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# Personal Insights:

*NAVIGATING INFORMAL NETWORKS*

Catherine L. Jordan | Bachelor Business Administration | Cum Laude

Western Michigan University | Honors Thesis | Lee Honors College | May 2024

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### **Introduction**

As a non-traditional student, my journey through college has been anything but conventional. Unlike the typical high school-to-college transition, I embarked on my educational adventure later in life, balancing coursework with familial responsibilities and career aspirations. Within this paper, I will share my insights, my triumphs, my challenges, and the interactions that have shaped my experience. Join me as I unravel the unseen and intricate ties that link us together through learning and growth.

### **Topic**

My time at Western Michigan University, particularly while attending the Haworth College of Business, influenced many aspects of my life. For two and a half years, I spent countless hours learning, studying, researching, and trying to forge lasting relationships and find a place where I belonged. Reflecting on my journey through Western's Haworth College of Business, I recognize the profound impact it has had on my personal and professional development. For two and a half years, I immersed myself in a rigorous academic environment, dedicating countless hours to learning, studying, and researching. My pursuit of knowledge was relentless, and my commitment to academic excellence was unwavering. Yet, amidst the intellectual challenges, I sought something more intangible but equally vital—a sense of community and belonging. I tried to forge lasting relationships and connect with peers and mentors who shared my aspirations and values. Despite my efforts, the goal eluded me, staying just beyond my reach. I yearned to find my niche and weave myself into campus life.

### **Self**

My name is Catherine. I am a non-traditional, first-generation student, a mother to seven wonderful kids, a sister, a wife, a lifeguard, a nurse, a taxi, a boo-boo kisser, a fighter, a lover, a

peacemaker, a woman, an aunt, a daughter, and so many more identities. I did not graduate from high school; however, I did obtain my general education diploma before the rest of my high school class graduated. I tried attending community college the summer after ‘graduation’ from high school—I messed things up and rightfully earned two ‘W’ [withdrawals] on my permanent student record—affecting my cumulative and transfer GPA overall. I was unable to reach *Summa Cum Laude* at Western due to this early disruption, but I was OK with that, I earned *Cum Laude*. I went back to that same community college eight years later—this time I had a plan. I created a ten-year plan, and during that time, I would have to earn a bachelor’s degree. My plan, although simple, did identify milestones and a time limit; it must be completed within ten years—I completed it in six. My plan is outlined below:

1. **Phase One:** Apply to attend a community college.
2. **Phase Two:** Graduate from a community college.
3. **Phase Three:** Apply for transfer to Western—take advantage of the transfer partnership.
4. **Phase Four:** Graduate from Western.

Now, each of these phases may seem broad, but each one had multiple subheadings that detailed specifically how I would achieve each phase. I did not realize it at the time, but I was creating and working on what I now know is a goal system designed to help me clearly identify goal specificities and then realistically achieve those goals within an attainable time limit.

I then spent three full semesters on academic probation—to prove that I was serious this time. During my year and a half of academic probation, I continuously demonstrated why I deserved to be given a second chance—I graduated from community college with two associate degrees in applied sciences and a management certificate. I also graduated *Summa Cum Laude*—something I had worked hard for—and my cumulative GPA only affected my transfer GPA, so I did earn the presidential honors distinction for both of my associate degrees. It certainly was no

painless process, but as someone who worked hard for something once said, “nothing worth having comes easy”—author (*unknown*). For a clearer identification of origin and author, ‘Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing; unless it means effort, pain, and difficulty’—Theodore Roosevelt (*TR Center*, est., 1905—1910). This emphasizes the challenges individuals face and the effort we must exert to overcome them.

### **A ‘Typical’ Haworth [HCOB] College of Business Student—Human Resource Program**

A ‘typical’ student enrolled in the Human Resources program at the Haworth College of Business (HCOB) at Western Michigan University is likely to be a young adult [aged 18—25] pursuing a specialized education in managing and developing others. The Human Resource program at Western stands out for its excellence and distinctiveness. The dedicated professionals who steer students learning foster extraordinary relationships with their students. The professors, with their extensive real-world experience, are deeply committed to the success of each student, ensuring they are thoroughly prepared for life beyond the university. The HR program emphasizes essential concepts for a successful career in human resources, industrial relations, or management.

These concepts include:

- Human resource planning
- Managing a diverse workforce
- Staffing
- Compensation
- Employee relations
- Organizational development and change

Students who enroll in this program are prepared for graduate studies in human resources or careers in business unions, industrial relations, or law. They are expected to have technical skills

in project management software, Microsoft programs, Google Analytics, payroll software, and possibly SAP experience. Interpersonal skills such as active listening, critical thinking, complex problem solving, social perceptiveness, time management, and management of personal resources are also crucial (Career Pathway: Human Resource Management, 2022). Moreover, students are encouraged to engage in activities that enhance their career readiness, such as taking part in student groups like the Society for Excellence in Human Resources and attending events like Business Career Day. The Zhang Career Center, another useful resource, is a hub of opportunity and growth for Human Resource students who are expected to take advantage of the opportunities offered by attending professional skills programming. A traditional student enrolled in the Haworth College of Business (HCOB) Human Resource program is characterized by a hands-on approach to personal and professional development. The comprehensive educational approach outlined above ensures students are well-equipped for the dynamic and evolving landscape of Human Resources.

### **Schema**

Schema, as defined by Vinney (2022), is a mental representation or framework that helps us organize our thoughts to simplify our interactions with the world around us. In psychology, as it relates to firsthand experiences, schemas describe a pattern of thoughts or behaviors to organize information and relationships. It is an underlying organizational structure or pattern within our minds. Mental schemas are individualized, and they determine how each of us responds to complex information and stimuli, they guide our thought processes, emotional aptitudes, and the behaviors we display (Vinney, 2022). Traumatic events can have a significantly adverse influence on our mental schemas, which can lead to maladaptive and

distorted responses, perceptions, and reactions to situations with other individuals. These early schemas can end up serving as templates for future relationships and interactions, affecting long-term well-being following subsequent trauma experiences. Below, I will try to relate how the lack of early intervention has thwarted my intentions, however well-meaning they were.

