

# 5 Steps for Building & Strengthening Students' Networks

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Ensuring that every student graduates with the networks needed to thrive

By Julia Freeland Fisher & Mahnaz Charania, PhD

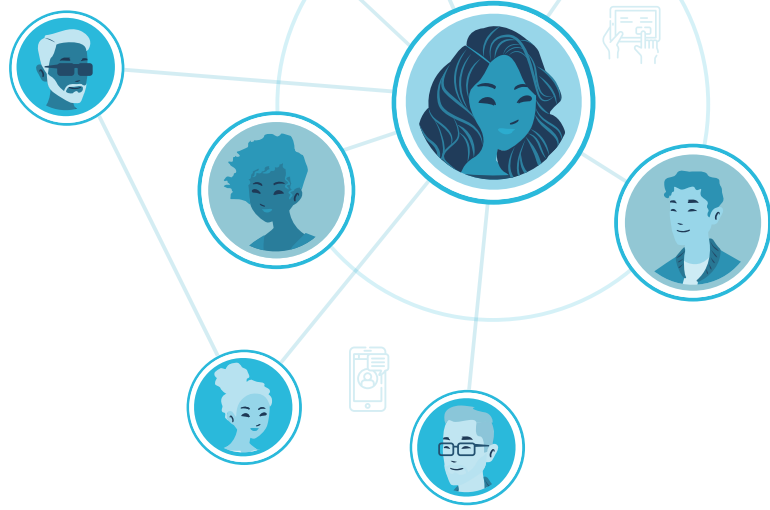


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# What is this playbook and who is it for?

This playbook was developed by the Clayton Christensen Institute to help K–12 and postsecondary leadership and nonprofits that work with those institutions implement and adapt strategies, tools, and metrics that build and strengthen their students' networks. Students' networks help support their well-being and can expand their postsecondary and career options. Although we offer tools and tactics that could be implemented in standalone programming or courses, we urge users to treat network-building as a system-wide goal, rather than a one-off effort reserved for only a few students.

## How to use this playbook

Each design step summarizes relevant research, strategies for translating the research into practice, and real-world examples of the design in practice. We recommend readers download the customizable plan and fill it out while going through each design step. This guided worksheet includes reflection questions to drive both design and measurement, as well as prompts to identify strategies to implement with colleagues and students.

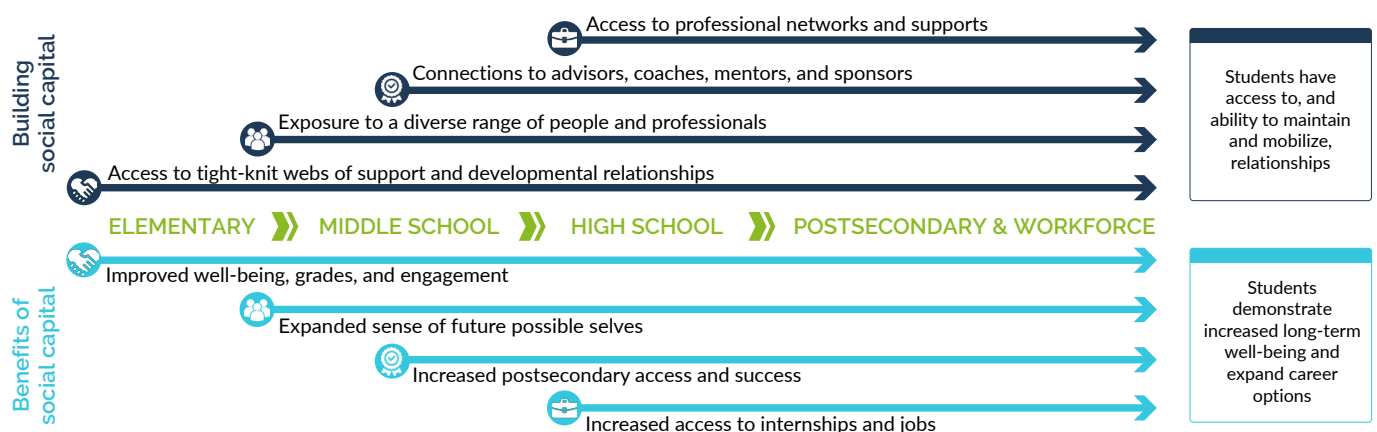
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# Getting started: How every student benefits from a strong and diverse network

Opportunity sits at the cross-section of what you know and *who* you know, and that especially applies to today’s students. Networks drive healthy development and long-term well-being. Studies repeatedly demonstrate the value of networks in a students’ ability to build confidence, identity, and agency. In addition, networks are a critical ingredient to students’ access to career planning and growth.

The value that resides in networks is what we refer to as “social capital.” Social capital is defined as students’ access and ability to mobilize relationships that help them further their potential and goals, both as those goals emerge and as they inevitably shift over time. The graphic below illustrates how social capital may manifest across a students’ journey in school and beyond, as well as the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality relationships in students’ lives.

## Relationships drive well-being and expand opportunity



## Why measuring access to networks is an equity imperative

All students already possess social capital. They arrive at school with networks, and in the course of learning and serving students, schools and institutions contribute to those networks. However, slim but troubling data suggests that students’ access to relationships is not equally distributed and that not all relationships are supporting development and opportunity at an equal rate.

A wide range of factors including race, family income, and parental education level can impact the size and scope of students’ networks, and the resources those networks can offer.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Moreover, within K–12

and postsecondary pathways, students report unequal or limited access to [developmental relationships](#)<sup>5</sup>, mentors<sup>6</sup>, and professional connections.<sup>7</sup> This can, in turn, impact students' access to opportunity and economic mobility.<sup>8</sup>

For example, while 86% of adults in K–12 schools report that they are building strong developmental relationships with young people, only 45% of young people report experiencing strong developmental relationships.<sup>9</sup> This data suggests that there is a stark discrepancy in how young people are actually experiencing relationships compared to how adults think or hope they are experiencing relationships. Among postsecondary alumni, fewer than half of students report having had a mentor in college, and students of color are 34% less likely to cite having a professor as a mentor compared to their white peers.

Schools and institutions hoping to reverse trends like these have an opportunity in front of them: to invest in and measure students' networks in more deliberate, equitable, and effective ways.

## Ensuring all students are growing and strengthening their networks

[Opportunity gaps](#) reflect resource and relationship gaps. But simply putting relationships within reach isn't always enough to activate the benefits of social capital. In fact, a negative relationship can be worse than no relationship at all. Young people who experience negative or curtailed mentoring relationships show marked *decreases* in their sense of self-worth and academic ability.<sup>10</sup> By taking a purposeful approach to measurement, schools and institutions can ensure all students feel supported and engaged on their education journey and graduate with both the skills and networks that drive success.

Schools and institutions that are starting to prioritize students' social capital rarely use a single metric to gauge how students access and experience relationships. Instead, these K–12 and postsecondary programs are capturing data across four interrelated dimensions:

### A four-dimensional framework for measuring students' social capital



For more information about the four-dimensional framework for measuring students' social capital, read the Christensen Institute's report, [The missing metrics: Emerging practices for measuring students' relationships and networks](#).

## Meaningful metrics to center equity in your design

Systems change will depend on educators and administrators sharing power and knowledge with both students and their networks. This will require schools and institutions to capture data that reflects the diversity of students served, and to equip students as agents of change in their own educational and professional pathways. As you navigate each design step, this playbook offers “meaningful metrics” your organization can use and adapt to ensure all students receive support and resources in the way they need.

