

Examining Social Capital in the Conference Setting: A Case Study of College Student Participants

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Abstract

This study examined students' social networking experiences at the 2006 National Parks and Recreation Association (NRPA) Congress. Students' perceptions of feelings of inclusion, enjoyment, goal attainment, and overall satisfaction and their exposure to topics related to career development, academic development, and social life were explored. Results indicated students who attended NRPA Congress were goal-oriented. Goal attainment was the most significant predictor of conference satisfaction. Student interactions with professors/researchers were identified as being the most helpful component of goal attainment. Professors/researchers were rated highest on acquainting students with career and academic development information while students were rated highest on their social interactions with other student attendees. Practitioners interacted with students significantly less than professors/researchers on academic development, career development, and social life. Non-native English speaking students enjoyed the conference less and had fewer discussions about career development through their interactions with practitioners than native English speakers. Recommendations for enhancement of students' social networking experience are provided.

KEYWORDS: Student, conference participation, social networking, social capital

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Introduction

National Parks and Recreation Association (NRPA) Congress is a major annual conference in the field of Parks and Recreation in North America. One purpose is to bring professionals together to share and exchange ideas and to celebrate accomplishments in the field. Conference participants have an opportunity to present current work, receive feedback about their research, and network with other conference participants. In general, universities and faculty encourage students to participate in the conferences and provide them with some form of financial support to do so. Additionally, NRPA provides students with opportunities to volunteer in exchange for waived conference fee.

It is evident that NRPA holds a strong interest in nurturing current and future parks and recreation professionals. Traditionally, evaluations of presentations at educational and research sessions have been employed; however, little has been done to understand participants' social networking experiences during the Congress. While it has been recognized that college students are regular participants of the NRPA Congress, little research has been done to better understand the quality of students' conference experiences and how these experiences may influence career and academic development of future professionals.

Literature Review

College student population in the United States is constantly changing under the influence of demographic, institutional, political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological factors. To reflect the changing nature of college students, intensive research has been conducted to examine factors supporting college student learning and development over the past forty years (Felder, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Several studies have investigated interactions between students and faculty (Bjorklund, Parente, & Sathianathan, 2002) and between students and their peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998) both inside and outside classroom settings. Student interactions with their peers while working in teams have been shown to affect college student persistence, help develop problem solving skills and improve abilities to apply theoretical knowledge to practical applications (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000). Previous studies have also found that student interactions with faculty promote academic achievement and persistence (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Bjorklund, et al., 2002).

A few studies have addressed the importance of students' participation at professional conferences. Dolan, Kropf, O'Connor, and Erza (1997) highlighted that the main benefit associated with conference participation is to become socialized in a given profession through networking with established scholars. Francioni (2002) examined the influence of conference participation on learning, career and academic development of undergraduate female students in computing. She found that in general, participants perceived the conference as a positive experience. The conference participants indicated that attending presentations and interactions with other female participants at the conference had enhanced their self-confidence and exposed them to a great number of educational and career

opportunities. In addition, the conference provided them with guidance for steps to take towards future goals and opportunities to improve their interviewing and networking skills while speaking with potential employers.

In another study, Davison (2005) proposed seven benchmarks to be used as tools to examine social justice in relation to academic conferences. These benchmarks included: gender representation, geographic distribution, representation by professional position, first language representation, cultural and religious representation, access to and use of technology, and financial barriers. He suggested these factors needed to be taken into account by conference organizers to assure social justice and fairness of conferences.

In an effort to expand the limited research on student conference participation, this study examined students' social networking experiences at the 2006 NRPA Congress. Specifically, students' perceptions of feelings of inclusion, enjoyment, goal attainment, overall satisfaction and their exposure to topics related to career development, academic development, and social life were explored. Students' perceptions of the aforementioned perceptions and discussions of the three topics through their interactions with peers, professors/researchers, and practitioners were investigated separately to provide a better insight into the different interactions.

