

# **The Role of Social Capital, Collective Efficacy, and Webs of Support in Supporting First Year Students: Experiences From the Exploratory Studies Program at the University of Nebraska Omaha**

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*Historically, graduation rates for students entering the University of Nebraska Omaha as “undecided” were abysmal. The Exploratory Studies Program was created to support students who enter the university without a major (Explorers), half of them being first-generation, who often equate their indecision with not belonging at the university and face an array of barriers in higher education. Explorers embedded in a “web of support” of faculty, peer mentors, and advisors help to normalize the process of finding a best-fit major and navigating the complexities of academia, well-being, and future career development. The current article employs sociological and human development paradigms to demonstrate how social capital, collective efficacy, and webs of support can improve student belonging in their first year in university and help buffer barriers to success in higher education. In addition, this framework offers educators a powerful tool to work collaboratively with “undecided” students to augment persistence toward graduation.*

*Keywords: exploratory studies, social capital, educational attainment, social support, collective efficacy, undecided, undeclared, web of support, campus partnerships*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Exploratory Studies Program (EXPL Program) offers a bold, expansive, and increasingly well-integrated campus initiative for undergraduate students that enroll at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) as “undecided” (now known as “Explorers”). Historically, these 450-600 first-time students who

enroll as undeclared have been the most at-risk for not being retained to graduation, demonstrating an overall completion rate of approximately 33%. Additionally, fifty percent of Explorers are first-generation students, which adds a layer of vulnerability to this population. The EXPL Program infuses mentoring throughout each aspect of the collaborative campus-wide initiative, delivering cohesive approaches to support “Explorers” and their dream of a college education and a career (the University of Nebraska at Omaha, n.d.). Anchored in social capital theories, collective efficacy, and webs of support framework, the current report presents descriptive statistics from preliminary program surveys to illustrate how Explorers have formed connections, improved well-being, and benefited from our first-year program.

## BACKGROUND

The conversation around how to mentor undecided or “exploring” students is only just beginning. While numerous research articles have established a positive student success correlation between both mentors and mentees (Hirsch, 2021; Lund, 2019; O’Sullivan, 2017; Rhodes, 2008; Young, 2021), surprisingly few peer-reviewed publications have been published thus far on the effects of a comprehensive mentoring program directed specifically at undeclared, and often first generation, college students. However, there’s plenty of work being done on the ground at undergraduate campuses across the country (Steele, 2022). Exploratory programs have emerged at institutions like the University of Cincinnati, Purdue, the University of Colorado Boulder, and our own, the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO). These programs specifically aim to support college students who have not yet decided upon an academic major, and they often utilize various mentoring models (peers as mentors, academic advisors as mentors, instructors as mentors) in that work.

It is important to note that the Exploratory Studies program grew out of a wider “Completion Imperative” as announced by Chancellor Jeffrey Gold in 2019 (see <https://www.unomaha.edu/strategic-planning/strategic-priorities/completion-imperative.php>). Updates then continued to the campus community on the overall Completion Imperative, including EXPL, in 2020 and 2021, even during the pandemic, such as at: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/the-completion-imperative.php#inds>, and as recently as September 2022 at: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2022/09/uno-reports-historic-first-year-student-enrollment-for-fall-2022.php>. In 2019, before commencing the Completion Imperative, the UNO Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) had identified a historical graduation rate for students entering UNO as “undeclared” at around just 33% for the nearly 800 first time freshman entering in that category. With the start of the EXPL designation, the UNO administration, and an area charitable foundation funding EXPL, hired SciLEAD, a University of Nebraska spin-off company with evaluation expertise, to help OIE to monitor the various rates, and to provide an external perspective and review of the program’s data trajectory to the foundation as a condition of the three years of funding. Analysis strategies included the statistical examination of university-contributed quantitative data trends, qualitative interviews and focus groups, and close collaboration on various new data monitoring processes, such as the EXPL Dashboard, which tracked students as they left EXPL and entered various majors and will continue to follow them to graduation (SciLEAD, 2022). Recently, Chancellor Joanne Li has spearheaded initiatives underlying the importance of workforce development, the acquisition of transferable skills, paths from majors to careers, and securing internships and employment. Such initiatives include Career Connect, the Future of Work Symposium, and the Office of Engagement—all of which underlines how the value of building social capital aligns with student status attainment (Li, 2022 *Omaha World Herald*).