### Putting it into practice

As you consider what success looks like for your students and how you will measure progress, solicit feedback from the different members of your organization and community whom the data and vision will impact. Identify who needs to be included from both within and outside your organization to support planning, implementing, and progress monitoring of your efforts. To help ensure equity is infused throughout your efforts, reflect on how students’ identities are honored and integrated into your planning process from the beginning. This can include students’ racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic status, and/or learning and thinking differences. A better understanding of students’ identities can inform how you are implementing relationship-building opportunities, collecting data on how students experience relationships, and defining success across your school or program. Specifically, in getting started, first ask<sup>11</sup>:

- Why is this work necessary?
- Whom will this work benefit?
- Whom can this process hurt or harm?
- Whose perspective needs to be included in the planning phase?
- What does success look like for students? For staff?

Download our [guided worksheet](#) to keep track of your progress while going through the playbook.

# Step 1. Take stock: Getting to know who your students know

## Guiding questions

- How do you currently take stock of the relationships in your students' lives inside of your school or program? What about beyond school?
- Who are the people in students' lives, both inside and outside of school, and what resources—such as support, sense of belonging, and new information and opportunities—are they currently providing?
- Do students themselves have awareness of the relationships at their disposal and how those relationships could help them accomplish their goals?
- Reflecting on your current approach to brokering relationships with students, which members of your staff or community do you believe your students feel comfortable reaching out to for support or opportunities? Which relationships could be strengthened or nurtured?

## Meaningful metrics

Different students will have different needs and interests, and in turn, different sets of relationships. Mapping the relationships students have access to both inside and outside of the classroom can uncover untapped assets for, and overlooked gaps in, their **social capital**. Institutions committed to getting to know who their students know should measure:

- The number of **strong tie** and **weak tie** relationships a student maintains in everyday life
- Where relationships are formed (e.g., school) and with whom
- Students' awareness of social capital, what it means, and why it matters



My older brother's mentor set the path for me and my siblings. A lot of times, that's the way it works in families: you educate one and then all benefit.

— Pedro Noguera, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Education





## What the research says

- **Schools and programs often leave deep reservoirs of social capital, and what researchers call “funds of knowledge,” on the table.** Most schools and programs collect limited information on their students’ networks beyond class rosters, students’ caregivers, or students’ emergency contacts. In other words, students likely have numerous existing, valuable connections in their neighborhoods, faith communities, extended families, or jobs that rarely are connected in a systematic way in support of their educational and career pathways.<sup>12</sup>
- **In fact, even students’ existing acquaintances can generate new, expanded opportunities.** When schools and institutions make an effort to understand students’ networks, just asking about their closest friends and mentors won’t tell the whole story. Acquaintances—or what sociologists call “weak ties”—are more likely to contain new information, advice, and opportunities than students’ strongest ties.<sup>13</sup> When taking stock of students’ networks, schools and institutions also should count weak ties.
- **Making assumptions about the composition of students’ networks based on their demographics can backfire.** Programs designed for entire subgroups can miss critical assets in students’ lives. For example, researchers have found that low-income students arrive at college campuses with different social and cultural capital depending on their high school experiences, rather than just their socioeconomic status.<sup>14</sup> Schools and institutions should ask students about their experiences and networks rather than assuming that all members of a given subgroup have the same assets or needs.



## Strategies from the field

Asking students about their existing relationships and networks can paint a clearer picture of what relationships students are actually forging in their day-to-day lives, and the different roles those relationships play. The following strategies can help you “take stock” of whom your students know on a regular basis and better leverage those connections over the course of students’ academic and professional journeys:

- **If you’re trying to better understand relationships inside your school or department → Try relationship mapping protocols with your team and students:**

Relationship mapping is a strategy that can help schools adjust their practices to effectively forge trusting relationships between students and adults. All it takes is a roster of student names and two sets of different colored stickers for staff to visualize patterns among whom they feel they have a strong relationship with and whom they believe may be at risk for academic, personal, or other reasons. Larger schools and institutions may prefer to move through the process one grade level or department at a time. You can also perform mapping exercises across both staff and students to compare the results. From there, schools that identify students who lack trusting relationships with adults or faculty can direct additional connections and resources accordingly. For example, watch Ted Dintersmith’s Innovation Playlist to see relationship mapping [in action at Jamestown Public Schools](#).<sup>15</sup>

- **If you want to understand broader networks that students have access to outside of your school or program → Try social network mapping:**

For decades, social workers have used asset mapping, a close cousin to relationship mapping, in order to assess the support networks of their clients. One example is the Social Network Map, developed by researchers Elizabeth Tracy of Case Western Reserve University and James Whittaker of the University of Washington. Their tool helps case managers identify and sort the structure and quality of a client’s support system by mapping relationships into several categories, including family, peers, friends, and co-workers. Researchers recommend doing multiple rounds of relationship or social network mapping because students may forget to include certain connections that make a difference in their lives. You can gain a more complete picture of who your students know and depend on by revisiting relationship and social network maps. Read more about this approach in the article [“The Social Network Map”](#).<sup>16</sup>

- **If you’re working in a resource-scarce, human capital-scarce environment → Use relationship and networking mapping as a student project to identify latent resources:**

Not only does relationship mapping provide more detailed information regarding whom your students know and turn to—it can also surface relationships that you could enlist more deliberately to expand supports or opportunities at your institution. Make sure you have a shared contact database where you can store these connections so that they remain within reach for your community to tap into in the future.



Dr. Helen Heinneman and Father Joe Appleyard didn’t just redirect my life—they filled in whole blanks of space I wasn’t seeing on the page and colored it in for me.

— *Paul LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU)*



## Program spotlights

**Beyond 12 coaches college students to reflect on their existing support networks and how to maintain them.**

Beyond 12 is a nonprofit that offers virtual coaching to low-income, first-generation, and historically underrepresented students. The Beyond 12 curriculum includes a specific core content area focused on *“Networking and Building Social Capital”* in an effort to map who plays what roles across students’ networks. As part of this module, students fill in a chart detailing specific relationships in their lives with people who can help them accomplish their goals. They reflect on the help they receive from various individuals; how frequently they interact; how formal or informal their interactions are; and identifying good “next steps” to continue to strengthen those relationships.



**Evidence of impact:** 85% of students whom Beyond 12 has coached for four years have either graduated or are still enrolled in college.



**Sample data collection strategy:** Beyond 12 coaches use a checklist to identify the extent to which students are growing their on-campus networks:

- Identify a campus advocate or mentor
- Identify three peers who can serve as references
- Create at least one study group with high-performing peers

**Big Picture Learning asks students about their existing networks to generate and distribute local internship opportunities.**

Big Picture Learning, a national nonprofit that supports internship-based learning high schools, has designed a technology tool called ImBlaze to help schools manage work-based learning contacts and opportunities. But schools don't just use ImBlaze as a productivity tool; at the start of their semester, Big Picture students are encouraged to upload their existing and new contacts that they have in local businesses through their families, communities, and other networks. From there, students across the school have visibility into the range of opportunities represented across their entire school community—not just limited to their existing, [inherited networks](#). The tool also provides references and records on students' previous experiences at various internship sites. Read more [here](#).



**Evidence of impact:** 95% of Big Picture Learning students were accepted into two-year or four-year institutions. 88% of those who did not enroll in college secured full-time employment—with 74% reporting that this employment was facilitated through a mentor or contact from one of their internships.



