

SOCIAL CAPITAL, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

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Abstract

Research has shown that social interactions and relationships are a conduit for knowledge construction. Over the course of four years spent pursuing an undergraduate degree, a strong social network is formed at the university. Engagement in the community serves to integrate students with the community, as well as giving them a strong connection to the area. Connections to home are equally important, and those connections can be formed in the arena of a university/community setting. Young professional organizations and new hire clubs at large companies work towards integrating 20-somethings into their new community. An organization on the Binghamton University campus geared towards acclimating undergraduate students to the area would increase the chances of retaining graduates in the Greater Binghamton Area.

Keywords: Social networks; Concepts of 'home'; Relationship building; Acclimation

Binghamton Keywords: Southern Tier Young Professionals (STYP); Lockheed Martin's New Hire Club; IBM's Endicott New Blue

I. INTRODUCTION

For most Binghamton University undergraduates, Binghamton is not home. Just over one-fourth of the undergraduate population hails from Upstate New York; over half come from downstate and 20% are international or out of state.¹ Merriam-Webster.com provides several definitions for the word 'home': one's place of residence; the social unit formed by a family living together; a familiar or usual setting, congenial environment, the focus of one's domestic attention.² Most Binghamton University students are not natives of Binghamton or the Southern Tier. Despite the fact that students spend the majority of the year in Binghamton, their 'usual residence' as listed on their driver's license is probably at least one hundred miles away. The focus of their 'domestic attention' is most likely their family and friends, located in their own hometowns. The question that arises, as we look towards the future of a knowledge economy in the Southern Tier, asks how to get Binghamton University students to stay in the city of Binghamton and call it 'home'.

In the four years that undergraduates spend at Binghamton University, they encounter, interact with, and befriend a countless amount of people. From the woman who sells you your

¹ "Measures of Excellence" link, Binghamton University website:
<<http://www2.binghamton.edu/admissions/class-profile.html>>

² <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/home>>

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coffee in the morning, to the RA who helps you navigate registration, to the roommate whose dirty socks always end up on your side of the room, the day to day life of a college student is filled with social interactions, and the development of a social network. Relationships and social connections influence the decisions college students make which, in turn, affect significant portions of their time, such as what classes to take, who and where to live with, and where to find an internship. When it comes time to make decisions about their post-undergraduate lives, many Binghamton University students revert back to the social networks they left behind four years ago as incoming freshman. What happens, then, to the social network they built up during their time at Binghamton University? Blustein, Schultheiss and Flum argue that "human beings are dispositionally and perhaps even biologically oriented toward developing and sustaining meaningful connections with others", whether they are conscious of it or not (2004). Looking at how people form relationships and their significance in the working sphere, how significant social networks are, how community integration affects social capital and what 'home' really means in terms of emotional connections provide a basis for understanding what the Binghamton University student needs to confidently and comfortably include Binghamton in the list of options for their post college lives, whether it be graduate school or a job.

Relationships are a dynamic force that affects every aspect of people's lives. From the moment students meet their first roommate, to the stimulating discussion about a common interest during a professor's office hours, to the mentoring received through a summer internship, relationships inform and shape our identities and serve as a support system. Blustein et al. (2004) used a social constructionist viewpoint to determine that social interactions and relationships are a conduit for knowledge construction, and that knowledge construction takes place in the "cultural, socioeconomic and sociopolitical context" of careers (p. 427). The need for strong relationships extends into the working sphere, as evidenced by the definition of 'career' chosen by Blustein et al., which grounds the term in a social context (2004). The university-community relationship is a breeding ground for knowledge construction, and students who engage in internships in the area are involved in the further development of these relationships. Involvement in the community early on will cement their relationships, providing opportunities for careers after college. A relational approach to careers is an effective way to highlight the benefits for Binghamton University students to choose careers in the Southern Tier.

