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College Students' Use of Facebook: Examining College Generational Status, Social Capital, and

Academic Implications

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Abstract

First-generation college students often lack access to information about college in comparison to their continuing-generation peers. However, there is correlational evidence that the use of social networking sites like Facebook is associated with greater social capital among college students. This experiment tested whether undergraduates ($N = 99$) report greater social capital when randomly assigned to a Facebook group exposing them to college-related information versus when exposed to a control. Furthermore, this experiment assessed whether social capital mediates the effects of social media exposure on academic self-efficacy. Results indicate that the experimental condition does increase bridging capital, which in turn increases self-efficacy, particularly for first-generation college students. The implications for understanding the role of social media in academic outcomes are discussed.

College Students' Use of Facebook: Examining College Generational Status, Social Capital, and Academic Implications

Research on college student populations has examined how college-going impacts students psychologically, socially, and academically, how these impacts may differ based on race, gender, and other social identities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Because of these varying impacts, scholarship has theorized ways to promote equity within institutions of higher education (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Although this research has spanned decades, there is a relatively new interest in researching college generational status as an identity that may impact students' psychological, social, and academic experiences in college. The term "first-generation college student" has emerged in response to increased research, activism, and programming around this particular identity (Holmes & Slate, 2017; Metcalf & Wiener, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). While multiple identities are relevant in creating and deepening these disparities, college generational status is one that is particularly relevant as an increasing number of first-generation college students enter higher education in the United States (First Generation Foundation). Despite its relevance, college generational status is relatively understudied and under-considered when universities develop and institutionalize student support interventions.

Most institutions of higher education define first-generation college students as students whose parents did not graduate from a four-year university. In the United States, fifty percent of undergraduate students are first-generation college students (First Generation Foundation). At UCSB (the site of the present experiment) this figure is slightly lower at 42% (University of California, 2017). While first-generation college students have a significant presence on college campuses today, they continue to lag behind their continuing-generation peers. Compared with

continuing-generation students, first-generation college students report a more difficult social transition into college (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). They also report lower academic motivation, self-efficacy, and GPA (Metcalf & Wiener, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010).

These disparities, including that between first- and continuing generation students, have frequently been attributed to differences in social capital. Social capital is “a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252). It is commonly classified in terms of bonding and bridging capital (Pascarella, 2004; Putnam, 2000). Bonding capital occurs when “strongly tied individuals...provide emotional or substantive support for one another” (Williams, 2006, p. 597). Bridging capital, sometimes referred to as “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1977) occurs when individuals from different backgrounds make connections between social networks. For example, a student receiving a letter of recommendation from a professor would be considered bridging capital as it is a resource that results from a relationship between individuals who are only loosely linked in their social network. Unlike bonding capital, which typically exists in the form of resources like emotional support, bridging capital often exists in the form of information. Traditionally, research has conceived social capital as an interpersonal process.

However, given the connectivity of students online today, the cultivation of social capital no longer has a strictly face-to-face dimension. Previous research indicates that students' use of social networking sites like Facebook is associated with increased bridging social capital, particularly amongst those with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Social media's ability to decrease barriers to forming social ties may be particularly impactful, not just for those with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction, but for

first-generation college students as well. The few interventions that do exist concerning college students and social capital have shown that face-to-face programming designed to help students create connections with peers and faculty on-campus increased students' bridging capital (Schwartz et al., 2018). Increased bridging capital then led to higher grade point averages, which have been predicted by students' self-efficacy (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). These findings suggest a mediational relationship in which resources accrued by the connections we have in our social networks (often facilitated by social media) lead to greater social capital, which then leads to improved academic outcomes. Finally, because first-generation college students have lower social capital, GPAs, and self-efficacy, on average, than continuing-generation college students, Facebook use may be more helpful in increasing social capital and improving academic outcomes for this population. I, therefore, hypothesize the following relationships:

H1: Students who are exposed to information about college-going on Facebook will report greater bridging capital than students who are exposed to a control condition.

H2: The effect of the experimental condition on ratings of student self-efficacy will be mediated by bridging capital.

H3: The mediational relationship linking the experimental condition to student self-efficacy through bridging capital will be stronger for first-generation than continuing-generation participants.