**Sample data collection strategy:** Some Big Picture schools administer surveys to students at regular intervals that ask questions such as:

- *What adults do you plan to work with today [in your internship]?*
- *How connected do you feel to the adults you are working with at your internship right now?*

## Putting it into practice

What relationships does your school or program deliberately put within reach and emphasize already? What checks and balances are in place to ensure that all students—rather than only those who are outgoing—are forging relationships? [Download our guided worksheet](#) to take stock of your students' existing networks.

## Tools & resources

- The Christensen Institute's [Beyond 12 case study](#): This case study details how Beyond 12 builds social capital and provides design tools and tips.
- Search Institute's [Relationships Check Tool](#): This free survey can be used for self-reflection to see where young people's relationships with educators and staff are particularly strong, and where they can grow. When it's complete, you'll receive actionable approaches and activities to strengthen relationships with young people.
- Making Caring Common's virtual [Relationship Mapping Strategy](#): This free tool helps educators and administrators identify perceived positive and stable staff-to-student relationships so they can visualize trends within the school community. Tools for peer-to-peer and staff-to-staff relationship mapping are currently in production.
- RESCHOOL Colorado's [Learning Map](#): This free protocol offers guidance for mapping the people, places, and tools involved in student learning.
- Connect Our Kids' [Family Connections Tool](#): This tool is free for social workers serving young people in the foster care system. It maps existing and extended family connections and other supports in a young person's life.
- Visible Network Labs' [PARTNER Platform](#): This paid management system and app tracks network size and strength at the individual and organizational level. PARTNERme is a mobile social needs screening and referral tool. It uses network science to make social support and resource networks visible to enable whole-person care.
- Loom's Salesforce [Map your relationships tool](#): This paid Salesforce extension application allows users to map and analyze social network connections across their contacts.
- Big Picture Learning's [ImBlaze internship management tool](#): This tool is a paid platform for uploading and coordinating internship opportunities.



## Step 2. Shore up support networks: Ensuring every student has access to a web of supportive relationships

### Guiding questions

- Who are the close relationships students are already turning to for support beyond your school or program?
- Is there at least one person that the student identifies as someone they trust to turn to inside your school or program?
- How well are the individuals in a student's support network connected to one another?
- How does your organization securely share information about students among their identified support networks to help ensure that those individuals interacting with students can best support them?
- How intentionally have you built opportunities to practice skills in relationship building into your approach to social and emotional learning and well-being?

### Meaningful metrics

Based on youth development research, a close-knit web of strong ties—or strong relationships—is critical to helping students thrive. An effective [web of support](#) typically contains at least one anchor or especially strong relationship. Research has shown that a web is also more supportive and resilient if the members of that web know one another, particularly for academically at-risk students or those dealing with adverse life experiences.<sup>17</sup> Systems committed to shoring up strong support networks for their students should measure:

- The number of peers and adults a student turns to for different supports
- The sources of supportive relationships formed (including whether a student met someone through an existing relationship or a specific mentor) and how those individuals are connected to each other and the student
- A student's level of comfort in seeking, activating, and mobilizing support from individuals in their network



“ Search Institute has arrived at a surprisingly simple conclusion: nothing—nothing—has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships.

—Peter Benson, Former CEO and President of Search Institute



## What the research says

- **Building webs of support buffers risk.** Oftentimes, programs try to make sure students have access to a single “mentor” or a “caring adult.” Although that’s a great first step, it’s incomplete. [Research](#) from the Center for Promise is clear: students benefit from a *web* of close, supportive connections, rather than a single mentor, to turn to for support. As the number of strong ties a student has access to goes up, so do academic motivation, social and emotional skills, and students’ ability to take responsibility for their own actions. Furthermore, risk behaviors decline with additional supportive relationships.<sup>18</sup>
- **Intentional efforts to address adverse life experiences with varied types of support may be necessary when social support is not enough.** Young people who have experienced high levels of adversity and trauma may require mental health and social services beyond what relationships with family, school personnel, and friends can provide. Professional and [instrumental support](#) may be needed in addition to social support. Researchers have found that it can be especially difficult for young people with five or more adverse childhood experiences to form connections with new people, which makes establishing trust essential.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, plugging in mentors as stop-gap solutions where other professional supports or public subsidies are needed could backfire.<sup>20</sup>
- **Support can take many forms—emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental—all of which can promote student success in different ways.** One reason a web of support is so powerful is that different relationships can provide different types of support depending on a student’s needs and circumstances in a given moment.
- **Anchor relationships act as a gateway to a web of support.** Within a web of support, a single “anchoring” relationship allows the young person to access available community assets and to recognize and act upon his own internal strengths. Some researchers have defined this anchor as a person who is not a family member or a paid youth worker, and who provides deep, unconditional support.<sup>21</sup>
- **“Close connector” mentors may have the greatest impact.** Youth paired with mentors identified as “close connectors” show the greatest improvements in a variety of outcomes, including improved parent-child relationship quality, increased help-seeking behaviors, and greater extracurricular activity participation. “Close connectors” not only form close, trusting relationships with mentees, but also proactively connect mentees to other relationships and networks.<sup>22</sup>



- **Providing support can have upsides for the “supporter” too.** Peers and [near peers](#) can be valuable sources of support. These relationships not only benefit the student receiving the support, but also appear to motivate the individual empowered to provide support. For example, high school students giving motivational advice to younger students earned higher report card grades in both math and a self-selected target class over an academic quarter.<sup>23</sup>

## Strategies from the field

You can't expect students to get ahead if they lack webs of support to get by. Ensuring that students have a web of supportive connections is critical to strengthening students' networks. The following strategies can help you build support networks for all students:

- **If you're trying to drive better academic outcomes and skills development → Keep educators in the wraparound services and basic needs loop:**

Both K–12 and postsecondary systems are increasingly focused on provisioning “wraparound” supports to ensure students have the resources they need to learn. Some integrated student support programs attribute their success to the idea that educators are better able to serve their students academically when they have a better understanding of their personal lives. As a result, teachers' academic decisions can be sensitive to the non-academic factors present in students' lives. For example, one evidence-based integrated support model called [City Connects](#) provides non-academic and academic support to low-income students by assigning coordinators and existing staff members to assess each individual student's needs and connect them to in- and out-of-school supports.

- **If you're introducing new staff or mentors into student support networks → Integrate a Critical Mentoring agenda into program design and training:**

Support can be delivered in a manner that ignores students' strengths and focuses on deficits if it discounts existing assets in students' homes and communities. Factors like race, class, sexuality, and gender all contribute to students' identities; but mentorship and support models do not always recognize or address these facets head-on in how they train or support mentors or staff. Additionally, if programs broker new connections between White mentors and non-White mentees or students, they may be urging students of color to assimilate to dominant culture rather than recognizing and investing in their own culture. Instead, a [Critical Mentoring agenda](#) to brokering support recognizes the assets in both students' existing networks and identities, while providing deliberate opportunities for students and mentors alike to celebrate the strengths, cultures, and values within that network.