Relationships can be described in terms of embeddedness, and, consequently, a 'sense' of embeddedness, and mutuality. Embeddedness refers to the assumption that individuals are tied to a social context, while a sense of embeddedness refers to the "feeling of belongingness and of being included in some sort of social network" (Blustein et al. 2004). Mutuality refers to the 'we' experience that moves away from the individual. Embeddedness and mutuality both find significant expression and meaning in the work world. The dynamics of social interaction reveal that relationships are essential to human functioning and have significance in all aspects of an individual's life, which extends into an individual's perception of their own identity (Blustein et al. 2004). Blustein et al. turn to social constructionist theory once again to explain that identity is constantly changing as a result of changing relationships (2004). Construction of identity through relationships focuses on the discourses available to the individual: age, gender, education, job status and success (Blustein et al. 2004). When Binghamton University students get involved in the community and see the accomplishments of community leaders, the knowledge that success and happiness are possible in Binghamton will lead to a transformation in their own perceived identities, and instill a greater connection to the area.

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The role pre-existing relationships play in social networks has been studied extensively. Studies done by Backstrom, Huttenlocher, Kleinberg and Lan (2006) and Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) support the idea that existing connections play an important role in forming new relationships in a social network. Perhaps the most visible and notable social network among college students (and now a large percentage of the general population) is generated through Facebook, an online social networking site. Ellison et al. examined the role Facebook had with undergraduates at Michigan State University, and determined that Facebook represents an offline to online phenomena; that in general individuals will search for people they know in person online, as opposed to trying to form new relationships in cyberspace. Relationships generate social capital; social capital in turn has displayed signs of creating a greater commitment to the community it stems from (Ellison et al. 2007). The implications these views can have on the Greater Binghamton Area are extensive. During college, students develop rich social networks that result in significant gains in social capital. Just as the transition from high school to college precipitates the need to maintain social capital, and the transition from college to career life brings about the same demands. The type of social capital generated in college spans a more diverse population than the social network of high school students. Instead of just friends and family, social capital in college consists of professors, mentors, employees and likeminded students with similar career aspirations. Herrero and Gracia (2004) note that at the juncture between college and adulthood, an individual's social network requires "significant adjustments and expansion so as to accommodate new roles and to provide social identities more appropriate to the new developmental stage" (p. 707). They believe these adjustments can be made through involvement in the community, where they are forced to interact with leaders on professional level. When this enhanced social network forms, its physical setting at and around the university creates the opportunity to maintain the relationships simply by staying, for our purposes, in Binghamton.

Community involvement creates social capital by developing relationships and expanding social networks. Herrero and Gracia conducted a study to look at how an expansive social network beyond the confines of simply family and friends defines how and where college students develop their careers and social identities. Herrero and Gracia found that students who engaged in community related activities and who were integrated into the community were able to increase their social capital and broaden their social network in ways meaningful to future career development. Personality and self esteem contribute to the likelihood of community involvement, as do life events. Interestingly, Herrero and Gracia found that there is no substantial link between a young person's involvement in community-related activities and the involvement of their close personal friends in that community. Backstrom et al.'s 2006 study of LiveJournal communities revealed that there is no significance associated with having more than two friends in an online community in drawing an individual into that community. Differences between Herrero and Gracia's findings and Backstrom et al.'s findings arise in the data from Backstrom et al., which reveal a significant increase in membership in a community when an individual's friends in that community know each other as well. The implications for Binghamton University, in terms of Backstrom et al.'s findings, is that increasing the degree to which students participate in community organizations and activities must be focused on increasing individual involvement through groups that have pre-existing internal connections.

It is worthwhile to promote community involvement, based on the results of Herrero and Gracia's study. Their study found that participation in community activities stimulated college students to engage in thinking about their future from an adult perspective; however,

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participation was only by those who had high self-esteem and low levels of stress (2004). To engage low self-esteem, highly stressed people, their recommendation was to promote personal adjustment in the early college years, through external sources of support and taking advantage of weak tie networks. The advantage of weak tie social networks, or a social network of acquaintances, is that they "provide more diverse support because they access a greater number and variety of social circles" (Herrero and Gracia 2004); this view is held by Ellison et al. as well: "members of weak-tie networks are thought to be outward looking and to include people from a broad range of backgrounds. The social capital created by these networks generates broader identities and generalized reciprocity" (2007). Ellison et al. maintain that Facebook is a utility which fosters the promotion of weak tie relationships (2007). Their study also displayed evidence that low levels of Facebook use coupled with dissatisfaction at Michigan State University corresponded with lower bridging social capital than students with high levels of Facebook use and satisfaction at MSU (Ellison et al. 2007). For Binghamton University, taking advantage of high levels of Facebook use involving weak tie bonds could help engage more students and expand social networks.

