

Strategies for Building First-Generation Students' Social Capital

OVERVIEW

For many first-generation students, attending college is the one of the best opportunities to increase their social capital and chances for financial and professional success. However, colleges and universities that do not respond to the needs of first-generation students run the risk of doing the exact opposite by ultimately reinforcing the systemic barriers that prevent postsecondary success for those who are the first in their family to attend college. This guide is a resource for student employment professionals to help them understand the unique needs of and most effective capital-building strategies for first-generation students.

The first step for any practitioner is to understand what “social capital” means, particularly for students whose parents did not attend college or those students whose professional connections may be lacking. In an article posted on [EdSurge](#), writer Mary Jo Madda provides a strong definition of social capital.

“Social capital, as argued by sociologist James Coleman, is defined as those **intangible resources** that come embedded within interpersonal relationships or social institutions. They can be as **strong** as that of family members, friends, colleagues or fellow students, or as **weak** as distant LinkedIn connections. But when push comes to shove, a connection can mean the difference between a job and unemployment, between a college acceptance and rejection.”

The word “intangible” is especially important to communicate with students who may not understand how fluid and ever-changing their network can be. By helping students see their social capital as an evolving, professionals can teach ways of cultivating new connections starting in college and lasting throughout their professional career.

It is also important to help students distinguish, as Madda does above, between “strong” and “weak” relationships. A faculty member could be a strong or weak ally depending on how well the student has built and managed the relationship. This applies also to an employer the student met once at a networking event, but who doesn't work in the exact field in which the student is interested. A simple, easy-to-remember definition for students is: “Our social ‘wealth’ is determined by the strength of our networks and relationships.”

In [University Business](#), Mahnaz R. Charania discusses the four-dimensional framework she and her colleagues at the Clayton Christensen Institute have developed for measuring social capital. When assessing a student's access to networks and professional relationships, practitioners should consider:

1. Quantity of relationships: Does the student have a sufficient number of relationships - or a wide enough professional network - to assist them with employment during college and after graduation?
2. Quality of relationships: Are the people in a student's network - faculty, advisors, family members, mentors, peers, etc. - providing the connections, advice, and guidance the student needs?
3. Structure of network: Is there variation within the student's network and relationships? Do they have connections in various areas that could benefit them down the road?
4. Ability to mobilize relationships: When the student needs assistance, do they know how to "mobilize" their network (i.e., ask for help or feedback)?

This framework can help employment professionals assess students' social capital at the macro-level (*Overall, do our first-generation students know how to grow and utilize their networks?*) or at the micro/student-level (*Does Erika know who makes up her network of supporters and how to ask for help when she needs it?*).

NSEA MEMBER FEEDBACK

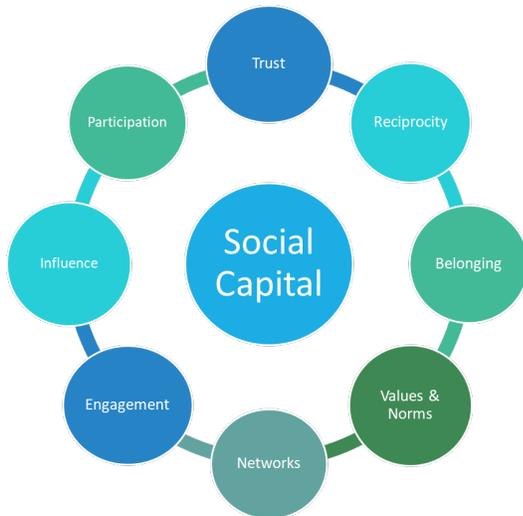
As part of NSEA's research project, interviews took place with NSEA members in May and June 2021. The goal of the interviews was to understand members' knowledge about first-generation students and how they navigate employment-related issues in college. Below are several quotes that stood out from the conversations.