- **If you're scaling student support structures → Build on existing advisory structures and peer-to-peer connections and cohorts:**

Some schools and institutions have already invested in systems that build close student-to-student and student-to-staff connections, such as advisories. Deliberate designs and measures can ensure advisory becomes a vehicle through which every student has a robust support network within school. For example, [EL Education's Crew](#) model involves engaging with the same peers and crew leader on a regular basis (daily or multiple times per week), and they often remain together year after year. You can scale student support without advisory teachers or full-time staff members by connecting students with their peers and near peers. This untapped source of support can be quite effective because similar age and circumstances can inspire greater confidence and trust. Peers can also foster a sense of accountability. For example, the Atlanta-based Forest School enlists peers to support one another through its [Running Partners](#) approach, which pairs students with an accountability partner to help them set and reach their goals.

- **If you're supporting students in building their relationship skills → Empower them to lead conversations with their support networks:**

Investing in stronger support networks in school is often well-intentioned. But it can backfire if these investments occur absent clear diagnostics identifying whom students are turning to within and beyond school in the first place. Programs can leverage the strategies in Step 1 to gather reliable information on the staff, family, community, and peer connections already providing support to students before adding new relationships to that mix. From there, they can empower students to lead conversations with their support networks. For example, Achievement First's Greenfield school model has implemented a structure called **Dream Teams**, also referred to as a "community of champions," composed of students' parents, caregivers, extended family members, or neighbors. Dream Teams meet quarterly with students and their teachers. The approach specifically focuses on building student agency; students lead their quarterly Dream Team meetings to update their web of support on their goals and progress.

- **If you're struggling to connect the individuals within a student's web of support → Build shared student profiles that sit alongside academic data:**

As more systems have tried to improve student support models, many have created student or learner profiles where relevant information about students' goals, challenges, and experiences can sit alongside academic data. To make these part of a more coherent web-of-support approach, systems can ensure that multiple stakeholders have access to the learner profile and the ability to contribute to the profile over time. This can decrease coordination costs across the student's web of support.

- **If you're determining how to identify and disseminate critical student information securely → Evaluate information to prioritize which individuals need to know what:**

To maintain student privacy, prior to engaging in this work, stakeholders should think deeply regarding the information they are collecting, how it will be used, who has access, and how it is stored. Information should be circulated across students' support networks on a need-to-know basis that is appropriate in a given context. In instances that involve sensitive information, individuals can be empowered to encourage extra support for a student without sharing specifics. For example, law enforcement may use the phrase "handle with care" to indicate to school administrators that a particular student may be experiencing a difficult situation.



“

Developing strong relationships involves compassion and investment. Not everyone in a web of support needs to have complete information, they just need to be invested in having a positive relationship.

— Joan Wasser-Gish, Director of Strategic Initiatives,  
Center for Optimized Student Support

”

## Program spotlights

**Connected Scholars arms college students with the agency and skills to build their own support networks in school.**

Connected Scholars is a research-informed course designed to meet the needs of high schools, colleges, and universities interested in implementing a mentoring program for its students. It specifically aims to equip low-income and first-generation college students. Instead of matching students with assigned mentors, students are trained to understand the value of building their social capital, then learn and practice networking and relationship-building skills to expand their networks. Read more [here](#).



**Evidence of impact:** Young people who completed four Connected Scholars sessions on learning how to recruit mentors at the start of college had a higher GPA at the end of the school year.



**Sample data collection strategy:** Students respond to a series of questions related to academic and career networking, such as:

- I introduced myself to professors and support staff.
- I met with professors and support staff to discuss my goals and interests.
- I reached out to professionals in a career or interest area of mine.
- I got to know at least one professor well.
- I asked a professor or support staff for career advice.

### **This Way ONward combines webs of support and youth employment for first-time employees.**

Gap Inc.'s This Way ONward (formerly This Way Ahead) model offers on-ramps to paid work to young people who are low-income or currently disconnected from work or school. The program has deliberately constructed distinct but connected roles that its community partners, employees, and supervisors play to shore up a web of support around young, first-time store associates. All This Way ONward participants are paired with a job coach from a local nonprofit organization, an on-the-job “big sib,” a store leader, and a store manager. These individuals are all expected to communicate with one another in an effort to anticipate challenges and set young employees up for success.



**Evidence of impact:** A Gap Inc. survey showed that 72% of alumni (2007–2016 participants) go on to secure stable employment compared with 55% of their similarly-situated peers not part of This Way ONward.



**Sample data strategy:** Gap Inc. set up a separate job code in their HR systems to “tag” anyone who gets hired through This Way ONward. That’s helped the company track business outcomes such as retention, performance, promotion, and diversity generated through the model.

## **Putting it into practice**

Which members of your staff, team, or broader community are called upon to support students? How do those individuals communicate and share information with students but also with one another? Can all students identify at least one person they trust to turn to inside your school or program? [Develop a plan](#) to shore up your students’ support networks.

## **Tools & resources**

- Center for Promise’s [Defining Webs of Support](#) framework: This framework describes the importance of recognizing that youth are active agents in relationships; relationships are embedded within a broader ecology of relationships; and different adults provide different types of support.
- CERES Institute for Children & Youth’s [Using the Web of Support Framework](#): This tool was designed by Shannon Varga and Jonathan Zaff for use by youth-serving professionals and youth. It identifies important structures within a web of support, best practices, and sample prompts.
- Dr. Tori Weiston-Serdan’s [Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide](#): This book details the critical mentoring approach created by Dr. Tori Weiston-Serdan. It provides a foundation in critical race theory, cultural competency, and intersectionality. Dr. Weiston-Serdan’s team offers [services](#) to embed equity-focused practices into training mentors.
- Education Redesign Lab’s [Children’s Cabinet Toolkit](#): This free guide focuses on building municipal partnerships to integrate social services functions to best support young people.
- EL Education’s [We Are Crew: A Teamwork Approach to School Culture](#): This workbook provides case studies and templates for schools to design advisory models that provide students with year-over-year support networks.





## Step 3. Expand networks to expand opportunities: Helping students forge new connections

### Guiding questions

- How does your program currently gather information on students' individual career interests? How often do you check back on how those interests have evolved or shifted?
- Based on those interests, what kinds of professional opportunities are you hoping students will have access to down the line?
- What expertise, experiences, and professions are currently represented in students' families and extended networks?
- What new connections does your approach currently leave "to chance" that you want to make sure all students have access to?
- How often are new professional connections and mentors in students' lives opening their own Rolodexes to broker additional connections on students' behalf?

### Meaningful metrics

Different people with varied backgrounds, expertise, and insights can provide students with a wide range of options for discovering opportunities, exploring interests, and accessing career options. Programs aiming to expand career options or help graduates secure high-quality jobs should ensure alignment between students' goals and the diversity of relationships put within their reach. Institutions committed to expanding students networks in service of expanding opportunities should measure:

- The number of industry connections beyond school that a student forges over the course of a program
- The attributes of those with whom relationships are formed (such as career expertise, background, and willingness to open up their own networks to students)
- Students' access to a diversity of networks, particularly across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds
- Students' ability to name connections across or within specific professional industries



Leveraging students' existing networks and empowering them to grow their social capital is critical. Since social capital is such an important component of our theory of change, we've taken a multifaceted approach to measuring it."