Importantly, studies that incorporate measures of college student social capital may lack construct validity. Widely utilized scales such as Williams' (2006) social capital scales ask questions about perceived social capital and do not specify immediate, tangible resources that may be accrued from social capital. It is, therefore, possible that people will under- or over-

estimate their perceived social capital with these measures. Furthermore, studies of social capital amongst college students are, for the most part (except Schwartz et al., 2018), correlational studies which do not allow strong inferences regarding causal mechanisms. For example, individual differences such as introversion/extroversion, conscientiousness, and general intelligence may explain social capital disparities. It is therefore essential to demonstrate that any effects of social media on increases in social capital take place independent of these other variables.

Previous work examines “student success” but typically relies on Grade Point Average (GPA) instead of other substantive aspects of student success, such as academic self-efficacy and academic motivation. Because of the documented disparities between GPAs of first-generation and continuing-generation college students (Holmes & Slate, 2017), the ability of the GPA measure to fully represent student success, particularly for first-generation college students, is limited. Previous work on disparities in academic success also fails to account for the role of general intelligence, which is currently the strongest predictor of academic success (Jensen, 1998).

This study builds upon previous research by utilizing an experimental interventional trial, which provides information about causal mechanisms behind the development of social capital and its translation to academic outcomes. The present study incorporates new social capital measures in addition to measures of GPA and student self-efficacy while measuring and controlling for general intelligence and other relevant individual differences. These measures are incorporated to obtain more precise and multi-dimensional estimates of student social capital and academic success. Incorporating general intelligence and individual difference measures helps to

determine whether the interventional trial significantly increases social capital, GPA, and self-efficacy irrespective of elements like extraversion, consciousness, and general intelligence.

Method

Participants & Design

Ninety-nine participants were recruited through e-mail lists for the Biological Sciences ($n = 3$), Sociology ($n = 7$), Economics ($n = 3$), and Psychological and Brain Sciences ($n = 3$) departments at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and through the Department of Communication's undergraduate research participant pool ($n = 83$). Participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental intervention designed to increase bridging social capital or to a control condition. Participants' parental education levels were measured and treated as a continuous moderator. The primary dependent measures were bridging social capital and student self-efficacy. Participants recruited from mailing lists were compensated with a \$5 Amazon gift card, and participants from the undergraduate research participant pool were compensated with course credit.

Procedures

First, a short survey was conducted on Qualtrics that asked participants to consent to participate in the study and to provide their names and e-mail addresses. At the end of the survey, Qualtrics randomly assigned participants one of two links to a Facebook group—the social capital induction or the control.

Social Capital Induction. The experimental condition involved participation in a private Facebook group which included posts about UCSB academics, campus life/extracurriculars, and career preparation organized into three distinct "units." In the *UCSB Academics* unit of the Facebook group, participants were instructed to browse posts about various courses offered at

UCSB, watch five videos and comment on three pieces of information they learned about academics and academic resources at UCSB, comment on what UCSB-related Facebook pages they interact with regularly, and reply to five of their groupmates' comments. In the *Career Preparation* unit, participants were instructed to: browse posts from the UCSB Career Services Facebook page, watch two videos about professional development resources at UCSB and comment on information they learned, read and ask questions about articles on professional development, and reply to three of their groupmates' comments. In the *Extracurricular/Social* unit, participants were instructed to: browse Facebook events posted by campus resource centers, watch two videos and comment on two new pieces of information they learned about support services on campus, read and ask questions about three embedded articles about resources on campus, and reply to three of their groupmates' comments.

Control Condition. The control condition consisted of participation in a private Facebook group which included embedded articles, videos, and posts organized into three distinct "units." In the *Life Hacks* unit, participants were instructed to: read three articles about organization and comment on one piece of information that they learned, discuss their favorite strategies to manage time and daily activities more efficiently, and respond to one of their groupmates' comments. In the *Traveling* unit, participants were instructed to: browse embedded articles about travel and comment on one piece of information that they learned, discuss where they would most like to travel to and why, and respond to their groupmates' comments. In the *Tech Corner* unit, participants were instructed to: read embedded articles about technological developments, discuss their most utilized digital technologies, and respond to their groupmates' comments. While participants were asked to engage in similar types of activities on Facebook between the two groups (i.e., reading articles, watching videos, etc.), the stimuli in the control condition did

not provide information about college-going and, thus, was not expected to increase students' social capital.

Following participation in the Facebook group, participants were asked to complete a survey on Qualtrics which asked for basic demographic information as well as about their parents' education level and income, year in school, major, and GPA, Facebook use and perceptions of Facebook, social capital, group identification, personality, student self-efficacy, and general intelligence.