Theoretical Framework

Previous studies have suggested people gain new knowledge through a process of individual learning and interactive learning (Morone & Taylor, 2004). Typically, interactive learning results in formation of new social networks often referred to as social capital (Putnam, 2000). An argument can be made that conferences represent settings which enable interactive learning of individuals through face-to-face interactions with other participants. In addition to *social capital* that emphasizes the connections among individuals, Putnam (2000) also identified *physical capital*, which represents the physical objects and *human capital* that refers to the properties of individuals. Both Coleman (1988) and Burt (2000) emphasized the close connection between social and human capital. Coleman (1988) highlighted the role of social capital in creation of human capital and suggested social capital is created by changes in the relations among people resulting in action. Similarly, Burt (1992) defines social capital as "friends, colleagues, and more general contacts through whom you receive opportunities to use your financial and human capital" (p. 9). He referred to social capital as the complement to human capital and suggested that "the people who do better are somehow better connected" because social capital provides them with "a competitive advantage in pursuing their needs" (Burt, 2000, p. 3).

Social capital has emerged as a theoretical base to analyze social networks. Though there are diverse definitions of social capital, they seem to share the same theme in the sense that all networks have value and actors create and continue these relations as long as they benefit from them. According to Putnam (2000), "social capital refers to the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclina-

tions that arise from these networks to do things for each other” (p. 19). Coleman (1988) wrote:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. Like physical and human capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible (p. S98).

Coleman (1988) also emphasized information as an essential form of social capital. He believed the acquisition of information can be sometimes costly but through social relations, human beings are given the opportunity to acquire the information they need.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was multi-faceted. First, this study examined to what extent social relations were formed through students’ interactions with other participants (professors/researchers, practitioners, and students). Secondly, the perceptions of the social relations that contributed to students’ overall conference satisfaction were identified. Thirdly, the extent to which students were acquainted with information pertaining to career development, academic development and social life through their interactions with specific groups of participants was also investigated. Fourth, students’ demographic backgrounds and other factors influencing the formation of social relations and/or the acquisition of information (e.g., goals for conference attendance, who accompanied student participants, future career goals) were examined. Finally, several key elements for conference planning were identified in order to understand what makes a resource rich and student-friendly conference environment.

Research Questions

Utilizing social capital theory, five research questions were formulated:

1. Do students’ social relations vary by their interactions with different groups of participants?
2. Overall, what perceptions of social relations contribute to students’ conference satisfaction?
3. Do students acquire information differently through interactions with different groups of participants?
4. Do students differ in terms of their social relation aspects and acquisition with information through interactions with different groups of participants?
5. What makes a conference a useful social capital resource for student participants?

Methods

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire was developed from informal interviews with student participants at the 2005 NRPA Congress in San Antonio, Texas. Based on the results of interviews and a comprehensive literature review, questions were designed and refined by three graduate students and a professor at a NRPA/AAPAR (American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation) accredited university. A pilot study was conducted in February 2006 at the Michigan Recreation and Park Association (MRPA) Annual Conference. Sixteen student participants completed a self-administered questionnaire on-site. Analyses confirmed a high reliability of all constructs (Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.69 to 0.88). The final survey instrument included six sections pertaining to students' experiences at the 2006 NRPA Congress. These sections measured constructs of feelings of inclusion (6 items), enjoyment (3 items), goal attainment (6 items), overall conference experiences (4 items), student-friendly conference (11 items), and demographics (11 items). The first four constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. With regards to items related to feelings of inclusion, enjoyment, and goal attainment, all the questions were rated three times based on respondents' interactions with different groups: other students, professors/researchers, and practitioners. An example of the feelings of inclusion asked: "During the conference, I felt I was accepted and welcomed by a). other students, b). professors/researchers, c). practitioners." An example of the enjoyment items included: "During the conference, I enjoyed interacting with a). other students, b). professors/researchers, c). practitioners." An example of goal attainment items was: "Overall, my participation was beneficial to my academic development through interactions with a). other students, b). professors/researchers, c). practitioners." Examples of the overall satisfaction questions were: "I want to come next year," and "Overall, my participation in this conference was a pleasant experience." The student-friendly conference construct was designed to learn about students' opinions regarding conference services. A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* was adopted for this purpose. Items pertaining to this construct included: "Making the conference affordable to students," "Having interesting education sessions," and "Having programs or social events that help students connect with practitioners." In the last section, respondents were asked to provide socio-demographic information.