— Aimee Eubanks Davis, Founder & CEO, Braven



## What the research says

- **Networks shape career exposure, which in turn shapes career ambitions. But broad exposure to diverse careers isn't equally distributed.** America is witnessing an alarming rate of what researchers have dubbed “lost Einsteins”: young people who show promising potential but who, due to lack of exposure to innovation, appear far less likely to pursue careers as inventors. As a result, children from high-income (top 1%) families are ten times more likely to become inventors as those from below-median income families, based largely on exposure rather than aptitude.<sup>24</sup>
- **Young people believe connections and social capital are essential for navigating their career journeys—but often struggle to build them.** In a qualitative study of students' experiences in career pathways programs, researchers found that young people know they can't progress on their career journeys alone. But many described striving and struggling to form connections that offer the social capital needed to navigate entry into work opportunities and to advance their work-related goals.<sup>25</sup>
- **When it comes to job-getting, there's a surprising strength in weak ties.** Weak ties, which are by definition more plentiful in our lives, are more likely to open up new opportunities or information beyond what stronger ties can.<sup>26</sup> In fact, researchers have found that jobseekers are more likely to find out about job opportunities through their weak-tie networks. However, a single strong tie can prove more valuable “at the margin.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, people tend to have far more weak ties—acquaintances, former colleagues, friends of friends—than they do strong ties, which increases the chances that more opportunities flow through weak-tie networks. But stronger ties may be more willing to help.<sup>27</sup>
- **Even brief chats with industry experts can make a difference.** According to research in the UK, participation in career talks with employee volunteers can change students' attitudes toward education, influence their future plans and subject choices, motivate them to study harder, and support an improvement in academic attainment.<sup>28</sup> There may be a financial benefit as well. Researchers at OECD found that when 14-year-old students engaged in short, school-mediated career talks with outside speakers, there was a 0.8% increase in wages for each talk and a 1.6% increase if students thought the talk was “very useful.”<sup>29</sup>



## Strategies from the field

Although you may be offering one-off “networking” opportunities for your students, doing so with an eye toward forming more authentic connections aligned to students’ needs and interests can pay dividends. Expanding students’ networks can broaden their short- and long-term options. The following strategies can help you put more relationships from an array of backgrounds and industries into reach for your students:

- **If you’re trying to recruit new volunteers or mentors into students’ lives → Look at the networks your students and community already possess, but may not be activating:**

Diversifying students’ connections can often mean recruiting new “outsiders.” But the first step to finding those new connections is understanding whom students already know but may not be viewing as valuable resources or connections to help them achieve their goals. For example, a student may view a neighbor as a friend of her parents, but might not know what that neighbor does for a living. In addition, by leveraging the “taking stock” strategies in Step 1, you can start to surface relationships in students’ networks whom other students in your program could benefit from getting to know, in turn encouraging students to share their network resources with one another.

- **If you’re brokering new connections on students’ behalf → Plant seeds of trust early on by surfacing (sometimes hidden) similarities:**

The notion of [homophily](#), more commonly thought of as “Birds of a feather flock together,” describes the fact that people are more likely to trust others who they perceive to be similar to them. By asking students and new connections to share aspects of their lives and identify areas of common interest, experience, or taste (even if those are not obvious at first), you can increase the likelihood that trust is forged. Innovative programs like [Climb Hire](#) often use storytelling exercises for students to share their own stories and frame those stories to prospective employers. They also provide students with a list of possible questions that they can ask when conversing with prospective employers to purposefully surface homophily or shared experiences and interests.

- **If your students experience a negative interaction with a new connection → Debrief the relationship to mitigate long-term harm:**

Relationships may go badly for a whole host of reasons, but you can take steps to ensure a negative relationship does not cause lasting harm to students’ sense of self-worth and academic ability.<sup>30</sup> Ensure that you have someone in place to help the student process what happened in that negative interaction or relationship. For example, mentoring programs like [Big Brothers Big Sisters Massachusetts Bay](#) have developed protocols for how staff can engage in practices that promote healthy “closure” of mentor-mentee relationships, including acknowledging emotions, reflecting on memories, and considering how the mentee grew or changed in the course of the relationship. MENTOR’s director of research and evaluation, Mike Garringer also [offers helpful guidance](#) on implementing positive “closure” practices.

- **If your students know exactly what they want to do and where they want to work → Cultivate a few very strong ties:**

If students are far along on their educational journey and have specific goals, high-touch, enduring mentor connections can increase the likelihood of getting hired. For example, Big Picture Learning’s approach to high-touch mentoring in the course of internship-based learning appears to be paying off in graduates’ job prospects. In a study of three of their high schools’ alumni outcomes, 88% of those who did not enroll in college secured full-time employment—with 74% reporting that this employment was facilitated through a mentor or contact from one of their internships.

- **If students are still exploring their interests or if your program is aiming to expand students' options long-term → Invest in larger, more diverse weak-tie networks:**

If students are still exploring possibilities, then programs should think about ways to multiply the number of connections to people working across an array of industries. This expands students' access to opportunities and their sense of possible future selves. Broad, diverse networks with high levels of [structural diversity](#) expand students' optionality down the line. Opening up these connections can include everything from job shadows to career chats to short client projects. When doing so, come up with clear protocols by which students can “get back in touch” with people they meet, so that those weak ties remain accessible afterward.

- **If you're working with cohorts of students focused on new opportunities or job-getting → Build a culture and infrastructure in which peers can offer information and advice to one another:**

Many career-exposure and experience programs rely heavily on staff to train and support students. But students and near peers can also train and support one another if there is a culture of social support established early on, and if there are protocols and infrastructure tools to promote information sharing.

- **If you're inviting guest speakers, community members, or alumni into the classroom or other volunteer-based programming → Structure these visits as relationship-building opportunities, rather than one-off events:**

Every time a “new” person comes into contact with your students, frame that exchange to both visitors and students as an opportunity for forging connections. Work to ensure that guest speakers hail from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences that reflect the student population you serve. Try to structure two-way conversations where students can share something about themselves. Encourage guest speakers to reflect with students on how relationships helped them accomplish their goals. Create secure avenues by which students can get back in touch by re-engaging guest speakers on future projects or lessons where their expertise is relevant. For example, [CommunityShare](#) helps educators in K-12 invite community members into classrooms, often creating enduring relationships between students and guests. For postsecondary institutions, tools like [Riipen](#) help faculty integrate working professionals into projects and coursework, in turn exposing students to real-world projects and connections.

- **If you're struggling to scale internship-based learning experiences → Experiment with shorter, smaller-scale experiences, but measure expanded connections:**

Many programs are focused on expanding career opportunities through internships. Although internships are critical onramps to jobs, they are difficult to scale and don't always yield strong networks. Explore shorter dosage opportunities for career exploration and experience, such as [micro-internships](#), short client projects, and capstone projects as alternative routes to putting professional skills, feedback, and connections within reach for students. For example, [Parker Dewey](#) is an online marketplace offering brief, paid work experiences to college students.

- **If you're investing in skill building and network building in your program → Design feedback, transcripts, and portfolios to expand and document who knows what your students know:**

Brokering new networks is a powerful way to expand opportunity, but part of the power of networks is making more people aware of students' potential, passions, and skill sets. Consider how to ensure that students can show what they know when interacting with new connections, and consider capturing this information in your LMS or CRM tools as well.



We examined what value our students could add and how to present industry partners a lower-lift option to authentically engage with and benefit from students.”