My path through the Human Resources program as a non-traditional student can be best understood through the application of developmental and informal [social] network communication theories as they apply to my experiences. To better understand these theories, the concepts of schema, mindset, loneliness, and communication will be explored as a background to a personalized quasi-network analysis. This analysis should enhance my learning, my decision-making, and my ability to achieve an understanding of complex systems through consideration of an exclusive perspective of social interaction.

### **Mindset Theory**

As a transfer student, I felt I was already in a disadvantaged position upon my arrival at WMU. I came into a program where students had been busy forming bonds, creating lasting relationships, and making lifelong connections. I perceived myself as being an outsider from my first day in class. Perhaps, this was the main factor in what would eventually be the outcome. Mindset theory (or something similar) could explain my perceptions. *Mindset Theory*, first proposed by renowned Stanford University psychologist, Carol Dweck in the 1970s and again shown by Kapasi and Pei (2022), is a theory of motivation and achievement. Its central characteristic is *growth* and the view that abilities are pliable and changeable—something alterable. A *growth mindset* is a belief that an individual's abilities and intelligence are developable over time through dedication, and hard work (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). On the other



hand, a *fixed mindset* is the belief that from birth, an individual's intelligence, abilities, and talents are what they are—they cannot change regardless of hard work and perseverance.

To further elucidate these concepts, I will highlight the various aspects of Dweck and Yeager's (2019), research that individuals tend to focus on:

***Growth Mindset:*** People who work toward a growth mindset tend to:

- Embrace challenges as opportunities for learning and growth.
- Persevere when faced with setbacks, viewing them as a part of the learning process.
- Effort is a path that one walks through to improve and control.
- Seek advice from others to enhance one's abilities and learn from criticism.
- Using the success of others as a motivational tool to develop one's skills.

By focusing on a growth mindset, individuals can increase their motivation and achievement aptitude, particularly in educational settings (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

***Fixed Mindset:*** Dweck and Yeager (2019) identified this concept as individuals who make assumptions about their abilities and potential, viewing them as predetermined. Those stuck in this type of mindset, tend to focus on:

- Shying away from challenges for fear of failing expectations.
- Easily discouraged by obstacles and view them as insurmountable.
- Effort is not considered necessary; instead, it is considered irrelevant and not valued.
- Refute feedback that could lead to growth, preferring to stay in one's comfort zone.
- Threatened by and envious of others' success. Individuals usually see this as reflecting their limitations and abilities.

Those who focus on a fixed mindset miss opportunities for learning and growth and refuse to attempt an alteration of their talent, abilities, and intelligence through hard work and effort (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

***False Growth Mindset:*** This kind of mindset, identified by Dweck and Yeager (2019), is where individuals misunderstand or misapply the concepts of a growth mindset yet fail to encompass its meaning and understanding. Individuals with this type of mindset may possess traits such as:

- Lacking consideration for progress toward outcomes and instead approving one's effort.
- Recognizing one's abilities or effort but failing to offer means of support, resources, or opportunities to realize and attain that potential.
- Individuals may use this mindset to focus on the absence of personal improvement instead of taking the initiative and necessary steps to cultivate a mindset that leads to growth.

Dweck and Yeager (2019) caution against a superficial understanding of growth mindset concepts to avoid misapplying an ineffectual application of them. Instead, Dweck and Yeager (2019) promote the unpretentious implementation of growth concepts to gain a deeper understanding that could lead to positive outcomes for one's growth, development, and learning. Through this lens, I see that I allowed my pervasive thoughts and self-doubt to cloud my thinking and overcome my natural capabilities to build connections and associations. *The False Growth Mindset* Theory introduced by Dweck (2016) explores individual and group dynamics, which could explain my inability to step out of my perceptions of judgment and rejection I feel because I may hold fixed beliefs about my abilities. This means that holding fixed beliefs about my abilities behind a façade impedes my ability to adapt and develop a deeper and truer growth mindset, which could eventually lead to more fulfilling success and personal development. It is

difficult to see how you can hold yourself back when you are the one experiencing a situation. When we lack meaningful bonds with others, we miss people being comfortable enough to share their observations about our behavior, actions, and character. We then must rely on our distorted perception, effectively becoming our own worst critic [i.e., Ellen Hendrikson, 2018].

### **Explain Concepts**

Understanding my growth and behavior through the developmental concepts I will outline and describe will reveal how recognizing and acknowledging my development has shaped my interactions and experiences as a non-traditional student at Western.

### **Personal Experiences in Creating Barriers**

All of us are works in progress. I am altering and revising my schema to change the meaning surrounding events in my life that have been disruptive. Specifically, changing the way I talk to and treat myself is one way I am working on re-storying my narrative to change the meaning related to the traumatic events in my life. For mental safety, health, and well-being, early therapeutic intervention should be pursued to try and reframe negative beliefs and promote healing and recovery (Holt, 2023; Savard, 2014; Werries, 2024). I have come to perceive and relate some interactions with my peers as being negative because of how my schemas were built. My experiences in adolescence shaped the thoughts I would later frame to build my perception of myself and how others view me. The preceding sections outlined how I structure my thoughts and interactions by recognizing that my frame of mind significantly influences my perception of the world. The next sections portray my experiences based on my transfer-in status and how that status impacted my ability to create lasting relationships. Transferring meant that I had not taken part in the two years' worth of relationships that other students were able to develop through

shared interests. This impacted my perception and ability to fully relate to my peers. I was not only a transfer student, but I also commuted quite a distance away from campus; when classes wrapped up for the day, I went home—not to the student center or the dorm lobby to ‘hang out.’ I was lacking critical tools, which several of my peers possessed. Once my age was considered, I perceived that I ended up in a completely different social league in comparison to many of my colleagues, due to an ocean of differing factors. Of course, a lot of the differences appeared so deep and wide because of my perceptions and reactions, but some of the differences were just geography, life stage, cultural upbringing, and facts.