Materials

Demographics. Participants self-reported their parents' highest level of education, their parents' income, and their GPA in this section. Parents' level of education was gauged using two closed-ended questions that asked for each parent's highest level of education, if applicable (*no high school; some high school; high school graduate; some college; 2-year college graduate; 4-year college graduate; graduate school*). Parental education level was treated as a continuous variable. Parents' income was measured on an 11-point scale (1 *Under \$15,000*; 11 *\$200,000+*, $M = 6.41$, $SD = 2.75$). GPA was measured using an open-ended question ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .40$).

Facebook Use. One item from the Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), "In the past week, on average, approximately how much time per day have you spent actively using Facebook?" was modified to create two open-ended items: "How many times do you log into Facebook per day?" and "On average, how much time (in minutes) do you spend each time you log in?" to obtain more precise estimates of use ($M = 39.86$, $SD = 40.26$).

Facebook Informational Utility. Ellison, Gray, Lampe, and Fiore's (2014) 3-item Facebook informational utility scale measured participants' perceptions of how useful they think Facebook is in transmitting information in general. Participants were asked to rate the degree to

which they agree with the following statements on a 5-point scale: "I get useful information from Facebook" and "I learn things when my friends post questions or requests on Facebook" (1 *strongly disagree*, 5 *strongly agree*). The third item was dropped in order to improve the reliability of the scale ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .85$, $\alpha = .75$).

Facebook Network Utility. Ellison et al.'s (2014) 3-item Facebook network utility measures were used to measure participants' perceptions of how useful they think their Facebook network is generally. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with the following statements: "I see others posting requests for information, advice, or other help on Facebook", "Reading responses to other people's questions on Facebook is useful to me", and "I learn things when my friends post questions or requests on Facebook". Responses were measured on a 5-point scale (1 *strongly disagree*; 5 *strongly agree*). The first item was dropped in order to improve the reliability of the scale ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.00$, $\alpha = .83$).

Bridging Social Capital. Participants responded to 12 items that measured bridging social capital, 6 of which were retrieved from Ellison et al.'s (2007) adaptation of Williams' (2006) online social capital scales. Examples of the six borrowed items were: "I feel like I am a part of the UCSB community", "UCSB is a good place to be", "Interacting with people at UCSB makes me want to try new things", "Interacting with people at UCSB makes me feel like part of a larger community", "I am willing to spend time at UCSB activities", and "At UCSB, I come into contact with new people all the time". To measure the specific ways in which social capital functions for participants, six additional bridging capital items were created: "I know people at UCSB who can help me prepare for my career", "I know people at UCSB who can help me improve my academic skills", "I know people at UCSB who can help me access financial resources", "If I needed a letter of recommendation from a Professor at UCSB, I would know

who to ask”, “If I needed emotional support, I know of places or people at UCSB to go to”, and “If I needed social support, I know of places or people at UCSB to go to”. These twelve items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 *strongly disagree*; 5 *strongly agree*; $M = 3.99$, $SD = .54$, $\alpha = .85$).

Bonding Social Capital. Ten items measuring bonding social capital were retrieved from Williams' (2006) online social capital scale. The wording of items was altered so that items reflected bonding social capital specifically at UCSB. Example items included: “There are several people at UCSB I trust to solve my problems,” “There is someone at UCSB I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions,” and “When I feel lonely, there are several people at UCSB I can talk to.” The full set of items is listed in Appendix A. Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 *strongly disagree*; 7 *strongly agree*; $M = 4.73$, $SD = .81$, $\alpha = .72$).

Social Identification. Social identification was measured using eight items adapted from Hogg and Hains' (1996) measure. Example items included: “I feel I am similar to the UCSB community as a whole in terms of general attitudes and beliefs” and “I like the UCSB community as a whole.” The full set of items is listed in Appendix A. Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 *strongly disagree*; 7 *strongly agree*; $M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.12$, $\alpha = .95$).

Big 5 Personality. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) was measured using the John & Srivastava (1999) 44-item scale (1 *strongly disagree*, 5 *strongly agree*), which measures five dimensions: extraversion ($M = 3.35$, $SD = .66$, $\alpha = .80$), agreeableness ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .59$, $\alpha = .78$), conscientiousness ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .55$, $\alpha = .76$), neuroticism (1 item was removed to improve the reliability of the scale) ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .74$, $\alpha = .81$), and openness ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .62$, $\alpha = .80$).