— *Natasha Morrison, Director of Real World Learning, DaVinci Schools & DVX*



## Program spotlights:

**DVX offers shorter project consults, rather than longer internships, with the goal of scaling students' professional networks and experiences.**

Da Vinci Extension (DVX) is a hybrid college in Hawthorne, California, which includes work-based learning as a core feature of its model. As enrollment grew, DVX found it could rely on only three to five local companies to provide high-quality, full-semester, paid internships. To expand opportunities, “project consults” emerged. Smaller groups of DVX students (typically four to six) form teams based on their career interests and engage in real-world projects with industry clients over a six- to eight-week period. Students are expected to take over the many moving parts of client and project management. Preparation and planning for DVX’s full-time educators and for clients were not as onerous. Unlike full-fledged internships, industry partners don’t always have to seek approval from higher-ups to embark on a consultancy. And students who are working while attending DVX didn’t have to quit their jobs to engage in a project consultancy. Thanks to this shift, it’s currently partnering with over 20 local companies on project consults.



**Evidence of impact:** Between 2017-2020, 83% of all DVX students either persisted or earned a degree.



**Sample data collection strategy:** DVX administers a student survey after each project consult, soliciting feedback including:

- *Rate your communication with your industry client (1-4 scale)*
- *I feel more prepared to enter the workplace after this experience (strongly disagree to strongly agree)*
- *Were you provided with all the resources and support needed to complete your deliverables?*

**Basta’s infrastructure and staffing model empowers peers to expand opportunities for one another.**

Basta helps first-generation college students of color navigate the job search process. The organization has carefully designed opportunities for students to exchange their job search information with one another through a variety of channels. Basta uses Slack to host industry-specific discussions where students can trade interview tips, job opportunities, and industry-relevant news with one another. The program strengthens these near-peer relationships by identifying and codifying tasks that near peers can perform in lieu of its full-time, paid Career Success Managers. For example, Basta enlists recent alumni of the program to serve as resume and cover letter-writing coaches, with alumni leveraging their own experience to help students tell their stories to employers.



**Evidence of impact:** 80% of Basta fellows secured a career-pathway job within six months of graduating.



**Sample data collection strategy:** Basta frequently surveys participants on the relationships they are forging in the course of the program and their attitudes toward network building, including items such as:

- *I've developed one or more relationships...that I intend to continue beyond my participation in the program*
- *I feel comfortable building relationships in an informal networking setting*
- *Participating in Basta has increased my confidence in my ability to build and leverage a professional network*

## Putting it into practice

Who do your students want to connect with? What industries or individuals have you already brokered partnerships with? How can you better track and broker connections based on your students' interests? [Download our guided worksheet](#) to expand your students' networks.

## Tools & resources

- The Christensen Institute's [Basta case study](#): This case study details how Basta builds social capital and provides design tools and tips.
- American Student Assistance's\* [Futurescape Tool](#): This free app introduces middle and high school students to thousands of education and career paths and provides personalized career matches. After answering a series of questions, it uses machine learning to adapt to the young person's evolving strengths, passions, interests, and goals.
- YouthBuild USA's [Screening Your Mentors guide](#): This guide includes a free sample of a mentor screening policy along with checklists to guide background checks and prospective mentor interviews.
- NGLC's [MyWays Real-World Learning Toolkit Social Capital Tool](#): This tool includes two free self-reflection worksheets that connect social capital principles and personal experience to the design of real-world learning experiences.
- National Mentoring Resource Center's [Tools to Strengthen Match Support and Closure](#): This free guide explains how to prevent failed mentor-mentee relationships and how to address negative relationships with young people. It includes sample scripts and questions to discuss mentoring experiences with youth participants, mentors, and family members.
- America's Promise Alliance's [Relationships Come First](#) case studies: These case studies describe how four career development and workforce readiness programs prepare young people for work and life.
- DeJesus Solutions' [Social Capital Builders Institute staff and student trainings](#): This resource offers paid workshops for youth-serving organizations considering ways to better build and measure their networks.
- Guttman Community College's [Ethnographies of Work](#) course: This two-part course enables postsecondary students to explore and understand the world of work with a deep emphasis on student agency and building social capital.
- WhoYouKnow.org's [Edtech that Connects directory](#): This directory catalogues a number of career exposure tools and industry networking tools that the Christensen Institute has been tracking over the past few years.
- MENTOR's [Connect-Focus-Grow curriculum](#): Connect-Focus-Grow is a training curriculum that equips mentors with skills to support the personal and professional growth of young people, coaches supervisors on how to manage with a mentoring mindset, and guides young people towards engaging and leveraging mentoring opportunities.

\*Disclosure: American Student Assistance has provided financial support for the development of this playbook.



## Step 4. Leverage edtech that connects: Bringing new relationships within reach for students

### Guiding questions

- How is your school or organization currently using technology to foster connections? Do any of your existing tools have social features and functionalities that you're not putting to use?
- What types of relationships are currently “out of reach”—because of time, cost, or geographic distance—for your students that edtech could help leverage?
- How are both your organization and your individual students currently keeping track of the relationships being forged?

### Meaningful metrics

A powerful supply of [technology-enabled tools](#) that can expand and diversify students' networks is increasingly within reach. Paired with integrated supports, these innovative technologies can be game-changing for schools, particularly those serving students from under-resourced communities. Systems leveraging technology to connect their students to relationships beyond their reach should measure:

- The number and type of new relationships forged through the edtech tools
- Students' ability to document and track the growth of these relationships
- Students' access and ability to re-engage with the individuals they connect with through technology



Without the data—and the tools to collect and analyze the data—how can we measure the impact of expanded networks for our students?”

— *Kate Schrauth, Executive Director, iCouldBe*



## What the research says

- **Technology has a competitive advantage when it comes to diversifying weak ties.** Technology can be seen as an underwhelming surrogate for strong, caring, in-person connections. But it can be an efficient tool for finding, forging, and storing weak ties that still offer new information and opportunities.<sup>31</sup>
- **Technology can address gaps in access.** In some cases, technology-enabled connections are better than no connections at all. Technologies can target areas where relationships are out of reach and students lack access to connections—such as those to professionals working beyond students' home towns or to near peers navigating college and careers beyond students' schools.<sup>32</sup>
- **Multimodal online connections made possible through technology platforms can increase empathy and authenticity.** It is easier to form and express empathy over a video chat—where you can experience both visual and audio cues—than over a phone or text chat.<sup>33</sup>



## Strategies from the field

Today, we can use technology to connect at the press of a button. But for many programs, poor experiences before and during the pandemic may make them especially wary of trying to forge and maintain relationships in online environments. Technology should support your relationship strategy—it can't be the strategy itself. In that spirit, the following approaches can play to technologies' advantages in helping schools and programs organize and broker both virtual and in-person connections, without sacrificing privacy and quality.

- **If you're working to ensure safety and privacy first → Follow background check guidelines and ensure tools are designed to protect personally identifiable information:**

Edtech tools follow different safety protocols depending on the student populations they are designed to serve. For schools and programs serving younger students, some programs adopt a one-to-many policy, meaning students are only interacting online in groups, often under the supervision of an educator. Others make sure that any tools that allow for one-on-one interaction also apply web filters that can monitor the content of student-adult interactions and flag any potentially inappropriate content. These filters catch risky behaviors such as sharing locations or personal information that could threaten student privacy or safety. Some tools have gone even further to protect students' identities. For example, [iCouldBe](#), an online mentoring platform, has used avatars instead of photos to protect student privacy. As filtering technologies improve, more programs will likely move to video-based interactions and chats that can be properly filtered.