Relationships to people are not the only indicators for comfort and integration. Manzo discusses the dynamic nature of relationships to home as being the "foundation of our being", in that people relate being home to daily household routines, while being away is associated with new experiences (2003). This contrast between home and away informs individuals' identities. Place attachment, sense of place and place dependence form an interwoven framework upon which we can determine the overall importance of 'home' to an individual. How individuals form these attachments is equally significant. Instilling the idea in Binghamton University students that the city of Binghamton can be home is integral in creating a collective connection to the Greater Binghamton Area. Manzo (2003) uses the notion of dwelling to explain that the physicality of the house does not "define the experience of home" (p. 49). The dynamics of what is labeled as insideness and outsideness looks at positive emotional experiences in places that are not a person's 'usual residence' (Manzo 2003). Insideness occurs when there is an unconscious association of a place with home; conversely, outsideness is the conscious realization of separation from a place that is not home. Manzo also argues that place attachments are not static, and that they can change when an individual's physical place changes. Getting Binghamton University students to relate insideness to the Greater Binghamton Area is feasible if the significance of the social network formed here is fully understood by the students.

There are many factors that contribute to where college graduates choose to start their careers. In general, Binghamton University students have chosen to start their careers somewhere outside of Binghamton, although it is interesting to note that 25% of Binghamton undergraduates attend Binghamton University graduate schools.³ Focusing on and highlighting the ways in which Binghamton students have already begun to make the connections needed to secure jobs post graduation is one way to emphasize the advantages of starting a career in the city that they went to school in. Pushing students to see the benefits of becoming more involved in the Binghamton community can promote the benefits of looking to the community just a few miles down the road from campus as a hub of career and social opportunities. Realizing that the definition of 'home' is a dynamic force that is informed and re-shaped through

³ "Measures of Excellence" link, Binghamton University website:
<<http://www2.binghamton.edu/admissions/class-profile.html>>

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everyday interactions and activities, and especially through social network and career oriented ties can show undergraduates that 'home' doesn't always have to be the place where they grew up. Comfort plays a big part in determining post-graduation plans, and the home students knew for 18 years is seen as more comfortable than the home they knew for 4 years. However, the social network that they developed in Binghamton holds far more opportunities for the future than the family and friend based social network of their hometown: even if a student did not have an internship, or volunteer in the Binghamton Area, they still formed connections with their professors and interacted with other students looking to enter the same or similar fields after graduation. Losing all the opportunities provided by the extensive social network formed at college is to give up on a myriad of opportunities. The size of the Binghamton community, compared to that of New York City, provides Binghamton University students with opportunities to make a more significant impact through internships and volunteer efforts, leading to greater job opportunities. Whether students are bioengineering students looking to pursue research or a job in a large engineering company, a political science major eager to have a hand in local government or an English and history major who remembers their elementary school teachers so vividly that they want to have that same impact on the next generation, staying in Binghamton affords the opportunity to start those careers, and have a huge impact on the future of the community.

The psychology behind the formation of relationships, social networks and perceptions of home underlie the decisions that individuals make in all facets of their working and social lives. Showing students that the career opportunities that Binghamton has to offer is essential to retaining Binghamton University graduates and perpetuating the knowledge economy that is vital to the future and success of the Greater Binghamton Area.

II. BEST PRACTICES

There are a number of efforts in the Binghamton area geared towards acclimatizing young professionals who are recent transplants with no social or familial connections available to them. Southern Tier Young Professionals, Lockheed Martin's New Hire Club, and Endicott IBM's New Blue have the common goal of organizing events, social gatherings and volunteer activities to provide an introduction to the Greater Binghamton Area.