Study Procedures

The current study was supported by NRPA and employed a web-based survey. There were 142 students registered as student participants at the 2006 NRPA Congress. An e-mail list of all student registrants was obtained from the NRPA Congress in October 2006. An e-mail invitation containing a URL link to the web-based survey was sent to all student participants, with the exception of the two student authors (N=140), on October 13, 2006. The first reminder e-mail was sent a week after the initial invitation, and the second and the third reminders

were sent in the following two consecutive weeks. Data collection ended a week after the third reminder e-mail. The timing of the distribution for survey URL was designed to encourage maximum response. From the 140 student participants who were contacted, 64 responded. Of the 64 students who completed the survey, 15 were undergraduate students, 26 were master's students, 21 were doctoral students, and 2 did not specify their level of education. Of the 76 non-responses, 5 were due to invalid e-mail addresses. The overall response rate was 47%, which is considerably higher than the average web survey response rate of 37% based on a meta-analysis result (Sheehan, 2001). Given the small study population and the use of a five point Likert-type scale for examining primary study concepts, the study sample of 64 met the requirement for minimum returned sample size for analyses on continuous data with $\alpha = 0.05$, $t = 1.96$ and a margin of error = 0.03 (Bartlett, Kotrlik & Higgins, 2001).

Results

Demographic Profile

The majority of the survey respondents were female (60%), White (87%), graduate students (76%), and English native speakers (95%). The average age was 28 years old. Most expected to graduate within a year (77%). Respondents stayed at least 4 days during the Congress (79%) and were accompanied by at least one professor (81%) and another student (77%). The majority of the participants neither presented nor volunteered at the conference (69%). When respondents were asked about goals for attendance, the majority reported "important" or "very important" that they attended to benefit their career development (81%) and academic development (76%), while less than one third of respondents (32%) rated conference attendance as highly for enriching their social life. The majority of respondents (89%) had a specific goal after graduation: 37% indicated they would like to stay in academia, 24% indicated they would like to become a practitioner, and 28% indicated they would look for jobs in both academia and the field. None reported a desire to work in a different field.

Research Question 1: *Do students' social relations vary by their interactions with different groups of participants?*

To better understand students' perceptions of their social relations with other conference participants (professors/researchers, practitioners, and other students), a One-Way ANOVA was employed to test feelings of inclusion, enjoyment, and goal attainment based on interactions with specific groups of participants. The results showed that students rated higher than the median score on all experiences, with the highest rating on feelings of inclusion, followed by goal attainment and enjoyment. Students' interactions with other students regarding their feelings of inclusion and enjoyment were rated the highest. Interacting with professors/researchers was identified as most helpful for goal attainment, which was statistically different from interacting with practitioners (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Students' Social Relations Through Interaction siwth Different Participants

	Total		Students		Professors/ Researchers		Practitioners		ANOVA	Post Hoc
	MEAN	STD	MEAN	STD	MEAN	STD	MEAN	STD		
Aspects of Social Relations	4.16	0.67	4.28	0.66	4.15	0.63	4.05	0.72	F F(2, 189) =1.93, p = 0.15 F(2, 189) =3.01, p = 0.05 F(2, 171) =6.76**, p = 0.001	
Feelings of Inclusion	3.74	0.95	3.90	0.93	3.81	0.87	3.51	1.02		
Enjoyment										
Goal Attainment	3.85	0.82	3.82	0.81	4.12	0.67	3.58	0.89		Professors/Researchers > Practitioners

Note: Bonferroni test was performed for Post Hoc analysis.

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level, ** at the .01 level, *** at the .001 level

TABLE 2
Exposure to information through interactions with different participants

	Total		Students		Professors/ Researchers		Practitioners		ANOVA	Post Hoc
	MEAN	STD	MEAN	STD	MEAN	STD	MEAN	STD		
Exposure to Topics									F F(2, 187) = 7.11 **, p = 0.001 F(2, 189) = 15.01 ****, p = 0.000 F(2, 187) = 8.53****, p = 0.000	
Career Development	3.56	0.65	3.55	0.85	3.82	0.73	3.25	0.91		Professors/Researchers > Practitioners
Academic Development	3.58	0.61	3.64	0.74	3.89	0.71	3.14	0.92		Professors/Researchers/Students > Practitioners
Social Life	3.54	0.81	3.86	1.00	3.59	0.84	3.14	1.12		Professors/Researchers/Students > Practitioners

Note: Bonferroni test was performed for Post Hoc analysis.