- **If you're just starting to use technology to forge connections → Target connections otherwise out of reach:**

Most programs will tend to compare the quality of in-person connections to virtual ones—and find themselves underwhelmed with virtual connections. But technologies that expand students' networks will be best-suited to circumstances where relationships are out of reach. These could include relationships in your local community that are difficult to integrate into day-to-day programming, or individuals who live and work in other geographies. While these connections might not be as strong



as traditional, face-to-face relationships, they will still be able to foster new relationships and diverse networks, and can make up for roles that are hard to access in person.

- **If you're aiming to build affinity groups among and on behalf of students → Explore technologies designed to expand access to individuals who share students' identities and interests:**

Given that similarity breeds trust, connecting students with people from similar backgrounds can begin building a foundation for that trust. This strategy is especially powerful if you're trying to broker connections for students of color or students with other marginalized identities to people with shared backgrounds and identities. Some technology platforms, like [DreamWakers](#) and [Mentor Spaces](#), have been designed to specifically put new, affinity-based connections within reach.

- **If you're trying to connect students' local resources more efficiently → Consider tools that organize local connections beyond spreadsheets or directories:**

Sometimes relationships are “out of reach” not because of distance, but because of time and coordination costs. For those connections, look for technologies that can be used to organize local resources. These can offer efficiencies in sorting, filtering, and scheduling to integrate community members, employers, and alumni into coursework, student support, or career guidance, while providing teachers and faculty with choices to align to their lesson plans and syllabi. A number of emerging technologies offer the capability to both coordinate virtual and in-person connections. By engaging in the “taking stock” strategies in Step 1, you can populate online tools with local, existing relationships in students' existing networks and provide a mix of both online and offline connections.

- **If you're offering experiential, project-based learning → Integrate virtual experts to offer inspiration, project examples, and feedback:**

As educators weave real-world learning into their classrooms, they can scale access to real-world relationships too. Integrating virtual experts at the front end of lessons can spark engagement by making project work more relevant for students. Integrating virtual experts during projects to advise students or offer real-world feedback can help students build both the relationships and skills needed to secure jobs down the line.



We created an app because we simply couldn't afford not to. We believe that a high-tech, high-touch solution is the key to achieving social impact at scale.

—Alexandra Bernadotte, Founder and CEO, Beyond 12



## Program spotlights:

**Cajon Valley Union School District's “Meet-a-Pro” model uses technology to bring local and global professional connections into the classroom.**

Cajon Valley Union School District is a public school district that provides K–12 students with career-related learning. Guided by its World of Work curriculum, students have numerous opportunities to Meet-a-Pro, in which students engage in virtual tours, field trips, and industry chats with working professionals. To scale Meet-a-Pro, the school district uses a tool called [Nepris](#), which ports virtual volunteer industry experts working around the world into classrooms. But Cajon Valley also taps networks in its own backyard. The District has populated Nepris with local connections, including both district employees that work in its central offices and family networks across the district.



**Evidence of impact:** 54% of middle school students reported gaining confidence in their abilities for a future job if they “personally know someone who has done this job.”



**Sample data collection strategy:** Cajon Valley tracks the number and type of industry professionals students are exposed to through the Nepris platform. K–8 students collectively experienced 69,000 views of live industry chats or Meet-a-Pro experiences via Nepris in just over two years.

### **iCouldBe fosters secure online connections that, in turn, help students expand their offline networks.**

iCouldBe brings online mentors from all career backgrounds into high school classrooms where 50-100% of students live at or below the poverty line. The platform is deeply focused on secure, virtual interactions. Mentees and mentors can share information to build a relationship, but can't share personally identifiable information—any information that would allow mentees and mentors to connect physically or virtually outside of the program where no supervision is possible. To overcome the inability of mentees to share photographs, Instagram pages, etc., functionality on the site allows mentors and mentees to create custom avatars and participate with their mentor one-on-one in curricular activities that become highly personalized based on each mentee's unique personal, academic, and career interests, and post-secondary goals.



**Evidence of impact:** 63% of mentees reported that prior to the program they had natural mentors (in their offline lives). After the program, that percentage grew to 81%.




**Sample data collection strategy:** iCouldBe offers students a series of activities called “quests” that prompt students to identify and forge connections based on interests; students add these connections to their online network maps using the iCouldBe app.

## **Putting it into practice**

How are you currently leveraging technology to help students foster or maintain relationships? What additional relationships that are hard-to-find could you forge using technology tools? [Create a plan](#) to leverage edtech that connects.

## **Tools & resources**

- The Christensen Institute's [Cajon Valley case study](#): This case study details how Cajon Valley builds social capital and provides design tools and tips.
- WhoYouKKnow.org's [Edtech that Connects directory](#): This directory catalogues a number of tools that the Christensen Institute has been tracking that offer virtual connections or platforms you can use to organize your own local ecosystem of relationships.
- MENTOR's [Supplement to the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring](#): This resource offers guidance for translating effective mentoring practices into virtual environments. Pages 17-19 include descriptions of programs and researchers that are e-mentoring experts. Pages 26-39 include recommendations to support e-mentoring programs.



## Step 5. Build networks that last: Making sure your students remain connected and continue to expand their networks

### Guiding questions

- Are relationships forged in the course of your program poised to outlast the program itself? Or do they tend to expire when the program ends?
- Are you communicating the long-term value of relationships and relationship building to your students, alongside your academic, career development, or social and emotional learning curriculum?
- Are you arming students with the skill sets and mindsets to continue to reflect on, build, and mobilize their networks after they graduate?
- Is your alumni-tracking strategy integrated with your student experience and network-building strategy?

### Meaningful metrics

Institutions aiming to expand access to opportunity should broker relationships that outlast discrete interventions. To do this well, systems should start to treat relationships as outcomes in their own right, quantifying and tracking them over time alongside academic metrics. Institutions committed to building students' networks that last should measure:

- The number of friendships and other connections a student chooses to spend time with outside of the program or school
- The degree of student trust in and satisfaction with existing relationships
- Students' relationship skills, including the ability to engage or re-engage with individuals in their network



The lessons that [Bob]’s taught me have made all the difference because he became a champion for me and the university. I say a champion because a mentor will give you advice, but a champion will knock down doors for you.

— Freeman Hrabowski III, President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)



## What the research says

- **Access to and the ability to mobilize relationships is a critical asset in today’s workforce.** According to Deloitte’s Future of Work experts, “Individuals will need to find others who can help them get better faster—small workgroups, organizations, and broader and more diverse social networks.” Looking ahead at these trends, they anticipate “much richer and more diverse forms of collaboration” permeating the workforce. In addition, the labor market increasingly rewards social skills. From 1980 to 2012, jobs requiring “high levels of social interaction” grew by almost 12 percentage points, while less social jobs shrank.
- **If you don’t maintain them, relationships naturally “decay” and lose value.** Both strong and weak ties weaken over time without opportunities to stay connected.<sup>34</sup> Researchers describe this phenomenon as the **decay rate**—the rate at which we tend to fall out of touch absent reconnecting—of our existing friendships across geography and time.<sup>35,36</sup> Social networking technologies appear to slow down the natural decay rates of relationships by offering efficient channels for staying connected and providing mass “updates” to our networks.<sup>37</sup>
- **Alumni are a critical asset that often go untapped.** Alumni from your program or institutions contain valuable resources and advice for current students and for one another. But research suggests these resources are rarely tapped. According to a Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey, only 9% of college graduates reported that their alumni network was helpful or very helpful in the job market.<sup>38</sup>

## Strategies from the field

The stronger, broader, and deeper the reservoir of social capital students possess, the better equipped they are to thrive as life continuously throws new circumstances their way. Schools and programs can invest in this reservoir, treating relationships as outcomes in their own right and implementing infrastructure to keep students connected. The following strategies can support and maintain students’ networks beyond the duration of your program:

- **If you’re trying to build students’ longer-term networking skills → Embed skill building into community-building activities:**

Programs that are starting to teach “networking” are doing so first and foremost through embedding relationship-building activities within and across cohorts into their models. Students learn how to build relationships that are authentic and grounded in trust and reciprocity, rather than more transactional, one-sided models of networking. Some programs formalize these connections in peer accountability or success partner structures, through which students are expected to rely on and support one another. Through those experiences, they practice telling their stories and seeing the valuable strengths and resources that their peers possess. Only then do programs start to foster new connections with industry professionals and the like.