Southern Tier Young Professionals (STYP) was started in 2002 after a column was written in the Press and Sun Bulletin by reporter Hannah Maria Hayes expressing her frustration with trying to meet 20-somethings and 30-somethings in the Binghamton Area.⁴ Kristen Lyons, an active member of STYP, former Social Chair and Marketing Chair and current Secretary, met with me to discuss the history of STYP, the events and activities coordinated by the STYP Executive Committee and the responses she has seen from members in STYP's seven-year history. A member since the second week, Kristen was able to provide me with an in depth look at the impact STYP has made on the young professional community in Binghamton. STYP splits its focus between social activities and civic activities. Every other Thursday STYP hosts a 'Get Out' at a local venue, and there are monthly Dinner Clubs, Wine Clubs and Game Nights for members to participate in. More extensive excursions are also planned – in the past STYP has gone skiing, whitewater rafting, and hiking. STYP also hosts Summer Celebration, a

⁴ <http://styp.org/about_styp.php>

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membership drive event. On the civic end, STYP volunteers for Adopt-a-Highway, Spiedie Fest, the Air Show, park clean-ups, Habitat for Humanity, and the AIDS walk. They also organize a Valentine's Day Social at Hilltop Retirement Community, as well as a Spring Clean-Up at a senior living center (K. Lyons, personal communication, April 20, 2009)

Though there are roughly 100 members at any given time, membership is constantly rotating. Still, weekly 'Get Outs' draw 15 to 20 people, and larger volunteer efforts have seen anywhere from 80 to 100 members. The effect Kristen Lyons sees STYP having on the community is its ability to get its members to buy into the community and create personal ownership over the effect they can have by simply giving an afternoon of their time to helping someone else. There is a chain reaction effect – once they participate in one event, it draws young professionals back for more. As a member-driven organization, STYP members are encouraged to plan events that they want to participate in. Because of the rotating nature of STYP, its leadership and thus the events they run are constantly changing, but this allows new events to be planned and new ideas to be formed that will attract new members (K. Lyons, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

Lockheed Martin Owego's New Hire Club sends an automatic invitation to all of its new employees to become involved. With over 600 members simply by nature of the fact that Lockheed Martin is a huge company that always has employees who have been with the company between zero and five years, the New Hire Club organizes events similar to those of the Southern Tier Young Professionals. Kristen Lyons served as the Social Chair for the New Hire Club, and used her experience with STYP to introduce new programs to the club, including Dinner Club, and an event called Thursday Night Live. A weekly newsletter gets the word out about all the events the New Hire Club hosts to all of the members on its list, whether they have participated in an event in the past or not. The New Hire Club also sees a rotating membership, and can count on 30 to 50 participants at any given event. In addition to social and volunteer opportunities, the New Hire Club also hosts family events to accommodate the employees who have children (K. Lyons, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

Endicott IBM's New Blue is a community of new hires who have been with IBM between zero and five years; however membership in New Blue is not strict and anyone who wants to continue their participation past their 'new hire' stage is more than welcome. I spoke to Sebastien Lafontant, President of New Blue, to learn more about their events and programs. With a goal of retaining talent in the area, New Blue is split into three parts: Professional Development Events, Social Events and Community Service. Professional Development Events include technical speakers, managers who give talks to stimulate interest in IBM careers and staying informed about everything that is going on at IBM, as well as investment seminars that provide useful information about retirement funds and planning for the future to the 20-something new hires with limited experience in that area. Social Events at New Blue include food tastings at local restaurants. Last month's event was held at the Lost Dog Café in Binghamton. New Blue tries to patronize local establishments over chain restaurants to give employees a true taste of what the Binghamton area has to offer. New Blue also hosts Happy Hour on Fridays after work, game nights at a New Blue member's house, wine tastings, and picnics in the summer that draw New Blue's largest crowd. Picnics are open to interns as well as IBM employees, and all are encouraged to bring friends to the events to further expand their social networks. New Blue also coordinates participation in the monthly First Friday Art Walk (S. Lafontant, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