I aim to identify key components contributing to my personal development, career progression, emotional understanding, educational insights, and how applying principles of critical thinking will reveal my introspective progress. I will include components that emphasize and reveal my behaviors, reactions, and responses, by understanding my growth that occurred through my processes. This will become essential in developing a comprehensive self-portrait. This depiction will not only display certain achievements but also transparently illustrate the challenges I have overcome and the lessons I have learned along the way. This reflective approach allows for deeper insight into my journey and the factors that have shaped my development, specifically the outcomes of my actions. The above-mentioned process of self-reflection aims to analyze my learning processes, how I understand complex concepts, and how to connect theories with practical knowledge. During this self-account, I will endeavor to relate my emotional experiences to help release any affectual emotive remnants that are acting as an obstruction to my evolutionary maturity, growth, and development.

During my journey, I learned [sometimes in difficulty] that the actions we take create ripples, much like a stone cast into a pond. My own story is a testament to this. Guardedness has

been a constant companion, a shield forged from the adversity of youth and the insights of a diagnosis that illuminated the reasons behind my guarded reactions. Yet, I recognize that we are all in a state of growth and development, a continuous evolution to find who we are—our ongoing saga of transformation. In my quest for personal growth, I endeavored to reshape my internal narrative, to reframe the disruptions of my past into lessons for the future. Upon the completion of my academic pursuits, holding my bachelor's degree was a bittersweet moment. The ambitions that once seemed unattainable sparked a period of deep self-reflection. This introspection brought into focus the complex network of relationships that define our existence. I appreciate the dual nature of my educational experience—the triumphs achieved, and the dreams deferred. It is becoming a chronicle of personal enlightenment, an understanding of the resonance of my actions, and the critical importance of nurturing the bonds we form.

### **Loneliness and Isolation as a Non-Traditional Student**

#### **Explain Concepts**

To gain deeper insight into the effects of social isolation and loneliness on my experience as a non-traditional college student, exploring themes that personally resonate with me will be useful in highlighting how these concepts intertwine with my inability to become part of a social group. Loneliness, defined by the CDC, is “feeling alone or disconnected from others” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). It is a feeling where one is lacking in meaningful or close relationships and lacks a sense of belonging. The explanation of loneliness reflects the difference between a person's ‘actual and their desired’ level of social bonding and relationship making, as described by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2023. This concept encompasses both social bonding and relationships and emphasizes the need for meaningful contact with others to prevent feelings of loneliness. Even a person who has a lot of

friends can still feel lonely. Students who bear the title, ‘non-traditional,’ should wear it as a badge of honor. Actions do not always align with words and intentions. Students such as these have differences in age, experiences, and responsibilities that make social integration a challenge (Ellard et al., 2022). There are steps higher educational institutions could take to address the challenges associated with feelings of loneliness for students who feel they lack commonalities with their peers.

Understanding the unique difficulties non-traditional students may face and implementing strategies to encourage a sense of belonging may assist in preventing feelings of loneliness. Some strategies for inclusion that universities could implement to build stronger connections for non-traditional college students are:

- **Creating inclusive spaces:** Universities can establish dedicated spaces where non-traditional students can meet and connect with peers who share similar experiences (Brunner & Ehlers, 2022).
- **Encourage participation in diverse groups:** Promoting involvement in clubs and organizations that cater to a variety of interests could ensure that there are a variety of options that resonate with non-traditional students (Gulley, 2021).
- **Facilitate mentorship programs:** Pairing non-traditional students with mentors who have navigated similar paths can provide guidance and a sense of community (Hittepole, 2019).
- **Organize social events:** Plan events specifically for non-traditional students to foster connections and reduce feelings of loneliness (Alexander-Jordan, 2023).
- **Offer flexible engagement opportunities:** Recognize the time constraints of non-traditional students by providing flexible meeting times and virtual participation options (Coughenour, 2023).

Through implementing these strategies, universities could help non-traditional students integrate socially, which may reduce loneliness and enhance their overall university experience. I believe that having dedicated spaces, groups, discussion boards, and social events specifically

tailored for non-traditional students like me could have helped prevent loneliness and fostered meaningful connections with my peers. Providing opportunities for students who already feel out of place could be beneficial in offering support. Institutions need to acknowledge the diversity of their student body and actively work to meet the needs of all students, including those who may not fit the traditional mold. The diverse and inclusive nature of the Haworth College of Business currently offers many of the options I have outlined, making HCOB a remarkable and unique place to learn and grow professionally.

Social isolation is the absence of connecting with others, entwined with minimal or nonexistent social support and interaction (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). There is a risk associated with mental health when a person is socially isolated, regardless of feeling lonely. Social isolation and loneliness tend to go together and are likely influenced by culture, learning, playing, demographics, upbringing, adult relationships and interactions, friend groups, and the places where people live, among others. In 2020, a study conducted by the *National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine* uncovered adults aged 65 and older face social isolation at a rate of one in four, stressing the absolute importance of building a connection with other people on a meaningful level as a requisite for life. This study further uncovered that individuals experiencing social isolation face heightened health risks compared to those who maintain meaningful connections. The specific risks identified are:

- Dementia Risk—50% Increase
- Heart Disease—25% Increase
- Stroke—32% Increase

### **Personal Experiences Combating Loneliness and Social Isolation**

To overcome social isolation and the challenges stemming from limited human interaction, I discovered that taking proactive steps can make a significant difference. By actively seeking out new connections and engaging with a diverse range of individuals, I have broadened my perspectives, learned so much about others, and found new and exciting resources and opportunities. Moreover, I have realized the importance of building inclusive and supportive networks. These networks value diversity and ensure that all members have equal access to information and opportunities. Shedding my insecurities has been a difficult yet crucial aspect; it has allowed me to feel less isolated and lonely. If only we all openly expressed our emotions, others may not feel so isolated and alone and know there is a good chance that those around them share similar feelings. We could establish open, deeper, and more meaningful social ties with one another based on our shared thoughts and feelings. Social isolation can have detrimental consequences for our health and well-being. The following section discusses how human interaction and involvement could give rise to the formation of groups, which in turn could lead to meaningful relationships.