- "[First-generation students] often say, 'No one told me to do anything different' which captures how little we're communicating to these students.
- "When it comes to a student finding an on-campus job, you have to know someone."
- "So many students are anxious just to get *any* job that they take the first one offered, even if it doesn't pay enough or have any relation to their major."
- "[First-generation students] come in blinded to the whole experience [of college] and are just trying to keep their heads above water."
- "Students take qualifications [listed on job postings] to heart too much. They disqualify themselves before even applying."

These and other insights from NSEA members reflect that there are myriad institutional challenges for first-generation students, many of which may not even be familiar to the students themselves. As practitioners, it is important to find the gaps in support on your campus and to find ways to improve the skills and knowledge of your first-generation students.

THE SOCIAL CAPITAL WHEEL

Social capital manifests itself in many ways, most of which are unknown to students who are navigating higher education alone. While a strong network of peers/colleagues is important, social capital encompasses much more than “who you know.” Practitioners need to help first-generation students understand *how* to make their networks work for them.



The Social Capital Wheel provides an overview of the important components of social capital, many of which often go overlooked. As you review the wheel, think about how students can be taught to build their networks as well as how to maximize its impact. For example, “Reciprocity” is indispensable because social capital is not a one-way street; individuals must learn how helping and supporting others is just as integral to their own success. Similarly, understanding “Values & Norms” is particularly difficult for first-generation students because the environment is often unlike any they’ve experienced before. By learning the traditions and values of an institution, a first-generation student can improve

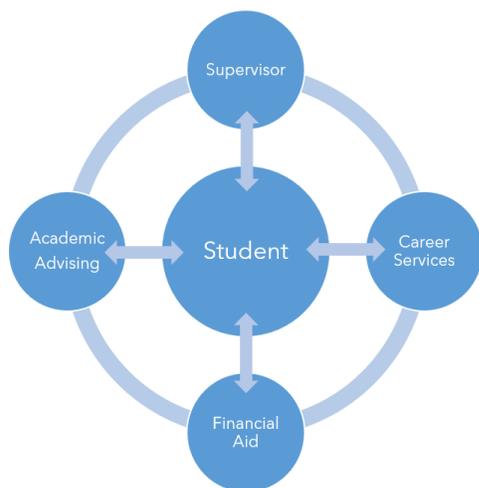
their social capital and teach other first-generation students about how to exist in a space that feels foreign and occasionally unwelcoming to those without sufficient capital.

In addition to providing knowledge and skill development, it’s important for student employment professionals to consider first-generation students’ employment journeys holistically. This means not only helping them work while in college, but also finding ways to build up their professional skills, competencies, and knowledge of their career field. [Career pathing](#) is one approach that has had success in both business and non-profit sectors. Career pathing includes asking the questions

- What are the student’s short- and long-term employment goals?
- What are the hard skills the student needs for their current position *and* for their future career field?
- What are the soft skills the student needs for their current position *and* for their future career field?

These questions should guide practitioners in ways of envisioning more impactful employment experiences for first-generation students. Start by working with campus partners who hire and supervise student employees to help them identify career development opportunities for the students they manage. Create training guides or resources for supervisors to create professional development or soft skills building activities for first-generation students. It will also be an opportunity to re-envision how student employment operates in relation to other offices such as academic advising and financial aid.

CREATING A HOLISTIC SUPPORT FRAMEWORK



To best support first-generation students through their employment journeys, institutions should work to develop mutually reinforcing support networks. “Mutually reinforcing” means the individuals in each department are communicating with one another and sharing knowledge to support students in the ways that are most needed, including individualized attention for students with unique needs. Regular, clear communication will improve the effectiveness of the network which will ultimately benefit the student who will receive identical messaging and resources (i.e., mutually reinforcing support) from each office or department.

The most critical partners to creating this type of network will most likely include academic advising, financial aid, career services, and the supervisors/managers involved. Below is an overview of the knowledge each partner will bring to the network to best support a student in need. By working cooperatively and communicating regularly, the collective knowledge of the network – and each office/department individually – will increase substantially, creating better support and guidance for first-generation students.