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level, ** at the .01 level, *** at the .001 level

Research Question 2: *Overall, what perceptions of social relations contribute to students' conference satisfaction?*

The three aspects of social relations were tested with regards to predicting students' conference satisfaction. The results from multivariate regression analysis using stepwise selection method indicated that goal attainment was the only significant predictor of conference satisfaction ($F_{(1,59)} = 9.92^{**}$, $p = 0.003$). The adjusted R squared value was 0.14, indicating 14% of the variance was explained by the model. Specifically, an increase of one unit of goal attainment would result in a 0.48 unit increase of conference satisfaction ($\beta = 0.48$, $t(59) = 3.15^{**}$, $p = 0.003$). The results suggested the more satisfied students were with goal attainment during conference participation, the more satisfied they were with the conference.

Research Question 3: *Do students acquire information differently through interactions with different groups of participants?*

A One-Way ANOVA test was performed to examine whether students' acquisition with information pertaining to career development, academic development, and social life differed by their interactions with different groups of participants. Students rated professors/researchers highest on acquainting them with career and academic development information, while students rated interactions with other students highest on aspects of social life. Practitioners were found to interact with students significantly less than professors/researchers on all three areas, and less than other students on topics related to academic development and social life (Table 2).

Research Question 4: *Do students differ in terms of their social relation aspects and acquisition with information through interactions with different groups of participants?*

The results of a series of One-Way ANOVA analyses showed undergraduate and master's students had more discussions with practitioners regarding academic ($F_{(2,59)} = 9.92^{**}$, $p = 0.003$) and career development ($F_{(2,59)} = 7.39^{**}$, $p = 0.003$) than doctoral students. Doctoral students also reported lower level of goal attainment ($F_{(2,51)} = 4.88^{*}$, $p = 0.011$) and enjoyment ($F_{(2,53)} = 3.88^{*}$, $p = 0.021$) through interactions with practitioners than undergraduate and master's students. Compared to students who attended the Congress alone, students who were accompanied by another student experienced higher enjoyment overall ($F_{(1,60)} = 5.05^{*}$, $p = 0.028$), with other students ($F_{(1,60)} = 5.60^{*}$, $p = 0.021$), and with professors/researchers ($F_{(1,60)} = 7.95^{**}$, $p = 0.007$). They also were exposed to information pertaining to career development more often in general ($F_{(1,60)} = 4.44^{*}$, $p = 0.039$) and through their interactions with other professors/researchers ($F_{(1,59)} = 4.82^{*}$, $p = 0.032$). Non-native English speaking students experienced less enjoyment ($F_{(1,60)} = 4.79^{*}$, $p = 0.032$) and had fewer discussions about career development ($F_{(1,60)} = 5.18^{*}$, $p = 0.026$) through their interactions with practitioners than native English speakers. Students who planned on working in a non-academic setting after graduation had more discussions with practitioners on topics related to career development ($F_{(1,61)} = 5.37^{*}$, $p = 0.024$), academic development ($F_{(1,62)} = 4.98^{*}$, $p = 0.029$), and social

life ($F_{(1, 62)} = 4.39^*$, $p = 0.040$) while their counterparts discussed more career ($F_{(1, 62)} = 4.49^*$, $p = 0.038$) and academic development ($F_{(1, 62)} = 6.39^*$, $p = 0.014$) with other students. Students who planned on working in a non-academic setting after graduation also rated higher on their goal attainment through interactions with practitioners ($F_{(1, 53)} = 5.02^*$, $p = 0.029$).

Research Question 5: *What makes a conference a useful social capital resource for student participants?*

Students rated all factors as being of high importance when asked to identify the key elements of a student-friendly conference. Among them, “making the conference affordable to students,” “having interesting education sessions,” and “providing free Internet and computers to use at the Congress” were rated the top three priorities (Table 3).

TABLE 3
Student-friendly conference factors

	N	MEAN	STD
Making the conference affordable to students	64	4.86	0.50
Having interesting education sessions	64	4.75	0.56
Providing free Internet and computers to use at the Congress	64	4.75	0.47
Having programs or social events that help students connect with professors/researchers	64	4.64	0.65
Having programs or social events that help students connect with practitioners	64	4.63	0.72
Providing information on job or internship opportunities	64	4.55	0.69
Having programs or social events that help students connect with other students	64	4.52	0.94
Providing information on academic program applications and/or scholarship opportunities	64	4.36	0.76
Giving away free stuff	63	4.33	1.12
Providing training or supports for students who work as volunteers	64	4.22	0.88
Providing a detailed schedule on education sessions and ongoing events	62	4.11	0.93

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on these results, students who attended the NRPA Congress were found to be very purposeful and goal-oriented. They attended the Congress with a specific conference goal—to socialize within the field of parks and recreation profession through the process of social networking. Also noteworthy, a majority of the respondents intended to graduate within one year and to join the field of parks and recreation either as a faculty member/researcher, a graduate student, or a practitioner. Conference organizers should be aware of, and plan for, students’ strong goal orientation, commitment to the profession, and desire for professional development and employment opportunities.