### **Informal Networks**

Informal networks are the social ties of association—they are spontaneously formed around shared interests and knowledge—and rely on forged personal relationships that are used to find information and accomplish tasks (Bryan et al., 2007; Cross, 2005). However, it may be useful to point out that not all informal networks are social; they may be purely professional, social, or a blend of both, depending on the nature and context in which they develop (Borgatti & Molina, 2005; Cross et al., 2001; Parkhe et al., 2006). Informal networks can increase the speed



of knowledge flow and increase cross-departmental efficiencies, but they can also slow things down (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). For example, an overload of email communications, complex and iterative company meetings, and repeated texts or voicemails can lead to a decrease in the quality and frequency of communication. Informal networks tend to be conditional on central individuals (decidedly an undesirable consequence of such networks) within the network; this individual becomes increasingly relied upon, predominantly so, if they share frequent and accurate knowledge with others. Individuals will come to this central figure for knowledge and information, but what happens when the individual leaves the network? Negative consequences can emerge: The individual takes the knowledge with them, and the linkages of communication and knowledge facilitation break, leaving group members disorganized and disconnected. Informal networks are emergent, non-hierarchical connections within organizations that are pivotal for information flow and innovation. DeHart-Davis, Whetsell, & Kroll (2021) emphasize how informal networks complement formal structures by enabling efficient information search and decision-making processes in public organizations.

### **What are they? Primarily Social in Nature**

Social networks are structures of personal relationships and social interactions that extend across both digital and physical spaces. They are crucial for emotional support and community building. According to Sven Horak et al., (2020) in the article *Informal Networks: Dark Sides, Bright Sides, and Unexplored Dimensions*, social networks, particularly for students, are part of an informal network and are seen as exclusive. Meaning, that those who are members of the social network have access to the benefits of such a network; outsiders lacking informal ties to a social network will not access benefits that are not limited to information, knowledge sharing, and job opportunities. For instance, Borgatti and Foster's (2003) research highlights the role of

social networks in facilitating collective action and knowledge sharing within communities.

Social networks are made in one's formative years—they are the friends on your 'block,' the kids you go to school with; they are the first pangs of regret and loss when one of those friends moves away. They can also be the friends you meet at work and school—those whom you get close to in your professional life. Social networks are meant to be personal and contextual. Social networks are how we learn what kind of friends and people we want around us and those we should avoid; they are the building blocks that shape the relationships we have in the future. Informal networks are spontaneously formed groups of individuals connecting to pursue information and knowledge sharing, whereas social networks differ because they are more personal in context and the group's nature. Social networks involve mutual understanding.

As informal networks expand, they often transform into social networks. This transformation is driven by the connections within informal networks becoming more organized and extending their reach to include both social and professional interactions (Bryan et al., 2007; Cross et al., 2006). Social networks, with their broader scope, can exert influence over both external and internal shareholders. They are instrumental in facilitating the rapid exchange of knowledge and information, which is particularly beneficial in complex organizational settings where informal interaction is limited, thereby fostering a collective pursuit of shared goals and values (Bryan et al., 2007; Cross et al., 2006). "Social informal networks" can be defined as the spontaneous and non-hierarchical connections that emerge within social and professional settings, facilitating the exchange of information and working together. These networks are characterized by their fluidity and adaptability, often forming around shared interests or common goals.

Social and informal networks are widely discussed in the literature grounded in organizational behavior and social networks. The following works provide a comprehensive overview of research where studies suggest a collaborative effort to identify common yet distinct characteristics of these networks. Social informal networks are a subset of informal networks involving social interactions and personal relationships. They highlight the importance of informal connections as conduits for information flow, innovation, and collaboration within and across organizational boundaries. Key contributions in this area include: (Burt's exploration of structural holes and social capital (Burt, R., 2004). Cross et al.'s insights into the role of social network analysis in organizations (Cross, et al., 2002; Cross, and Sproull, 2004). Dymitrowski et al.'s examination of network formation and outcomes (Dymitrowski, et al., 2019). Granovetter's seminal work on the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Taylor et al.'s investigation into the support networks of minority aging populations (Taylor, et al., 2014). Watts & Dodds' study on the influence of networks on public opinion formation (Watts & Dodds, 2007)). These studies collectively underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of social informal networks, emphasizing their critical role in shaping organizational dynamics and individual success.

Drawing on the scholarly work of Borgatti and Foster (2003) social informal networks are understood as the web of personal relationships that individuals form across various contexts, which are essential for collective action and the dissemination of knowledge within communities. DeHart-Davis and Whetsell & Kroll (2021) further elucidate that within organizational settings, these networks operate alongside and sometimes within formal structures, playing a critical role in information flow and innovation, thereby complementing the formal hierarchy. As Sven Horak (2022) identified, social informal networks represent the intersection of social connections and informal organizational ties, serving as a means for

connecting interaction, communication, support, and resource sharing in both personal and professional spheres. These networks can be built during the time spent in college and at work in the future—take advantage of what they offer and build your network to strengthen your character, learning, and the associations you will have in the future.

### **Personal Experiences Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness**

Examining aspects related to social and informal networks will aid in illuminating how the concepts associate with one another, and the dynamics interact to facilitate or impede participation in a social or informal group. The structure of informal networks can sometimes limit diversity and inclusion, as individuals may be more likely to interact with people who are more like themselves. This can create a sense of homogeneity within networks, leading to the exclusion of individuals who are from divergent backgrounds or perspectives. In turn, this lack of diversity can hinder innovation and creativity, as individuals may be less exposed to innovative ideas and ways of thinking. Another disadvantage of informal networks is the potential for information distortion or misrepresentation as it passes through multiple channels. In some instances, rumors or gossip within networks can lead to misunderstandings or miscommunication, damaging relationships, and reputations, damaging trust, and disrupting the network. Additionally, individuals may feel excluded from receiving valuable information or opportunities if they are not part of the right networks, further exacerbating existing inequalities.

