Chapter 4
The Influence of Social and Cultural Capital on Student Persistence

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ABSTRACT
Using a mixed-methods approach, this chapter examines the use of the social and cultural capital questionnaire to measure capital, combined with student narrative experiences to gauge student persistence. An analysis of the interviews from the participants’ experiences provided four themes: faculty/professors, family, self-motivation, and finances. In this study, social capital was more positively related to school success as a factor of persistence than cultural capital. The findings of this research study contributes to this growing body of literature by providing a unique survey instrument designed to assess the influence of social and cultural capital.

INTRODUCTION
Persistence occurs when a first-year student returns to regular enrollment status in the first semester of their sophomore year, being likely to graduate from the institution (Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987). There has been a shift in the theoretical framework towards an attempt to understand why some students persist and others do not. If student persistence is viewed through the lens of social reproduction theory, then there is an emphasis on early cultural experiences, i.e. social and cultural capital that is used to access different social levels within society (Longden, 2004). A review of the experiences of two students begins this chapter’s focus on the influence of social and cultural capital on student persistence.

Student A is approaching graduation, having maintained a 3.7 GPA as a sociology major. As a first-generation college student at a small private college located in the South, she had more personal challenges than academic. Her mother did not understand her change of major from business to sociology and believed she would not find a job. The notion of pursuing a graduate degree with student loans looming was nonsense. One of few Latinas on a predominately white campus, she felt she did not “fit
in” at times, even in a sorority she co-founded with other minority women. The campus had few admin-
istrators of color, and programming related to diversity or campus events that connected to students of
color was nonexistent. However, through her work-study job, she connected with a library staffer who
became her confidant and supporter during her senior year. The beginning of the relationship was not
easy; the student was reluctant to share her concerns about her courses, financial worries, and issues
with her mom, with a woman who did not look like her. Yet, it was this relationship, her sorority sisters,
and friendships with other students of color that she credits as support during her undergraduate years.
When asked if this was her network, she smiled and said, “Yes, a network to get this degree!”

Student B is approaching graduation, having maintained a 4.0 as an engineering major in a presti-
gious University honors program. She is a second-generation college student, pursuing a career similar
to her parents. She has concerns about finding a job because she has not completed an internship or
research experience, opportunities that are looked upon as favorable by companies. After receiving a
few rejections early in her undergraduate career, she became discouraged. To some, she is one of the
“lucky” students as she had support from her parents and family, as well as access to the best classes
and faculty, as a member of the University honors program. Yet as a student of color, she appears to be
lonely and her comments confirm that notion. She has not connected with other students of color in the
honors program, which is a very small group. She has not attended any of the engineering and University
groups or programs for students of color because she does not feel as if she belongs. The University
honors program does not provide activities for students outside of classes. Quiet by nature, her focus
is on avoiding the “imposter syndrome.” When asked who was in her network, she ponders for a few
minutes before responding, “Do I need a network?”

Much of the literature on student persistence has focused on theories of integration, involvement,
and departure (Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1980; Astin, 1984). These theories are grounded in research that cites
factors as such as finances, parental education, and student demographics (i.e. race, gender) contribut-
ing to the reason why students leave an institution of higher learning. Psychological theories trying to understand persistence have examined the influence of capital (cultural and social) on a student’s ability to persist. If we consider
capital as a measurement of an investment of resources, then both of the students reviewed have used
various amounts on their path to graduation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last ten years, conversations about access to college and inequities in education levels have shifted
the research on undergraduate persistence to Bourdieu’s concept of social reproduction. His theory offers
a promising set of constructs for studying the influence of the social structure of larger society on the
process of college student departure (Braxton, 2000). Much of the persistence literature has focused on
how “involved” (Astin, 1985) or “integrated” (Tinto, 1987) students feel in their college environments,
either socially or academically. These sociological theories attempt to explain why students leave an
institution of higher learning. Psychological theories trying to understand persistence have examined
student behavior, self-assessment, and coping mechanisms. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) was arguably one
of the most prolific and important sociologists in recent history (Swartz, 1997). Classified as a conflict
theorist, born out of Marxist thought, he asserted the importance of the economic structure in perpetuat-
ing and maintaining inequality (Winkle-Wagner 2010). Bourdieu expanded Marx’s ideas in the context
of modern views of meritocracy and the notion that one’s opportunities are predicated on one’s abilities