- **If you're hoping students' networks outlast programming → Build in opportunities and infrastructure for students to get back in touch:**

No single technology solution exists for the purpose of helping maintain students' relationships over time, but some models have certain benefits. For example, programs like [COOP](#) and [Basta](#) use Slack channels for alumni and current students to interact around particular industry topics and skills. On the other hand, LinkedIn groups have the benefit of maintaining connections to individuals, even if they switch jobs and, therefore, email addresses, lowering maintenance costs. As a reminder, for programs serving younger students, it's important to secure parental permission for any correspondence expected to occur beyond the original scope of a program.

- **If you have trouble keeping track of alumni → Integrate network-building strategies to keep alumni engaged in your community:**

Keeping alumni connected to one another and to current students can accomplish two things at once: brokering student-alumni connections while also increasing programs' and institutions' abilities to keep track of their alumni post-program. While many institutions focus on alumni as a source of financial capital, some are starting to tap alumni for their social capital to enhance students' opportunities for real-world learning, career exposure, and mentorship. In turn, alumni become more engaged with their alma mater's current community. For example, Big Picture Learning has [partnered with researchers to leverage "connectors"](#)—those staff members whom they have identified as maintaining strong connections with former students—to contribute to longitudinal evaluation projects on program outcomes that inform their work.



“The only reason we're combining incredibly high-touch support with lower costs is that alumni do everything for each other.”  
 — Kalani Leifer, Founder and CEO, COOP”

## Program spotlights

**COOP enlists alumni to staff its programming and maintains ongoing alumni support networks via community events and Slack.**

COOP is a nonprofit that helps Black, Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college graduates overcome underemployment. Each cohort of 16 COOPers is assigned four Captains who work collaboratively to guide their cohorts through the 200-hour COOP experience. Captains are themselves COOP alumni who serve as part-time, near-peer coaches, receiving a modest \$1,500 stipend. Although many alumni do this to pay it forward, COOP also strives to continue to create value for them. Alumni stand to benefit from referral bonuses for bringing fellow COOPers into their companies, managerial and leadership training by serving as Captains within the COOP program, or by simply having access to COOP community events. The organization also uses Slack channels that include alumni and current COOPers alike to provide feedback, celebrate, express gratitude, or provide updates. Alumni are also using the channel to solve for real-time issues at work or trade notes on technical skills.



**Evidence of impact:** On average, COOP graduates increase their salaries by three times relative to their pre-COOP earnings.



**Sample data collection strategy:** COOP asks participants for insights on their relationships within and beyond the COOP community in its program survey, including:

- *I have people in my network who I am close to that help me pursue my education or career goals*
- *My Captains support me in developing or strengthening the skills needed to pursue my education or career goals AND my Captains connect me or encourage me to connect with other people who are useful for pursuing my education or career goals*
- *The COOP community increases access to education or career opportunities for other people like me*
- *I form strong relationships with people that I can ask for help in reaching my education or career goals*

Union Capital Boston (UCB) hosts **Networking Nights**, during which its network leaders ask members to share “asks” and “offers” to generate dynamic, responsive resource exchange on a regular basis.

Union Capital Boston is a community-development model in Boston encouraging civic engagement and increasing access to employment through a platform that rewards member participation in community events. Once members join, UCB works hard to maintain participants’ access to social capital through frequent “Network Nights.” These include an activity called “Marketplace” where participants can request or offer help from one another.



**Evidence of impact:** The overall rate of UCB member employment gains has grown at three times the rate of the City of Boston overall.



**Sample data strategy:** Through Network Night exit ticket surveys, UCB asks participants about the nature of the networking experience and the extent to which exchanges or reciprocity took place, including:

- *“What were your emotions tonight at Network Night? (Happy, Shy, Lonely, Inspired, Bored)?”*
- *“Did you participate in Marketplace tonight?”*

## Putting it into practice

How are you currently arming students with the tools, skills, and mindsets to maintain relationships? How is your school and program staying connected to your alumni? [Develop a plan](#) to build networks that last.

## Tools & resources

- The Christensen Institute’s [COOP case study](#): This case study details how COOP builds social capital and provides design tools and tips.
- Education Northwest’s [Keeping Matches in Touch Over the Summer Months fact sheet](#): This resource offers practical tips on how to maintain connection during a pause in programming or post-programming.
- WhoYouKnow.org’s [Edtech that Connects directory](#): This directory catalogues a number of tools for storing and organizing connections and alumni engagement that the Christensen Institute has been tracking over the past few years.
- The Christensen Institute’s [Alumni networks reimaged report](#): This report documents how a range of tools and models in the postsecondary market are helping institutions tap into alumni networks to forge student-alumni relationships.



# Glossary of terms

**Developmental relationship:** A close connection between a young person and an adult, or between a young person and a peer, that powerfully and positively shapes the young person’s identity and helps the young person to thrive.

**Homophily:** The tendency for people to seek out and feel more connected to those who are similar to themselves, based on the notion that similarity breeds trust. Also known as the “birds of a feather flock together” phenomenon.

**Inherited networks:** The social infrastructure (i.e. networks of family, friends, and community members) into which individuals are born and which forms around them.

**Instrumental support:** Tangible support (often contrasted with emotional support) such as help solving problems, financial help, and information and communications that help with educational and occupational goals.

**Micro-internships:** Short-term, paid, professional assignments that are similar to those given to new hires or interns.

**Near peers:** Individuals close in age and experience that can lend support and advice.

**Opportunity gap:** Disparities in access to quality schools, training programs, extracurriculars, work experiences, and resources needed for all young people to be academically, socially, and professionally successful.

**Relationship decay:** The tendency of relationships—both strong and weak ties—to wane over time if they are not regularly maintained through communication and/or joint activities.

**Social capital:** An individual’s relationships and networks, and the benefits that can potentially accrue by virtue of those relationships. For students, this means their access to and ability to mobilize connections that can help them further their potential and goals.

**Strong ties:** Close relationships defined by high levels of time investment, emotional intimacy, trust, and reciprocity.

**Structural diversity (of a network):** The degree of heterogeneity among an individual’s contacts as measured by those contacts’ own ties and membership in other networks.

**Weak ties:** Relationships characterized by relatively less time, emotional intimacy, and reciprocity (as compared to strong ties). Research shows, however, that there is a strength of weak ties, in that they are more plentiful and more likely to contain new information and opportunities.

**Web of support:** The collection of individuals within and outside the family that provides a young person with varying levels and types of support. Supporters may be adults or peers. All are connected to the young person, and may also be connected to one another through formal or informal networks (for example, as members of a program cohort or an alumni group).



# Notes

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## About the Institute

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the world through Disruptive Innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach.

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