History tells us that students who enter college as “undeclared” have a low matriculation rate and the work being done on undergraduate campuses trying to boost the retention of those students is well worth it (Han, 2022; Kezar, 2020; Pickenpaugh, 2022). The UNO EXPL Team believes that mentoring offers educators a powerful tool to work collaboratively with students as they create meaningful college experiences. From research and the EXPL Team’s work as educators, this paper demonstrates how social capital formation, collective efficacy, and the development of a “Webs of Support” (Varga & Zaff, 2018) for exploring students are key to students thriving in their first year.

## THEORY

### Sociological Theoretical Roots

Traditionally, social theory has honed in on social capital and its impacts on educational attainment, status attainment, and upward mobility (Blau and Duncan, 1967) to explain American social stratification. In a seminal study, Blau and Duncan (1967) found that parental education was a key predictor of children's educational attainment—children whose parents, and especially fathers, went to college had a greater probability of attending and graduating college than children whose parents did not. Thus, not surprisingly, first-generation college students face a wide array of difficulties and lack resources to navigate the path towards college-- and to graduate college (Pascarella et al., 2004), compared to their peers whose parents attended college. Consequently, theorists have posited that culture, social connections, relationships, and trust play an important role in determining success in social and academic life (Bourdieu, 1997; Coleman, 1988). Importantly, Coleman (1988) has differentiated social capital from other forms of capital such as economic and human capital and has emphasized the interconnectedness within a network and the density of ties. In contrast, Bourdieu's rendition of the theory focuses less on network structure and highlights members' access to resources and the potential to reproduce other forms of capital. In "The Strength of Weak Ties" Granovetter (1973) describes the importance of social networks and acquaintanceships in the flow of information and the development of new connections and life opportunities. Further, Kawachi and colleagues (2008) have described the role of social capital in improving health outcomes. Communities rich in trust, cohesiveness, and densely knit networks abound with resources that promote healthy behaviors. Indeed, more cohesive groups are more likely to take health-promoting action through "collective efficacy," defined as the "willingness and ability of a group to work towards a common good" (Butel et al., 2019). In other words, in communities rich in social capital and collective efficacy, people help each other out in times of need and well-being improves. The previous theoretical and empirical concepts have been foundational to the theorization of the "Webs of Support" (Varga & Zaff, 2018) paradigm, which we will thoroughly describe below.

### The Web of Support Paradigm

One salient feature of the EXPL Program is the ecology of substructures provided in and out of the classroom to weave a "web of support." Varga and Zaff (2018) proposed the "web of support" theory, an integrative paradigm of relationships, social networks, and social support, anchored in a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. The authors purport that youth thrive when they have supportive relationships and benefit from quality resources. Specifically, they contend that supportive relationships are tied to academic success and psychological outcomes while buffering the impact of negative outcomes. While most of the PYD literature focuses on adolescents and K-12 learners (up to age 19), a growing body of research has been focusing on the impacts of PYD at the college level and among emerging adults. For instance, Dvorsky et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative analysis of the impact of PYD among emerging adults in six universities (N = 4,654). The authors found that the core tenets of PYD, the Five Cs: Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring were held during emerging adulthood. Results from this research demonstrate that PYD and the Five Cs may be adequately applied to a college context. In addition, the authors report that PYD is all the more important at the college level because it addresses internalizing symptoms and self-regulation, as reflected in Resilience Theory (Connor and Davidson 2003). Furthermore, in their sample, Dvorsky et al. (2019) included students up to the age of 29--and found that the PYD model was validated at the college level even among adult learners. While a better model may be available to address the experience of adult learners, we trust that PYD is adequate for our student sample, which comprises primarily adolescents and emerging adults. These findings support results from a wide body of literature on resilience in college environments (Johnson et al., 2015). In addition, we trust that the PYD paradigm is adequate for our first-year academic home, as most of our student body are considered adolescents, aged 18 and 19, reflecting Nebraska's majority age of 19.