Student Self-Efficacy. Because first-generation college students, on average, have lower GPAs than their continuing-generation counterparts (Holmes & Slate, 2017), I decided to account for this disparity by measuring multiple indicators of student success. Since student self-efficacy is based on one's perception of prior experience of mastery and has been shown to predict GPA, it can be used to conceptualize academic success in a more all-encompassing develop a more multi-dimensional measure of academic success (Gore, 2006; Metcalf & Wiener, 2018; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Student self-efficacy was measured by the 10-item Student Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Rowbotham and Schmitz (2013), which asks respondents to rate the degree to which they agree with statements such as "I am convinced that I am able to learn all relevant course content even if it is difficult" and "If I try hard enough, I can obtain the academic goals I desire" on a 4-point scale (1 *not at all true*; 4 *exactly true*; $M = 3.21$, $SD = .49$, $\alpha = .89$). The full set of items is listed in Appendix A.

Raven's Advanced Progressive Matrices. The short form of Raven's APM, consisting of 11 of the original 36 items, was used to measure general intelligence (Arthur & Day, 1994). Participants were asked to view increasingly complex puzzles and select the missing piece of the puzzle from eight answer options. Scores were obtained by taking the sum of the number of correct items and ranged from 0 to 11 ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 2.69$).

Results

Tests of Hypothesis 1

H1 predicted that students who were exposed to information about college-going on Facebook would report greater bridging social capital than students who were exposed to the control condition. A between-groups *t*-test was conducted as the first test of H1. The *t*-test confirmed H1, $t(97) = 2.76$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, bridging capital was higher in the experimental

($M = 4.14$), than control ($M = 3.85$) condition. Because college generational status should moderate the effect of the experimental induction, as a second test, a General Linear Model (GLM) was fit with the experimental condition as a between-subjects factor, and generational status as a continuous moderator. The GLM showed that the main effect of experimental condition was significant, $F(1,95) = 7.65, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .08$, as was the main effect for college generational status, $F(1,95) = 4.85, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .05, \beta = .21$. As expected, as parental education level increased, so too did participants' bridging social capital. However, the expected interaction was non-significant $F(1,95) = 1.54, p = .22, \eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Figure 1).

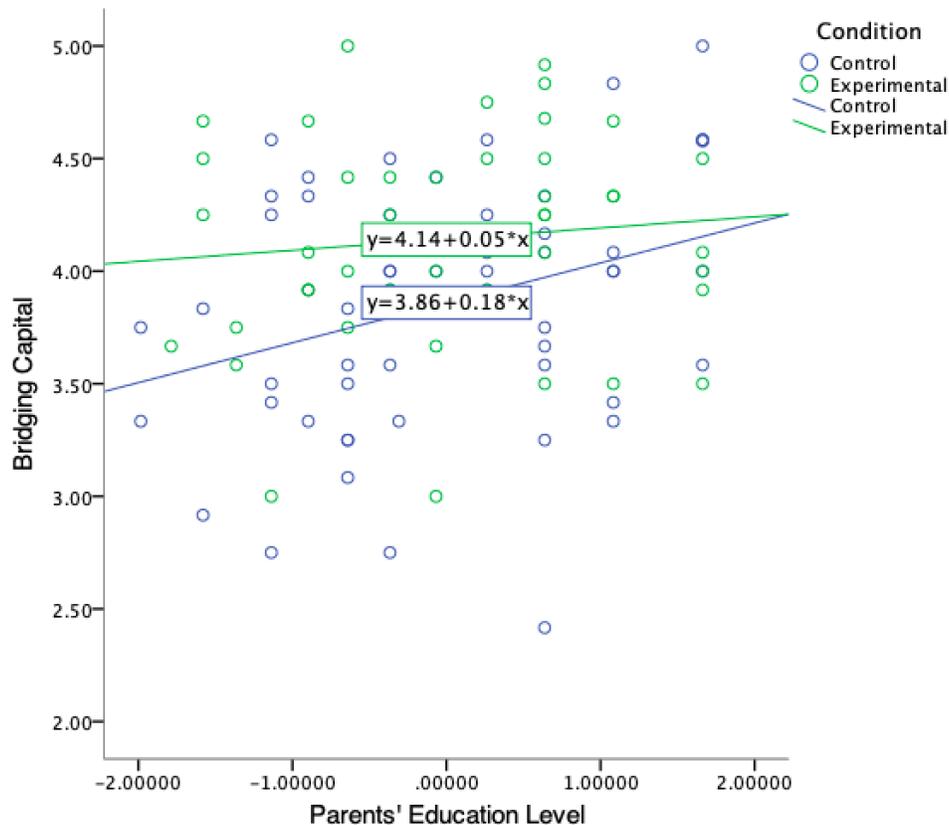


Figure 1. Interaction of parents' education level and condition on bridging capital.

