shared that they were first generation college students, and therefore, throughout the college application process did not have much support from their families. Parents were supportive of the idea of attending college, but could not provide much more. Therefore, staff members were significantly important in listening to the students' concern and providing them with the ease and reassurance that they were not alone during the process. This emotional support was significant for many of the students, and yet this was not discussed throughout the literature.

Much of the existing literature on social capital is not very clear of what social networks must provide in order to be considered social capital. Due to Coleman's theory being at the forefront of social capital research recently, a lot of the existing literature on social capital focuses on family social capital (Dika and Singh, 2002). Family social capital is easier to measure because it can be broken down into behaviors from parents such as homework help, attending parent-teacher conferences, involvement in college applications, etc. One study found that although social capital from both family and school are influential in the educational aspiration, family capital is shown to have a greater effect (Shahidul, 2015).

I believe the literature on family social capital versus school social capital is missing a significant component - physical location of the student. Most of the existing literature on social capital has been conducted on high school students. Therefore, most of the students are still living with their parents, and given their young age, most likely have increased parental involvement anyways. However, in the United States specifically, it is not rare for students to move away for college and experience an increase in independence and change in relationships

with their family. Therefore, I believe that there needs to be an increase in studies involving the role of faculty members on self efficacy and academic achievement with college students who live on their college campus.

Students also expressed that their identity connections to faculty was important. Students often sought out connections with faculty that they could relate to, shared interests with, or had a shared identity with. Respondents shared that professors that had shared identities or interests often made them feel more comfortable and welcomed. Social networks are shown to increase self efficacy and academic achievement, but the literature on how differences in connectedness of these social networks is limited. Further research should be conducted to assess the role that similarities and differences in identity play in the strength of social networks.

Throughout my research, I also found a strong association between expressed increased support from peers of similar identities and high self efficacy. Similar to the literature discussing faculty, the literature on the extent to which peers are resourceful social networks is limited. I found in my research that not only are friendships necessary for emotional support and connection, but friendships where there is a shared identity and experience are helpful for low income undergraduates students.

Respondents shared that their friends, especially those who were in similar situations, were supportive and were resources to do things such as study and complete school work together. As previously mentioned, some students even expressed the comfort and ease of being able to access their friends on campus to discuss academic material. Further research should be conducted on the role of friends *on college campuses* in developing self efficacy and academic achievement.



Bandura (1977) stated that a source of self efficacy is verbal persuasion, and this is most effective when it comes from a person with a significant relationship, such as a close friend or family member. However, the literature on differences in significance between different people is limited. I suggest that there be more research on the role of friends on campus in being sources of verbal persuasion for students, and helping build self efficacy.

As mentioned by one of the respondents, friends on college campuses become almost family, given the proximity, living situations, and time spent together. Therefore, although there is extensive research on family social capital in high school students, I would appreciate further research on the overlap between the two in college.

Students that were enrolled in QuestBridge scholarship program and had strong relationships with both faculty and peers had the highest self efficacy scale scores amongst respondents. As was expected, these students had higher social networks which provided a number of different resources - financial aid, access to other resources, and in many cases emotional support. Social capital allows students access to vicarious experiences, performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, and what I believe to be one of the most important things - better physiological states - which all are sources of self efficacy. Therefore, the students with the most social capital, had the highest perceived self efficacy. As displayed by our case with Michael, students without strong social networks and social capital, suffer from decreased self efficacy and are at a higher risk to struggle in academic contexts.

Michael was not completely isolated, and had *some* social networks. He came from a large family, and had some support in high school. However, the lack of support and resources was too overwhelming. He was also a first generation college student, so his family was not of much support in the context of academia because they could not provide him with the necessary

resources and advice. As a result of this, Michael struggled with staying enrolled, and even after making the tough decision to complete two entire semesters, decided it was in his best interest to take a gap semester. Michael's story reinforces my findings and the existing literature that social capital leads to higher self efficacy, both which correlate with academic success.