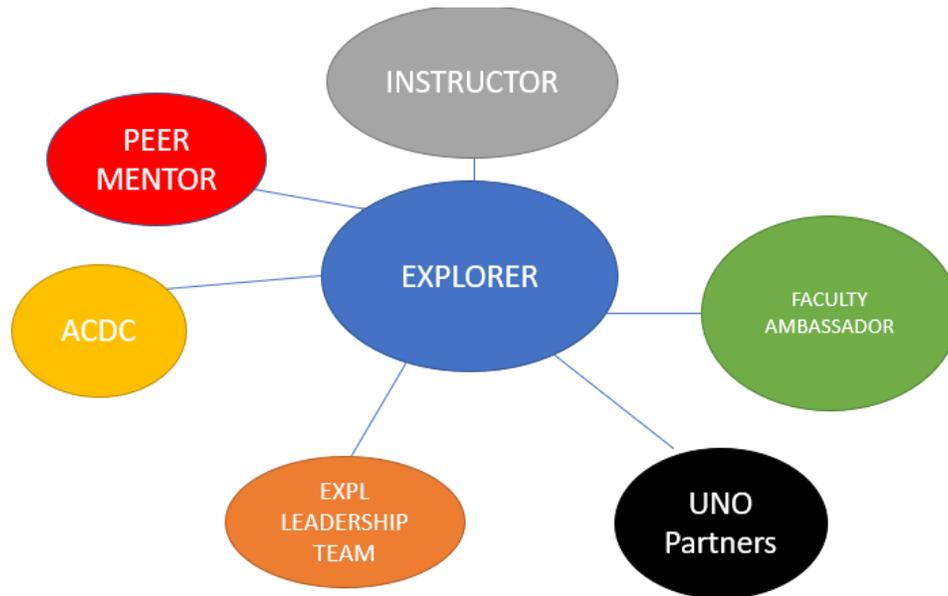
Five dimensions of social support are outlined by Varga and Zaff (2018), building upon Wills and Shinar's (2000) conceptualization of social support: 1) emotional support (discussion of feelings and

emotions, promotion of empathy and listening); 2) instrumental support (financial support, assistance with transportation, cleaning, cooking, etc.); 3) informational support (provide information about resources and available options and alternatives); 4) companionship support (provide a partner for activities); and 5) validation support (consensus information about issues, normativity about individuals; behaviors in college, and more).

### PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS ON THE EXPL WEB OF SUPPORT

The EXPL Program mentoring web of support offers all five dimensions of social support, manifested through multidimensional mentorship opportunities with six major players: 1) EXPL Program Faculty; 2) EXPL Faculty Ambassadors; 3) Explorer Peer Mentors (PMs); 4) Academic and Career Development Advisors (ACDC); as well as 5) EXPL Leadership team (E-care, peer-mentor training, high-impact practices faculty development opportunities); and 6) UNO resources. This approach engages the Explorer, an active agent at the center of their web.

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL EXPL PROGRAM WEB OF SUPPORT**



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#### *Collaborative Partner: EXPL Program Faculty*

The EXPL 1000 class allows students to explore majors, minors, and Academic Focus Areas (AFAs) as well as define their passions, talents, and career interests. Importantly, across all sections, EXPL faculty serve as educational mentors who help vulnerable, first-year Explorers navigate their transition to the university, foster a rigorous yet wellness-informed academic experience, create connections with the important university and local stakeholders, such as ACDC and Financial Aid, and refer students to any necessary campus resources (e.g., Counseling and Psychological Services, Food Pantry, student organizations, Student Health Center, and Office of Latino and Latin American Studies). Mentoring is included in the EXPL faculty's workload, so that they may interact with students beyond office hours and class time in richer and more supportive ways.

During their mentoring interactions, both in and outside the classroom EXPL faculty take note of personal or psychosocial challenges Explorers might encounter, and often offer referrals to university or community partners that may assist the student. The content of those mentoring experiences focuses on how Explorers can create a meaningful UNO experience as much as on course assignments and content.

EXPL faculty may identify key information regarding the student that is to be shared with the larger EXPL Program Team across the web of support using the MavTrack system, a communication platform to share information about Explorers across multiple areas of mentoring support. Through mentoring, EXPL faculty are afforded more opportunities to support students personally, connect them with the web of support created in the program, and experience a more active role in larger university-based retention efforts that undergird the Program. In turn, Explorers forge ties and relationships with Faculty that extend beyond the classroom and benefit from both the content expertise and high-impact practices EXPL Faculty embody.