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New Blue is active in community service endeavors, providing volunteers for Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels, as well as their Day of Caring program and a Take Your Child to Work Day that provides workshops for the children. Reactions to New Blue have been positive, providing a social network for new hires and creating opportunities to meet new people and make friends. Most of the members of New Blue are 20-somethings who are not married and who have moved to Binghamton from another part of the country. New Blue provides them with the tools to create a social network and enable them to cultivate connections to the community of Binghamton (S. Lafontant, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Binghamton University students need the same type of organization to establish a social network in Binghamton if they are going to stay in the area after graduation. "Homebodies" would be a student-run club on campus open to anyone interested in staying in Binghamton immediately following graduation. Much of the resistance to staying in Binghamton is the prospect of losing social connections. "Homebodies" would focus on creating a social network and engaging students in the community, in the same way Southern Tier Young Professionals, Lockheed Martin's New Hire Club and Endicott IBM's New Blue introduce their new employees and young professionals to the Binghamton area in an effort to create a strong connection. Starting this connection early is essential in retaining Binghamton University students in the area. Recruitment of freshman to the club would be a huge focus. Getting them out into the community and invested in it is the first step in making them see the benefits of Binghamton as a home.

"Homebodies" will have three facets, all geared towards fostering connections between Binghamton University students and the Binghamton community. Professional, Social and Volunteer events will be coordinated by designated chairs and committees. Essential to the success of "Homebodies" is getting as many people involved and interested as possible. To that end, participating in events that are already run by other campus organizations that take students out into the community is a great way to spread the word. Professional events will include seminars on money management, budgeting and saving for the future, as well as resume writing and job and internship search help. The CDC already offers programs with these goals in mind. "Homebodies" will work as a place to bring together students with similar goals and the desire to stay in Binghamton after graduation, and will capitalize on what Binghamton University already has to offer in the way of professional development and community engagement.

Volunteer activities can include working with the Boys and Girls Club of Binghamton, participating in the various walks and awareness events in the area, including the AIDS walk, and Relay for Life, as well as encouraging participation in the Johnson City Mentor Program. With the overarching goal of "Homebodies" being the establishment of social connections, social events will be a main focus. Weekly or bi-weekly dinners at local restaurants such as The Lost Dog Café, Grande's Bela Cucina, Whole in the Wall, Southside Yanni's and Cyber Café West will give students a literal taste of what culinary treats Binghamton has to offer. Coordinating participation in the First Friday Art Walk will give students a chance to walk around downtown and see the vast arts community that has a prominent place in Binghamton community life.

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Taking advantage of the different seasons Binghamton sees can be achieved by trips to Nathaniel Cole Park in the summer for swimming and a BBQ and to Greek Peak in the winter for skiing and snowboarding. Attending Binghamton Mets, Binghamton Senators and BU games as a group will introduce students to the sporting activities available in Binghamton. In addition, getting out of Binghamton and taking day trips on weekend to the surrounding areas will show students that there is more to Binghamton than the strip malls on Vestal Parkway. A trip to Owego, recently named America's Coolest Small Town by Budget Travel Magazine, with visits to town landmarks such as the Jailhouse Restaurant will show students the vibrant quality of life that the Greater Binghamton Area offers.

Getting the perspective of young professionals who came to Binghamton and were able to establish rich social networks here through STYP, Lockheed Martin's New Hire Club and Endicott IBM's New Blue will show students that a great life is possible in a city they may have originally seen as simply a place get an education. Bridging the connection between "Homebodies" and STYP, the New Hire Club, and New Blue will provide an additional social network for students to enter when they do graduate. Kristen Lyons attributed STYP as being the key factor in making friends when she moved to Binghamton and Sebastien Lafontant placed the same emphasis on New Blue in the creation of his social network (K. Lyons, personal communication, April 20, 2009; S. Lafontant, personal communication, April 20, 2009). "Homebodies" will begin the process of creating and sustaining a social network in Binghamton for students, in addition to serving as an outlet for CIC2020 to continue their efforts to promote Binghamton as a great place to live.

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