Throughout this study, I found that students with higher social capital had higher self efficacy. This is not surprising given the existing literature showing this association as well. However, given more time and resources, I would have liked to take this study further and show the relationship between social capital, self efficacy, and academic achievement. Academic achievement, especially for college students, is pivotal because of the increasing demand of college degrees for jobs. More importantly, there should be an attempt to truly make an education an even playing field that allows all students an equal opportunity. Low income and first generation college students are often at a disadvantage because they lack the knowledge and resources to be successful in college.

My study aimed to address a micro-macro link, the relationship between social capital, the intricate variety of entities and social mechanisms that are employed to make possible the achievement of certain goals that otherwise would be unattainable, and self efficacy, the degree to which a person believes in his/her own capacity to execute behaviors necessary to attain their goals, in the context of undergraduate low income students.

Given that admitted college students do not have a homogenous experience, colleges and college programs should work to foster a better environment for students. By introducing more beneficial social networks to low income and first generation college students, students would have access to increased resources including: vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion,

performance accomplishments, and better physiological states. All of these are sources of self efficacy, which would also increase academic success and performance.

Given the high positive association between social capital and self efficacy, we should push policy makers to create more programs and policies that would help low income undergraduate students access to social networks that build self efficacy, and in turn increase academic achievement.

### *Limitations*

As with all studies, limitations were present in my research. Given that the study was conducted at a medium sized, high ranking university with admitted undergraduate students, many students already exerted high levels of social capital and self efficacy, which allowed them to be admitted into the college and continuously enrolled.

Interviewers were also conducted based on students who saw recruitment flyers and volunteered to participate. We can assume that students that volunteered to participate had higher self efficacy and felt more confident about sharing their high school and college experiences with me.

### **Conclusion**

This study is one the few that has investigated the relationship between social capital and self efficacy amongst low income students. The results show the effects of having similar and supportive social networks to one's own belief about being able to succeed. Sociologists and other researchers have failed to grasp the importance of having *similar* identities in the effectiveness and power of social networks as social capital. I suggest that future research expands beyond the scope of low income undergraduate students, and investigates how

similarities and differences in the identities of social networks help students with actual access to resources and building of self efficacy.

Much of the existing literature on social capital and social networks only focuses on the idea that social capital are any social networks that are able to provide resources and make achievable a goal that would otherwise be unattainable. However, my research demonstrates that there is significant importance with the identities of the social networks. The students who had the most social capital, namely were involved in the QuestBridge scholarship program, connections with faculty, and connections with friends.

This was not surprising given that the existing literature demonstrated that social capital could be found in almost all places that foster community such as schools, clubs, religious communities, families, etc. However, this research did not emphasize the importance of connectedness through similarities and shared identities. Specifically in relation to connectedness with faculty and peers (friends), participants stressed that they felt most connected to faculty and peers who shared experiences and identities. When there was a sense of similarity and belonging, students felt more at ease and were more likely to depend on these social connections for help and resources. Although other faculty and friends who were not as close and did not share identities and experiences were still helpful, the recurring theme of connectedness through similarities cannot be ignored.

This study sheds light on the vast amount of research that has still yet to be done on social networks and self efficacy, especially with low income college students. Low income college students are disproportionately Black and Hispanic students who also come from underfunded schools. These communities, and these families can greatly benefit from research that demonstrates that social connectedness does positively impact students in their journeys

through higher education. We have all too often heard the phrase “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” and this cannot continue to place low income students at a disadvantage.

Further research should investigate more on the impacts of similar identities and shared experiences on the effectiveness of social capital, as well as the relationship between social capital, self efficacy and academic achievement. This study has shown that low income students benefit from social capital, especially those with higher similarities, because it increases their perceived self efficacy, their own belief at being able to succeed. America’s growing expectation of adults with college degrees entering the workforce must understand this finding, and use it to create policies that create and encourage social networks and connectedness as resources to help students succeed.