Supervisor	Career Services	Financial Aid	Academic Advising
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft and hard skills being learned • Professional development options in the field • Student's maturity, time management skills, and areas to improve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career exploration related to part-time work • Transferable skills from part-time to full-time job • Skills development resources (mentoring, internships) • Graduate school search and application assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-study eligibility and financial "need" status • Outstanding cumulative loan debt and repayment strategies based on future career • Graduate school scholarship searches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic course selection for career preparation • Guidance on academic strengths and areas to improve • Academic success strategies to improve GPA/transcript

Several institutions have developed similar student support frameworks that are instructive on how to support first-generation students from admission through graduation with a particular emphasis on improving social capital and confidence. The University of Iowa has developed [Iowa GROW](#) to focus on “high impact activity” of student employment. At Santa Clara

University, the [LEAD Scholars Program](#) provides both academic and career-focused development opportunities for first-generation students.

PRIORITY AREAS

The institutional barriers first-generation students encounter in college are seemingly endless. However, there are several areas/topics that should be the priority focus for institutions looking to improve first-generation student employment and success. The table below describes the priority areas, as well as the major considerations practitioners should focus on to better support first-generation students.

Priority Area	Institutional Focus
Networking & social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building and managing online professional profiles like LinkedIn or virtual portfolios • Maintaining a “professional” social media presence for future employers • Online networking and virtual informational interviewing. • NACE Journal: Cold networking for internships and job searching • EAB: Career center support for first-generation students
Alumni connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships between students and alumni who are first-generation • Incorporating alumni into students’ professional networks and campus programming • Exploring career fields with alumni interviews and networking • UCLA First-Gen Alumni Network • Clark University ClarkCONNECT
(Un)paid internships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researching paid/unpaid internships and comparing opportunities • Finding funding or financial assistance for unpaid positions • Exploring other experiential education opportunities related to career or employment
Job posting policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring all institutional part-time jobs are posted on the same day at the same time to ensure equity and fairness in applications • Devising expectations for the “readability” of job postings; making sure the language is easy-to-understand and free of jargon • Creating policies that require supervisors to consider all applicants rather than selective “cherry picking” recruiting
Service-learning &	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering with faculty or academic colleges/schools to create career-

coursework	<p>focused service-learning experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping students articulate service-learning experiences as accomplishments for resumes and cover letters • Developing ways to showcase service-learning through portfolios or virtual presentations
Salary negotiations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling workshops/trainings on salary negotiations with HR professionals/employers to provide clear examples of strategies • Creating resources to educate students on salary and benefit comparisons, cost of living estimates, loan repayment, etc.
“White collar”-ism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auditing your office to ensure “blue collar” professions are included in your resources and professional networks • Cultivating relationships with manufacturing, trades, and other non-white collar career fields • Developing internship opportunities for students to learn hands-on career-related skills in technical fields.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND PARTNERS

Finally, remember that there are an increasing number of organizations and companies whose mission is supporting underrepresented students in college. Below are several new and innovative resources and companies that are serving the needs of today’s diverse college students.

[Trovvit](#) – A one-stop virtual platform that helps students share their portfolios, resumes, learning networks, and other career-related examples of their work or accomplishments.

[Braven](#) – Focused on the needs of first-generation, low-income, and students of color, Braven helps students build skills, confidence, and knowledge as they transition to the workforce.

[COOP](#) – COOP utilizes digital skill-building and peer connections to help close the social capital equity gap for underrepresented students.

[CareerLaunch](#) – The mission of CareerLaunch is to help scale equitable solutions to help students navigate the “hidden” job market, particularly students with minimal social capital.

[CareerSpring](#) – Dedicated exclusively to first-generation students, CareerSpring builds students’ social capital through advisors, a video library, and job placement services.