Tests of Hypothesis 2 & 3

H2 predicted that the effect of the experimental condition on student self-efficacy will be mediated by bridging capital, but not bonding capital, and H3 predicted that this mediational relationship would hold more strongly for first-generation college students compared to continuing-generation college students. H2 and H3 were tested simultaneously using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro for SPSS (model 7). Experimental condition was the independent variable, parental education level was a continuous moderator, and both bridging and bonding social capital were included as potential mediating variables. Given that there are several possible effects on self-efficacy, we included controls for parents' income level, student GPA, and score on Raven's progressive matrices, extraversion, and conscientiousness. The bootstrap macro was run using 10,000 re-samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Confirming H2 and H3, there was evidence that bridging capital mediated the relationship between experimental condition and self-efficacy, and this mediational path was significant for students whose parents had a low or moderate level of education, but not a high level of education, 95% CIs, respectively (.02, .33; .009, .25; and -.02, .22) (see Figure 2). There was no evidence that bonding capital mediated the relationship between experimental condition and self-efficacy for any level of parental education, 95% CIs, respectively (-.021, .11; -.01, .07; -.02, .06).

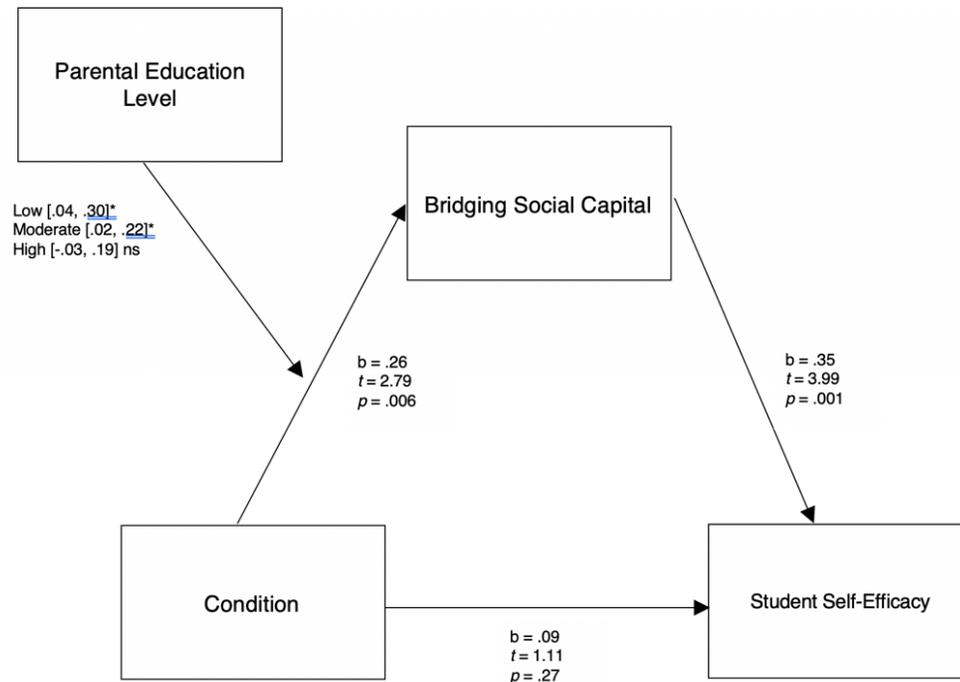


Figure 2. Mediating effect of bridging social capital on the effect of exposure to college-going information on student self-efficacy as a function of parental education level.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of exposure to college-going information on Facebook on social capital and student self-efficacy as well as whether these effects differed between first-generation and continuing-generation students. Results confirm that students exposed to college-going information on Facebook reported greater bridging social capital than those exposed to the control condition. Furthermore, those whose parents were more educated reported greater bridging social capital, a finding that is consistent with previous research on first-generation college students. The experimental condition had a significant and positive effect on bridging capital, which, in turn, increased student self-efficacy, particularly for students whose parents had a low or moderate level of education and even when controlling for relevant factors such as general intelligence as well as individual differences in conscientiousness. Ultimately, this

experimental study illuminated ways in which social networking sites may be used in an educational context to increase social capital for first-generation college students. By exposing first-generation college students to information about college-going on Facebook, these students can effectively gain bridging social capital and self-efficacy regardless of their general intelligence, introversion/extraversion, and conscientiousness/lack of direction.