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about why you chose to attend Commonwealth College?
2. What did you know about Commonwealth College before attending?
3. How was the application process?
4. What kind of high school did you attend?
5. Tell me about your relationship with your guidance counselor (if applicable)
6. Did you have a college fair? Attended?
7. Did you have access to an ACT/SAT tutor or prep course?
8. Did you have office hours during high school?
9. What was your relationship like with your teachers during high school?
10. Tell me about your support system both during high school and currently?
11. How do academics similar/differ from high school?
12. What was the friend making process like at Commonwealth College?
13. What do you and your friends do for fun?
14. Can you show me a picture that represents motivation for you? Explain it
15. What are your goals and aspirations for the near future (next 3-4 years)?
16. Do people on campus help you reach these goals? Who and how?
17. Tell me about your favorite class you've taken at Commonwealth College?
18. How do you feel you fit in at Commonwealth College?
19. Top 3 experiences of welcoming
20. Top 3 experiences of rejection
21. What would you change to make Commonwealth College better?
22. What is your relationship like with professors at Commonwealth College?
23. Are there any groups you belong to on campus?
24. What are some resources you access on campus?
25. Is there anything you felt unprepared for at Commonwealth College?
26. Is there anything else you feel is important to tell me about your high school experience or experience at Commonwealth College?
27. Will you recommend anyone to take this study?

## Appendix B: General Self Efficacy Scale

### General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE)

	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true
1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### **Appendix C: Codes used for transcribed interviews**

1. Commonwealth College stagg
2. Career opportunities
3. Clubs
4. Community
5. Content
6. Don't ask for help
7. Emotional connection
8. Emotional support
9. Faith
10. Family
11. Financial aid
12. Commonwealth College friends
13. High school friends
14. High school staff
15. Institutional social capital
16. Internships
17. Lack of resources
18. Networking
19. Openness from staff
20. Out of place
21. QuestBridge
22. Racism
23. Rejection
24. Reputation
25. Self Efficacy



## References

- Alexander D., and Fred Luthans. 1998. "Self-Efficacy and Work-Related Performance: A Meta-Analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 124(2):240–61. doi: [10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.240](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.240).
- Acar, Erkan. 2011. "Effects of Social Capital on Academic Success: A Narrative Synthesis." 6.
- Aries, Elizabeth, and Maynard Seider. 2005. "The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students." *Qualitative Sociology* 28(4):419–43. doi: [10.1007/s11133-005-8366-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-005-8366-1).
- Bandura, Albert. 1977. "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." 25.
- Bandura, Albert, Claudio Barbaranelli, Gian Vittorio Caprara, and Concetta Pastorelli. 2001. "Self-Efficacy Beliefs as Shapers of Children's Aspirations and Career Trajectories." *Child Development* 72(1):187–206. doi: [10.1111/1467-8624.00273](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00273).
- Brouwer, Jasperina, Ellen Jansen, Andreas Flache, and Adriaan Hofman. 2016. "The Impact of Social Capital on Self-Efficacy and Study Success among First-Year University Students." *Learning and Individual Differences* 52:109–18. doi: [10.1016/j.lindif.2016.09.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.09.016).
- Callero, Peter L. 2003. "The Sociology of the Self." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29(1):115–33. doi: [10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100057](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100057).
- Carnoy, Martin. 1977. "Education and Economic Development: The First Generation." 21.
- Coleman, James. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology* 27.
- D, Mart, Filip Dochy, and Mien Segers. 2011. "Factors Affecting Students' Self-Efficacy in Higher Education." *Educational Research Review* 6(2):95–108. doi: [10.1016/j.edurev.2010.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2010.10.003).
- De Vries, Jantje Hinrika, Maik Spengler, Andreas Frintrup, and Patrick Mussel. 2021. "Personality Development in Emerging Adulthood—How the Perception of Life Events