Results from a preliminary student survey suggest that Explorers value and appreciate the unique relationship shared with their EXPL faculty. At the end of Spring 2022, 100% of Explorers (N = 57) reported that their EXPL 1000 instructor had their best interest in mind. In addition, faculty efforts in and out of the classroom helped to form bridges between students. Overall, results from a preliminary survey revealed that students expanded their networks as a result of being in the Exploratory studies program. In particular, they reported meeting new students and forming new ties and relationships in their first year of college. Results from the end of the Fall 2021 semester revealed that 73% of Explorers (N= 65) reported making connections within their first semester of college at UNO. This resonates with Bourdieu's and Coleman's notions of the importance of network expansion to build social capital and access to key resources for educational attainment and upward mobility. In addition to meeting new students, the structure and partnerships offered by the Exploratory Studies program offer a network rich in collaboration, trust, support, and collective efficacy. We utilize the "Web of Support" (Varga and Zaff, 2018) framework outlined below to describe our program.

#### *Collaborative Partner: Exploratory Studies Ambassador Program and the Strength of Weak Ties*

The EXPL Ambassadors Program (EAP) includes Faculty Ambassadors from 70 departments at UNO who volunteer to work with Explorers. Once or twice a semester, Explorers meet with experts (FAs) in their academic fields of interest. This extended web of support represents another relationship of mentoring, guidance, and support provided by the EXPL Program, and all EXPL faculty serve as Ambassadors of their fields and specialty areas. Thus, the individual meetings between EXPLFAs and Explorers represent a protected time where trust and privacy between student and instructor are paramount. This program epitomizes the concept of the "Strength of Weak Ties" (Granovetter, 1973) and the flow of new information that results from new acquaintanceships, and that is essential for status attainment and upward mobility. For instance, one Explorer who met with a Real Estate Instructor reported the following:

*"I met with David Beberwyk on Monday, November 14, from 11:00-11:15 am on Zoom. For a large portion of the time, I asked him about what he did/does in the financial and real estate world, and he just talked about each field and how they always seem to overlap with one another. He also talked to me about classes I was taking and some that he suggested that I should take. At the end of the meeting, he offered to put me on an email list that puts out events for each week and job opportunities for business majors."*

In meeting with experts in fields of interest, students are often referred to community members and presented with opportunities for potential internships, career development, and future employment.

#### *Collaborative Partner: EXPL Program Peer Mentors*

The EXPL Program Peer Mentors (PMs) are often one of the first connections Explorers make within the EXPL program. They offer Explorers encouragement and assistance with all five dimensions of social support. The PMs framework of support consists of connections with Explorers from the moment they register in the summer for their first semester of classes, to being a co-facilitator in the EXPL1000 classroom (e.g., making announcements, leading discussions, checking on absences). PMs communicate with Explorers in person and via text, email, phone, or Zoom. One-on-one meetings are encouraged to establish what the Explorer Mentee (EM) needs from this collaborative connection. PMs continue to connect with their individual EMs outside the classroom throughout the semester by facilitating programming events to

bolster a sense of community and allow for the exploration of majors and potential career paths. Throughout all interactions, PMs model engaged student behaviors, such as attending university-sponsored events, taking advantage of opportunities to explore new ideas, getting involved in campus activities, and taking the initiative to learn about possible academic majors and career options. PMs are students who themselves have gone through an exploration process in college. The EXPL Program aims to cultivate a mindset that Explorers never stop exploring, seeking to learn and discover for a lifetime.

PMs provide various kinds of support: emotional support to EMs by sharing their story of entering college and trying to find their best-fit major that will support their passions and vision for the future they desire; validation support by meeting EMs where they are at, normalizing being “undecided” when entering college and adopting an identity as an Explorer; instrumental support by engaging with EMs on how to navigate practical matters, such as how to find parking on campus, how to use the campus shuttle system, how to buy books and schedule classes, and how to deal with resident life challenges. PMs, former Explorers themselves, offer critical kinds of support so EMs are equipped to thrive in a university setting; informational support by not only sharing their knowledge of university resources but by accompanying EMs to the campus resources or helping them to set up appointments or accessing online resources; companionship support by accompanying mentees to campus and departmental events, such as major and career exploration events, and university-sponsored community building programming events that PMs co-create with campus partners. A University of New Hampshire study purports that students who make friends in educational settings are more likely to succeed academically (Marder, 2009). The EXPL PMs created “MavPals,” a novel program that pairs compatible students based upon shared interests and offers programming events where “MavPals” can connect with their peers for safe and fun activities as well as attend university-sponsored events together.

To ensure the professionalism and confidence of PMs, the EXPL Program PMs receive extensive training before each semester begins and weekly throughout the semester. For example, PMs complete the National Association of Student Personnel Administration (NASPA) Certified Peer Educator Training and meet weekly with the EXPL Program Leadership Team to receive “just-in-time” training on current issues in the EXPL 1000 course, advising cycle, or upcoming events. Monthly training sessions include EXPL instructors and ADCD advisors so that PMs are familiar with the “web of support” available and align their mentoring work with each entity. This collaborative training is critical to provide a robust support network to Explorers.