### **Important Components**

In the realm of informal networks, I discovered that their limitations can be overcome by intentional efforts to forge new relationships. By venturing into diverse social landscapes, we not only broaden our horizons but also tap into a wellspring of resources and opportunities

previously unimagined. It is about constructing networks that are not just extensive but also inclusive, where diversity is tolerantly high and celebrated, and access to information is not just a privilege but a right shared by all. Social networks, informal yet powerful, often shape our daily interactions and experiences. They are the sinews that unite us with friends, family, and professional contacts. These networks evolve, expand, and exert influence, offering both opportunities and challenges. Through shared interests and experiences, these networks provide a platform for support. A friend's recommendation can open doors to new job prospects, while a casual conversation might spark a lifelong friendship. The potential of these networks is immense, yet their cultivation rests in our hands. Mine is a mindful approach, one that requires nurturing and a willingness to engage.

### **Communication**

If an individual does not possess the ability to forge and sustain a certain level of involvement with others, then social or informal networks can be a source of pain and discomfort. Particularly so, for people who struggle to communicate effectively what they mean. Communication is simply how information travels. As described in an article by the *National Communication Foundation* (2019), the essence of communication lies in how individuals use messages to create connections through shared meaning. It is the process of sharing, transferring, or exchanging knowledge, ideas, feelings, and messages in a variety of ways (Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Taylor, 2023; West & Turner, 2017).

### ***Communication Methods***

- **Conversations and Dialogues:** Face-to-face discussions or digital video calls are fundamental for direct communication (Munodawafa, 2008).

- **Social media:** Platforms like Facebook and Twitter facilitate the sharing of ideas and feelings (Munodawafa, 2008).
- **Books and Articles:** Writing and publishing are traditional means of transferring knowledge (Munodawafa, 2008).
- **Emails and Letters:** Written correspondence is a personal and professional way to exchange messages (Munodawafa, 2008).
- **Art and Music:** Creative mediums express emotions and narratives beyond words (Matsumoto, Hwang, & Frank, 2016).
- **Educational Lectures:** Teachers share knowledge with students in classrooms or online (Munodawafa, 2008).
- **Public Speaking:** Speeches and presentations convey messages to audiences (Munodawafa, 2008).
- **Sign Language:** Visual-manual modality to convey meaning, especially in non-verbal communication (Matsumoto, Hwang, & Frank, 2016).
- **Body Language and Facial Expressions:** Non-verbal cues that communicate feelings and reactions (Matsumoto, Hwang, & Frank, 2016).
- **Technology and Apps:** Messaging apps and collaboration tools for instant communication (Munodawafa, 2008).

I will consider the broad benefits of possessing effective communication skills, highlighting the connection between successful communication and its advantages (Robles, M., 2020; Taylor, E., 2023).

**Advantages** — These advantages aim to highlight the importance of effective communication in various aspects of life and the benefits it can bring to personal and professional interactions (Robles, M., 2020; Taylor, E., 2023).

- ***Builds Stronger Relationships***: Effective communication is a core tenet of trust and understanding in both personal and professional relationships.
- ***Enhances Professional Growth***: Effective communication skills can lead to career advancement and better job performance.
- ***Facilitates Problem Solving***: Clear communication is necessary for resolving conflicts and finding solutions to challenges.
- ***Ensuring Clear Understanding***: Being able to communicate effectively ensures that messages are understood as intended.
- ***Boosting Self-Confidence***: Proficiency in communication can increase an individual's confidence in their interactions with others.

**Disadvantages** — Below, the listed disadvantages emphasize the importance of being mindful of the communication method one has chosen and the potential pitfalls associated with ineffective communication (Robles, M., 2020; Taylor, E., 2023).

- ***Misinterpretation Hazards***: Misunderstandings can arise due to unclear messaging or misreading of the communication context.
- ***Over-Reliance on Verbal Communication***: Focusing too much on words can neglect the importance of non-verbal cues and other forms of communication.
- ***Overwhelming Information***: An excessive amount of communication can lead to information overload, making it difficult to process and respond effectively.

- ***Incorrect Medium Choice:*** Choosing an inappropriate communication channel can hinder the effectiveness of the message delivery.
- ***Breeding Conflicts:*** Poor communication skills can escalate disagreements and lead to conflicts.

Communication richness is a factor when examining how individual and group interaction can lead to or hinder effective communication (Robles, M., 2020; Taylor, E., 2023). When I ponder how I networked with my peers during my time at university, I can see how I obstructed my path, but I can also see how it is not just a one-way street. One requisite of communication is that it simply cannot happen with oneself; however, I am certain that at least half of why I failed to realize my goal was because I was consistently standing in my way.

*Table 1: Communication Methods—Level of Richness*

Communication Methods	Communication Richness	Advantages	Disadvantages
Face-to-Face	Rich in non-verbal cues.	Immediate feedback can build strong connections. Can clarify misunderstandings on the spot.	Misunderstanding of non-verbal cues. Time consuming.
Social-Media	Immediacy is offered. Varied language, but potential for misleading information.	Sharing individual experiences.	Potential for misinterpretation and oversharing.
Books and Articles	Low in communication richness.	Deep topic exploration, information permanence, and the ability to reach a broad audience.	There is no personal interaction. Intent may be misinterpreted.
Email and Letters	Asynchronous—does not occur at the same time. Lacking richness.	Thoughtful communication, time for considerate responses	Absence of verbal cues; no personal interaction. Overlooked in the inbox, tone misinterpretation.
Art and Music	Rich in emotional content. It generally lacks spoken communication.	Complex ideas are visualized.	May not understand. Open to wide interpretation.