- and Mindset Affect Personality Trait Change.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12:671421. doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2021.671421](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.671421).
- Destin, Mesmin, Michelle Rheinschmidt-Same, and Jennifer A. Richeson. 2017. “Status-Based Identity: A Conceptual Approach Integrating the Social Psychological Study of Socioeconomic Status and Identity.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12(2):270–89. doi: [10.1177/1745691616664424](https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616664424).
- Dika, Sandra L., and Kusum Singh. 2002. “Applications of Social Capital in Educational Literature: A Critical Synthesis.” *Review of Educational Research* 72(1):31–60. doi: [10.3102/00346543072001031](https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543072001031).
- Furstenberg, Frank F., and Mary Elizabeth Hughes. 1995. “Social Capital and Successful Development among At-Risk Youth.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57(3):580. doi: [10.2307/353914](https://doi.org/10.2307/353914).
- Gore, Paul A. 2006. “Academic Self-Efficacy as a Predictor of College Outcomes: Two Incremental Validity Studies.” *Journal of Career Assessment* 14(1):92–115. doi: [10.1177/1069072705281367](https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072705281367).
- Han, Jing, Xiaoyuan Chu, Huicun Song, and Yuan Li. 2014. “Social Capital, Socioeconomic Status and Self-Efficacy.” *Applied Economics and Finance* 2(1):1–10. doi: [10.11114/aef.v2i1.607](https://doi.org/10.11114/aef.v2i1.607).
- Hanushek, Eric A., and Ludger Wößmann. n.d. “The Role of Education Quality in Economic Growth.” 96.
- Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2016. “(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University.” *Sociology of Education* 89(1):1–19. doi: [10.1177/0038040715614913](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040715614913).
- Komarraju, Meera, and Dustin Nadler. 2013. “Self-Efficacy and Academic Achievement: Why Do Implicit Beliefs, Goals, and Effort Regulation Matter?” *Learning and Individual Differences* 25:67–72. doi: [10.1016/j.lindif.2013.01.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2013.01.005).
- Luyten, Patrick, and Sidney J. Blatt. 2013. “Interpersonal Relatedness and Self-Definition in Normal and Disrupted Personality Development: Retrospect and Prospect.” *American Psychologist* 68(3):172–83. doi: [10.1037/a0032243](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032243).

- Mishra, Shweta. 2020. "Social Networks, Social Capital, Social Support and Academic Success in Higher Education: A Systematic Review with a Special Focus on 'Underrepresented' Students." *Educational Research Review* 29:100307. doi: [10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100307](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100307).
- Motlagh, Shahrzad Elahi, Kourosh Amrai, Mohammad Javad Yazdani, Haitham altaib Abderahim, and Hossein Souri. 2011. "The Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Academic Achievement in High School Students." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 15:765–68. doi: [10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.03.180](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.03.180).
- Multon, Karen D., Steven D. Brown, and Robert W. Lent. 1991. "Relation of Self-Efficacy Beliefs to Academic Outcomes: A Meta-Analytic Investigation." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 38(1):30–38. doi: [10.1037/0022-0167.38.1.30](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.38.1.30).
- O'Connor, Noga, Floyd M. Hammack, and Marc A. Scott. 2010. "Social Capital, Financial Knowledge, and Hispanic Student College Choices." *Research in Higher Education* 51(3):195–219. doi: [10.1007/s11162-009-9153-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9153-8).
- Ostrom, E., & Ahn, T. K. (2009). The meaning of social capital and its link to collective action. *Handbook of social capital: The troika of sociology, political science and economics*, 17-35
- Ozturk, Ilhan. 2008. "The Role of Education in Economic Development: A Theoretical Perspective." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi: [10.2139/ssrn.1137541](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1137541).
- Pretty, Jules. 2003. "Social Capital and the Collective Management of Resources." *Science* 302(5652):1912–14. doi: [10.1126/science.1090847](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1090847).
- Putnam, Robert D. 1995. "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28(4):664–83.
- Rogošić, Silvia, and Branislava Baranović. 2016. "Social Capital and Educational Achievements: Coleman vs. Bourdieu." *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal* 6(2):81–100. doi: [10.26529/cepsj.89](https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.89).
- Shahidul, S. M., A. H. M. Zehadul Karim, and S. Mustari. 2015. "Social Capital and Educational Aspiration of Students: Does Family Social Capital Affect More Compared

to School Social Capital?" *International Education Studies* 8(12):255. doi:  
[10.5539/ies.v8n12p255](https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v8n12p255).