To address students’ career development needs, it is essential that NRPA Congress organizers increase the number of engagement activities to help expand

and enhance interactions among students, practitioners, and professors/researchers. In turn, these interactions will enhance students' self-confidence (Francioni, 2002) and enable them to share their educational and career experiences with potential employers and professionals in the field. Previous studies have suggested a gap persists between academic researchers and practitioners in the field of parks and recreation (Dahl, 1999; Goodale, 1992; McGuire, 2000). Poor communication between researchers and practitioners has been identified as one of the areas hindering the growth and application of knowledge in the field (Vaugeois et al., 2005). Very few practitioners read major research journals (Jordan, 1999) perhaps because they are not able to find relevance of the research to their practice (Madrigal, 1999). Witt (2000) requested academic researchers to conduct "more research that matters" (p. 187). Based on our results highlighting the lack of interactions between students and practitioners, it can be argued this gap starts to develop prior to students entering parks and recreation professions. To assist in narrowing the gap, it is crucial that NRPA Congress organizers encourage practitioners and students to attend not only educational sessions but also the Leisure Research Symposium where they can familiarize themselves with the latest research results and implications for practice. They can also provide researchers and students with immediate feedback and express how relevant the research findings are to the "real life" issues, as well as to enhance future research studies. Similarly, academic researchers and students should be encouraged to participate in educational sessions where they can establish collaborative relationships with practitioners to discuss the practical implication of the research findings and future research efforts (Witt, 2000).

With regards to academia, the results suggest faculty members represent the key resource for students' involvement in the Congress and therefore, it is imperative to make parks and recreation professors/researchers aware of their role in the success of students' Congress experience and their future academic and professional development. While faculty members may have already encouraged students to participate, co-authored articles with them, and/or provided students with financial support for conference attendance, a more active role during the Congress may be needed to ensure students' feelings of inclusion, enjoyment and goal attainment. The results of this study indicate it is important that faculty members facilitate interactions between students and other professors/researchers, practitioners and/or other students. Simple methods to accomplish this goal might be encouraging students to come as a group and setting up a booth providing information about their academic programs.

In addition, social events associated with the Congress are not always welcoming to students even if the planners intend to include them. Often, students either lack the information about the existence of these events, have no access to these events, and/or it is too costly for them to participate. Furthermore, many social events are held in bars or night clubs that do not allow students under the age 21 to enter, or the volume of the music does not permit a meaningful conversation.

Lastly, NRPA Congress organizers should try to meet students' needs and desires by making the conference a more student-friendly professional resource. To

help address several students' needs, the NRPA Congress organizers have already offered some programs and opportunities such as: "Student Zone" which helps students connect with peers and offers on-site computers with free Internet access; "Take a Student to Lunch" which facilitates interactions between students and professionals; and volunteering opportunities for a fee registration waiver. However, there is still room for improved service to the student population. For example, information pertaining to internships or jobs opportunities could be posted on-line or sent to participants through e-mails prior to the Congress so that potential meetings or interviews might be scheduled. Also, identifying and informing students about the professionals who are willing to participate in the "Take a Student to Lunch" program and encouraging them to set up an appointment ahead of time may increase the utilization of the program dramatically.

Notably, non-native English speakers reported less enjoyment than their counterparts at the Congress. They also had fewer discussions about career development through their interactions with practitioners. Non-native English speakers often experience language and cultural barriers not allowing them to fully engage in the conference experience. As previously suggested by Coleman (1988) and Burt (2000), people who are better connected enjoy greater advantage in pursuing their goals. The lack of engagement and low attendance by non-native English speakers (5%) might be a reflection of a lack of cultural representation in the field, and needs to be addressed by the parks and recreation professionals.

While the future of the parks and recreation field rests in the hands of our current students, how they transition from a college environment into the profession can be greatly influenced by current parks and recreation professionals. Students need to be perceived as a significant audience at the NRPA Congress who have specific needs and whose conference experiences should be enhanced. Through this study, it is hoped students' conference experiences can be better understood and the field of parks and recreation can be further strengthened by utilizing conferences as tools to enhance the future of our profession.

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