<b>Educational Lectures</b>	Rich in verbal communication.	Facilitates structured knowledge; clarification can happen immediately.	Can be one-sided, and personal connection may be limited.
<b>Public Speaking</b>	Impactful engagement can lead to rich communication.	Engages the audience, allows for immediate feedback, and can be motivational and persuasive.	It can be challenging to gauge audience engagement levels; the message is not personalized for all listeners.
<b>Sign Language</b>	Can be a rich communication channel.	Expressive body language and non-verbal cues.	Limited to those who understand the language; nuances are lost.
<b>Body Language and Facial Expression</b>	Can be rich in non-verbal cues but does not replace verbal communication.	Can provide context and depth to verbal communication.	Can be misinterpreted, and cultural differences may affect communication.
<b>Technology and Apps</b>	Depending on use and the context, it can be a rich source of communication.	Instant communication across distances. Can increase efficiency and improve collaboration.	Lack of personal connection can cause information overload, and technological issues can hinder communication.

### ***Contributing to Success by Combating Loneliness and Isolation***

Communication effectiveness can help individuals, like me, express how they feel, what they like or do not like, and how they are responding or reacting to situations. How we choose to communicate with others can also determine how the receiver responds or reacts to the message. Considering the communication channel before communicating information will aid in eliminating any confusion or misunderstanding. Communicating with others can lead to networking opportunities, sharing information and knowledge, and building relationships to constrain feelings of isolation and loneliness.

### **Personal Experiences**

Allowing my self-doubt to frame my perception of how others saw me may have paved the way for my failure to reach the actualization of my goal, untold advantages, and my full potential. My perceptual barriers clouded my judgment and made it difficult for me to successfully communicate with others, which led to misunderstanding social cues, over-sharing,

and misinterpreting the intentions of my peers. This self-imposed filter not only skewed my interactions but also hindered my ability to receive and give feedback effectively. It became a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, where my fear of judgment led to the very isolation I sought to avoid. Moving forward, I am committed to challenging these perceptions, by seeking clarity in communication and embracing my vulnerability as a strength. In doing so, I hope to foster genuine connections through the realization of success that lies within the ability to nurture and sustain growth and self-compassion.

## **Collaboration**

### ***Methods of Collaboration***

As defined in scholarly literature, collaboration involves deciding goals together with others, sharing responsibilities, and working together to achieve outcomes that surpass what could be accomplished individually (Barfield, 2016). It occurs through dialogue, social interaction, and joint decision-making, contributing significantly to individual and collective growth (Barfield, 2016). Furthermore, collaboration is recognized as a core component of collaborative learning, which can improve learners' conceptual understanding, motivation, and metacognitive skills (Alozie et al., 2023). Despite its varied definitions across disciplines, collaboration fundamentally refers to the act of working jointly with others, especially in intellectual endeavors (Penniston, 2022).

A student who is older than the typical age, through accessing informal networks, will secure key tools for integration and learning. Access to such networks allows for the sharing of diverse perspectives and experiences, which can be particularly enriching given the broader life experience of older students. Informal networks provide a platform for older students to

contribute their unique insights, learn from others, and build connections that are valuable for both academic and career advancement (Bryan, L., et al., 2007). Collaboration within informal networks is characterized by mutual respect, open communication, and a shared understanding of each other's experiences and challenges, which is essential for fostering a supportive and inclusive university environment.

### ***Contributing to Success by Combating Loneliness and Social Isolation***

At the Haworth College of Business, networks, and collaboration work in concert with one another, as they are essential for achieving group and individual outcomes—effective networks promote better collaboration. While some individuals actively participate in work groups and excel at facilitating group cohesion, others may not perceive group work as crucial. Regrettably, differing perspectives can lead to resentment among team members due to varying levels of group and work commitment. Fostering a collaborative environment is vital for success in any establishment (Barker Scott & Manning, 2024; Lang et al., 2022). When professionals share their knowledge, skills, and diverse perspectives, creativity and motivation could thrive, which in turn, may benefit the entire informal group. Effective collaboration could mean a reduction in burnout, diminished stress, and may enhance positive feelings toward tasks. By encouraging teamwork and open communication, workgroups could achieve more complex goals by collaborating and connecting to improve overall performance.

### ***Personal Experiences***

Fortunately, and unfortunately, I did not rely on key individuals from social networks during my time at Western—specifically, I did not depend on others for collaborative efforts. This was because of my perceptual inability to confidently put my trust in another individual.

Certain experiences during adolescence and young adulthood shaped my perceptions surrounding connectivity and finding a sense of belonging. I cannot organize, interpret, and understand some sensory experiences, in part due to trauma from past incidents that shaped my perceptual understanding. Although I did not rely on key individuals, I was still influenced by others' reliance. For example, I was in a workgroup during a class. The project we were working on was a semester-long task, with each assignment developing and enhancing the next. From the beginning, this pivotal individual took the reins without consultation from other group members; I quietly acquiesced—apprehensively. Things were fine for most of the semester, with a few disagreements here and there. However, in the last few weeks of the semester, the individual left for a familial occasion for more than a week. This effectively caused disjointed interaction amongst the rest of the group, the results of which were quite catastrophic for that phase of the assignment. Upon the individual's return, there was an attempt to rapidly align objectives by assigning separate and distinct portions of the assignment; the resulting outcome was scattered, messy, and poorly constructed, both lacking in correctness of content and originality. This was a stark contrast to previous assignments that I submitted individually; I must admit.

### **Connection**

Connection, as described by Farrell et al. (2018) is the feeling of belonging and the creation of bonding relationships, which are essential elements of student satisfaction, academic success, and retention when examining informal networks within the context of higher education. These thoughts align well with the findings of Farrell et al. (2018) because they encapsulate the idea that connection is a feeling of belonging and relies on the creation of bonding relationships. This connection is crucial for students' academic journey and their overall satisfaction with the college experience. The utilization of this citation assists in grounding my statement in scholarly

research, which adds both depth and credibility to my experiences exploring informal networks in higher education.

### ***Methods of Connection***

Building connections takes work; individuals should have clear lines of communication and a way to achieve understanding among themselves and other network members. Connection is the state or quality of being connected or interconnected, like the ties that bind individuals within informal networks. Individuals connect through shared interests, beliefs, and similarities, building trust, reciprocating abilities, and creating possibilities for the introduction of advantageous opportunities. The value created through social networking can lead to mutual benefits and access to resources, reflecting investment in a social group (i.e., Bourdieu and Coleman) and aligning with both *Mindset Theory* (i.e., Dweck, Kapasi, and Pei) and collaborative efforts that may lead to connection.