This study's findings corroborated and extended findings of past research. For instance, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found that intensity of Facebook use was correlated with bridging social capital. The present study's finding that the use of Facebook for exposure to college-going information leads to greater bridging capital supports this prior finding with causal evidence from an experimental trial. This discovery reiterates the significance of the "weak ties" theorized by Granovetter (1977) in the context of college-going, particularly for first-generation college students. For this particular population, weaker ties that provide them with procedural and institutional knowledge may be even more helpful than the emotional support provided by bonds these students have with their families and close friends.

As expected, bridging capital but not bonding capital mediated the relationship between parental education and student self-efficacy. This result appears to be because bridging capital is facilitated by the affordances of social networking sites and is more relevant to first-generation college students' experience in higher education. Because Facebook is often used to create and maintain broad social networks through vast friend lists, groups, and "sharing" features, its use likely has a particular impact on bridging capital and not on bonding capital. Bridging capital may also be more relevant to college students than bonding capital since measures of bridging capital concern resources and information, whereas measures of bonding capital concern emotional ties. When asked about their overall experience in college, students may more readily

identify practical resources than emotional connections. Bridging capital is also particularly crucial to college-going for the first-generation population. While first-generation college students may have families and close friends who support them emotionally, they lack ties with people who can provide them with key information about college-going. Thus, bridging, and not bonding capital, is more relevant for them.

This particular study may be replicated and utilized at multiple college and university campuses to promote bridging capital and student self-efficacy for first-generation college students. Ideally, replications would alter the information presented to reflect the support services and resources available at each particular campus in order to maximize effects on bridging capital and student self-efficacy—the more specific the information, the less likely that students will be familiar with this information. Because much of the information that participants in this study stated that they learned was specific information about key campus-specific support services and resources, it is presumed that the more specific the intervention, the more efficacious it will be. However, it may be that replicating the general format of the information may also be beneficial for some first-generation college students. By presenting more generalized resources for academics, career preparation, and extracurriculars on Facebook, colleges and universities may be able to minimize cost while ensuring support for its first-generation college students who have little to no information about the general functioning of college and universities.

While confirming the key predictions, this study does have some limitations. A primary limitation concerns its sample and the potential lack of ecological validity. Because women, as well as White and Asian students, were overrepresented, no conclusions should be drawn regarding how these effects may operate among different genders and ethnicities. Additionally,

participants were prompted to complete the Facebook activities that ultimately increased their bridging capital. This raises questions of ecological validity because it remains unclear whether these are activities that college students participate in without being compelled by the provision of course credit. Future research may use survey methods to determine to what degree college students are exposed to college-going information on their own accord and to determine the characteristics of those who do versus those who do not.

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Appendix A

Demographics

What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Other
- Prefer Not to Say

What is your race/ethnicity? Check all that apply.

- Asian
- Black/African
- Caucasian
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- Prefer Not to Say
- Other

What is your year at UCSB?

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th+

What is your major at UCSB?

What is your cumulative GPA at UCSB?

How many units of coursework are you currently taking?

What is Parent 1's highest level of education? **Check all that apply.**

- No High School
- Some High School
- High School Graduate
- Some College
- 2 Year College Graduate
- 4 Year College Graduate
- Graduate School
- My parent received an education in another country

What is Parent 2's highest level of education? **Check all that apply.**

- No High School
- Some High School
- High School Graduate
- Some College
- 2 Year College Graduate
- 4 Year College Graduate
- Graduate School
- My parent received an education in another country

Please estimate your parents' combined annual income.

- Under \$15,000
- \$15,000-\$29,999
- \$30,000-\$44,999
- \$45,000-\$59,999
- \$60,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000-\$124,999
- \$125,000-\$149,999
- \$150,000-\$174,999
- \$175,000-\$199,999
- \$200,000

Student Self-Efficacy

Think about your experiences taking courses at UCSB. How accurate are these statements to your experiences?

	Not at all true 1	Hardly True 2	Moderately True 3	Exactly True 4
I am convinced that I am able to successfully learn all relevant course content even if it is difficult.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know that I can maintain a positive attitude toward my courses even when tensions arise.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I try really hard, I am able to learn even the most difficult content.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of learning course content.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Even if I get distracted in class, I am confident that I can continue to learn well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident in my ability to learn, even if I am having a bad day.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I try hard enough, I can obtain the academic goals I desire.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with the stress that may occur while taking courses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know that I can stay motivated to participate in my courses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know that I can finish the assigned projects and earn the grade I want, even when others think I can't.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>