Data collected over the last two years supports that PMs are making a difference in the EXPL Program. For example, internal surveys about mentoring efforts via perception surveys with Mentees reveal the following important outcomes to the role of having a PM-EM relationship: 89% of Explorers surveyed (N = 57) at the end of the Spring of 2022 reported that they felt comfortable going to their Peer Mentor for support and/or advice. All in all, relationship building with PMs, access to new information, and trust exemplify the concepts of network expansion and social capital formation.

#### *Collaborative Partner: ACDC Advisors*

The Academic and Career Development Center (ACDC) Advisors work closely within the web of support to align communication with Explorers, develop tools, resources, and events that provide major exploration opportunities, and most importantly utilize an “advising as coaching” model to help students navigate academic and personal challenges, which are often intertwined in college. An ACDC Advisor is an Explorer’s first point of contact for the EXPL Program during Orientation, and Explorers continue to work with their Advisor until they declare a major. This coordinated care model has proven effective in building the Advisor-Explorer relationship and augments Explorer retention and re-enrollment.

The “advising as coaching” model, developed at Utah Valley University, combines aspects of academic advising with leadership coaching to “encourage the student to take responsibility for the process of developing, refining, and engaging in their decision-making and planning activities” (McClellan & Moser, 2011). This advising as coaching process (ADVISE) follows five stages: Active listening; Determining desire, dream, and problem; evaluate what has been done so far; Identify options; Select options and develop a plan; and engage and evaluate. The use of this advising as a coaching process has resulted in a high

touchpoint advising model for Explorers, and particularly for students on probation. Student engagements increased in one-on-one coaching meetings, academic advising, and workshops; this resulted in record-low suspension numbers for Explorers two years in a row. At the end of Spring 2021, 233 Explorers were on probation; at the end of Spring 2022, this number decreased to 202. Throughout the academic year, advisors are assigned caseloads of students ranging from 100-150. This manageable caseload allows for advisors to have frequent check-ins and follow-up appointments with students. By following a structured communication plan, advisors reach out to Explorers at intentional points in the semester about class registration, important deadlines (dropping a class, paying student bills, registration windows), general academic success strategies, and upcoming events. Through texts, emails, and phone calls, advisors contact Explorers directly about 15 times per semester.

Data-collected from Explorers through surveys to measure the effectiveness of the high touchpoint advising model at the end of Spring 2022, showed 93% of Explorers (N = 61) reported feeling valued by their advisor, 84% answered 8 or higher on a 1-10 scale measuring advisor compassion, and students rated the Academic & Career Development Center 4.75/5 in terms of inclusiveness. Finally, preliminary results from the end of Fall 2021 show that 76% of Explorers (N = 61) were more knowledgeable about ways to care for their mental and physical health as a result of belonging to the Exploratory Studies program. As demonstrated in student feedback, the coaching of Advisors to Explorers through the advising-as-coaching model is an important and effective aspect of the web of support.

## CONCLUSION

The University of Nebraska Omaha Exploratory Studies Program provides a robust model for building collaborative partnerships (“webs of support”) across academic and student success units as well as mentoring, coaching, guidance, and support practices among near-peers, faculty, and advisors. By aligning and coordinating supportive practices across campus, a significant increase in graduation rates for Explorers is projected. In addition, the EXPL Program serves as an example of how high-impact practices such as mentoring can be scaled across the entire university to augment retention, persistence, and graduation rates. These preliminary results suggest that faculty-student trust is a powerful supportive relationship, embedded in a multidimensional web of support, in which all dimensions of social support are represented. Trust in relationships is a key element of social capital formation and necessary for advancement and upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1997; Coleman, 1988)-especially among vulnerable and first-generation students. Further, this current report has demonstrated the relevance of collective efficacy in a first-year university pedagogical setting. Because our sample sizes are small, we could only focus on presenting descriptive statistics. Yet, further research must concentrate on inferential statistics and mixed methodologies to study the effect of this innovative program on first-year students. Future avenues of research ought to investigate the impact of social capital formation, collective efficacy, and webs of support on graduation rates, GPA, workforce development and status attainment, and mental health outcomes among our cohorts of Explorers and first-generation students.

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