### ***Important Components***

Building on the ideas presented by Lieberman (2013) and again by Cook (2013), we can further elaborate on the impact of social connections. Connection with others not only strengthens the bonds in informal networks but also catalyzes personal growth and community development. It nurtures trust, fosters authentic communication and collaboration, and cultivates a sense of belonging. My thoughts on social connections affecting my ability to become part of informal networks are supported by the neuroscience of human connections, where our social bonds are considered as fundamental to our well-being as food and water, underscoring the powerful influence of our social environment on our health and educational outcomes (Lieberman, 2013). Research conducted by Lieberman (2013) further highlights that our brains

are wired to connect, with social pain and pleasure being processed similarly to physical pain and pleasure. This neural basis for connection suggests that our relationships can profoundly affect our mental and emotional health, shaping our experiences and interactions within educational settings and beyond (Lieberman, 2013). The implications of being affected by our relationships are vast, influencing how we approach teaching, learning, and community engagement; ultimately fostering environments that prioritize well-being and inclusive excellence. The work of Cook (2013), Lazar (2021), and Lieberman (2013) emphasizes the role of social connections in shaping our mental and emotional health, which is crucial for creating supportive educational and community environments.

Connecting coordination across vertical lines is the interaction and relationships between different individuals within a network and the differing levels of interaction and communication (Casciaro et al., 2019). The authors point out that when individuals connect and collaborate, the resulting outcome leads to more effective and authentic communication, connection, and collaboration among individuals within a network. However, if one is not a member of a network, it is difficult to access the associated beneficial outcomes, which stresses the importance of continually working on oneself through learning and growth to build more meaningful relationships (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). As I step into the future, I carry with me not just a diploma but the wisdom from each interaction and connection. With renewed appreciation for the social fabric that binds our lives together, I am poised to engage with the relationships that lie ahead, eager to explore the endless possibilities they may unfold.

### ***Personal Experiences***

Sadly, I have always been cautious about allowing others into my world, due in large part to the trauma I experienced as an adolescent—that and a mental health diagnosis that explains a

lot of my reactions and responses to what I thought or sensed as a perceived affront, snub, or insult to my character. These reactions are attributed to limiting my ability to become part of a social network of people, even though becoming part of a social network is something that I have wanted since about teenage age [13]. I came from an environment where I had friends, connections, and relationships that I became reliant on, particularly at an impressionable age. My family moved to a different city, and it rocked my entire existence. Everything I had ever known was immediately and abruptly turned upside down. From that point on, even until now, I have been unable to form lasting and meaningful connections with people outside of familial connections. I could identify numerous reasons as to why I have been unable to build social networks with other individuals—in reality, we are responsible for our destinies. I will, however, share the impact this lack of connectivity has had on my emotional psyche.

As a mom to seven young children, a full-time student, an employee, a wife, a friend, a sister, a daughter, a monster chaser, a lover, a fighter, and a home economic engineer, amongst other identities, life is not always easy, and balancing these characters at times can be challenging. My kids are my biggest cheerleading section; they are so proud of all I have accomplished and worked for. My children know the sacrifices I have had to make, but I never let them forget the ones they have made either. Some days, it is a difficult choice to push on and attend class knowing that I will be missing my kids' sports game, or their band concert, or just be far too tired to attend another event—so I drop them off and wait at home for their call. Managing and organizing the array of self-identities requires prioritizing and setting boundaries—not all identities always need equal attention. When I am home, I try my hardest to always be a mom. When I am at school, I become a student, and when I am at work, I try to concentrate on my role as an employee.

It is a natural human condition that we crave to be connected to one another in a meaningful way (Lieberman, 2013). This is to counteract feelings of loneliness. I took a health course during my first semester at Western to meet *Essential Studies* requirements. This course encompassed holistic teaching and experiences to ensure students such as myself were taught critical competencies for personal wellness. This course, from day one, had a semester-long individual SMART (i.e., Doran, 1981) goals project. In each class session, a new assignment was detailed, and its contents were designed to build on previous sections of the project. The SMART goal I had identified was ‘to make long-lasting and meaningful connections.’ I thought, at the time, that this was an attainable goal. I, however, did not realize how difficult that would be, especially when I now consider my background, cultural upbringing, age difference, and emotional limitations as compared with my peers. Although I have yet to attain this goal, this has not prevented me from learning, growing, and changing my approach to making meaningful connections.

I started working on these SMART goals by joining a student-led club. The club I joined was athletics, and it boasted active participation in volleyball. I went to the first practice. I participated in the sporting drills, such as passing, spiking, serving, etc., and had fun that first night. The second night, I went back to the gym, where practice was held. I thought I was making substantial progress, as I was keeping up with my peers, but at some point, during practice, I overheard a conversation that was not meant for me to hear. The two young women noticed that I had heard what they were saying, it was related to my age. Without a word, I quietly packed my things and left. I was not wanted. I was not necessarily hurt by this, but I just could not understand how it was any of their business, what my age was, and why I was choosing to play a sport that I loved and at which I was good. I did not go back. This, as I have



now come to realize, was one of the various times I felt I did not belong. Although that practice was the only time my age was referenced when I heard it, I still felt that I was too old to participate in student groups. Even though I was a student, I was not a student like most of my peers—I had aged out of belonging to groups where young women gathered; I was not considered a young woman any longer, at least in the sense of learning and growth during ‘college age.’ That one interaction may have laid the foundations for future interactions with many of my peers. I put walls around myself and refused to let them down. My defensive walls were already high because of my own past experiences, so my peers might have never even had the chance to break through to see the genuine version of me.

When I was at the ‘traditional’ college age, I was not attending university; I would not trade it, but if I could, some decisions would be made differently. I was raising a young family. I was sitting up endless nights nursing my son, and then my second son, and the third and fourth, until I realized that I could not continue having children and only offering them the bare minimum—similar circumstances to what I faced when I grew up. I knew I had to change the cycle, and I did. I had taken my infant daughters [all three] at one time or another to school with me. There they sat, most of the time quietly and without fuss—while I worked on assignments, built papers, met for project work, and through it all, they watched. They watched as I cried in frustration on their little faces and hands. They watched as I told myself over and over that I could not do this. They watched as I finished my first credit—they watched as I finished 133 credits—and they still watch. The pride in their faces makes it worth it—they do not have to carry the weight of bearing the title ‘first-generation’ college student, and if they so choose, they do not have to bear the title ‘non-traditional.’ The one thing that they will have that I never did is

the ability to choose from a list of choices and know 100% that whatever they choose, I will be there to guide and support their decisions.

### **Learning Points about Informal Networks on My Journey**

When I came to Western, it was a culture shock. I was entering an environment that I was unfamiliar with, a place where student groups, social clubs, community and outreach engagement, and student living all come together to create personal links. Furthermore, social informal networks can and do have disadvantages, particularly when individuals are born into less privileged circumstances. The lack of access to informal networks can perpetuate existing inequalities, as individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds may have fewer resources and connections to draw upon. This can make it more difficult for individuals to access opportunities for education, employment, and social mobility, further entrenching their disadvantaged position. Those close-knit connections and my inability to access such social groups are in a way comparable to *Porter's Five Forces Model* (Danao, 2024; Gratton, 2024), [<sup>1</sup>competitive rivalry, <sup>2</sup>supplier power, <sup>3</sup>buyer power, <sup>4</sup>threat of substitution, <sup>5</sup>threat of new entrants].

1. [*Competitive Rivalry*]: The competition among students or faculty for resources or recognition.
2. [*Supplier Powers*]: The influence of those who provide valuable information or resources within the network.
3. [*Buyer Power*]: The influence of those seeking information or resources.
4. [*Threat of Substitution*]: Access to larger social networks can create more strategic advantages, opportunities, and knowledge sharing—the availability of alternative networks or sources of information.

5. [*Threat of New Entrants*]: The ease with which new members can join and influence the network.

Adapting and applying the principles of *Porter's* model to gain insights into the dynamics of small-scale, informal networks, particularly at the micro-level in a university context, could offer advantages to students, faculty, and administrative staff. It may help officials seize resource allocation, collaboration, and competition, enhancing the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the academic environment and those who influence the network. Although *Porter's* model is not typically used on such a small scale, the underlying concepts can provide insights into the power dynamics and competitive forces at play within a group or network. It is a flexible tool that can be adapted to various scales and contexts to understand and strategize within different competitive environments. While no specific seminal work has directly identified or bridged the concepts mentioned above, an interdisciplinary approach could yield valuable insights and new perspectives. Further research examining the intersection of *Porter's* model and social networks might explore how competitive forces impact relationship-building within a university setting and evaluate industry dynamics. I learned that research is an essential component for creating a practical theoretical model or framework applicable to organizations.

### **Recommendations/Things I Would Have Done Differently/Conclusions**

Social and informal networks effectively operate due to many factors. The authors identified below have significantly advanced our comprehension of these factors, elucidating how they synergistically facilitate the functioning of social and informal networks. These factors include trust and reciprocity, shared goals and interests, flexibility and adaptability, social capital,

informal communication channels, cross-functional collaboration, non-hierarchical structures, personalized relationships, and consistency, which will be further elaborated below:

**Trust and Reciprocity:**

- James S. Coleman's work on social capital emphasizes the importance of trust in creating valuable social structures (Coleman, 1986).
- Stephen Leider and others explored directed altruism, which can be understood as the tendency to favor friends or acquaintances over strangers when engaging in an unselfish concern for other types of behavior. This form of altruism is motivated by the connections we have with others and the social bonds that tie us together, as well as enforced reciprocity in social networks. Voluntary and spontaneous reciprocation is not usually enforced; however, engaging in strategies to encourage reciprocity could be helpful—for example, transparency, trust, shared interests, and goals, identifying social norms, and acknowledging network member contributions. (Leider et al., 2009).

**Shared Goals and Interests:**

- Rob Cross, Nitin Nohria, and Andrew Parker discussed how informal networks often provide strategic and operational benefits by enabling members to collaborate effectively (Cross et al., 2005).

**Flexibility and Adaptability:**

- Daina Crafa and Saskia K. Nagel discussed the adaptive self and the role of culture and social flexibility in feedback networks (Crafa & Nagel, 2019).

**Social Capital:**

- Matthew O. Jackson and other seminal authors examined the network patterns of favor exchange and the role of social capital in informal networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Jackson et al., 2012).

**Informal Communication Channels:**

- Keith Davis identified several types of informal communication networks, which are crucial for the flow of information within organizations (Davis, 1969).

**Cross-Functional Collaboration:**

- Research on cross-sector collaboration by Calancie and others, synthesized into the Consolidated Framework for Collaboration Research (CFCR), highlights the importance of cross-functional collaboration (Calancie et al., 2021).

**Non-Hierarchical Structure:**

- John Scott contributed to the understanding of non-hierarchical structures in social networks (Scott, 2011).

**Personalized Relationships:**

- Rob Cross and others emphasized the significance of personal relationships in knowledge-intensive sectors for finding information and doing jobs (Cross et al., 2005).

**Consistency:**

- Elisa Bellotti and others discussed the role of personal networks in cases of domestic violence, highlighting the importance of consistent relationships (Bellotti et al., 2021).

These authors provide foundational insights into the dynamics of social informal networks and the various components that contribute to their effectiveness. Social networks offer advantages, such as opportunities for support, mentorship, and personal growth. By cultivating strong relationships within these networks, individuals can strengthen their social connections

and build a sense of community and belonging. These networks can also provide a sense of security and stability, particularly during times of uncertainty or crisis. Thus, making meaningful connections with individuals becomes an essential component of maintaining mental health and well-being. If I had a deeper understanding of my emotional responses and perceptual reactions, I might have been better equipped to face the challenges that arise from becoming part of a social informal network group while being a non-traditional student.

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