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Effects of the decline in social capital on college graduates' soft skills

Sarah Andreas
Johnson University, USA

Abstract

Both businesses and recent college graduates in the United States attribute the lack of soft skills in recent college graduates to the colleges' inability to prepare students for the workforce. This article explores the literature on social capital, human capital and social learning theory, offering an alternative hypothesis for why recent graduates are missing soft skills: namely, that it is the decline in social capital that is influencing the graduates' ability to master those skills. Through the process of building social capital, college students gain the cultural and behavioural information and sensitivity they need to learn soft skills. College graduates are no longer accessing this experience; as a result, businesses and graduates are suffering the consequences of a decline in social capital. Therefore, the results of this study give rise to the hypothesis that the decline in social capital at the macrosocial level is negatively influencing recent college graduates' formation of soft skills. This may be due to the decrease in building social capital through face-to-face interaction, rather than due to colleges not preparing graduates for success in the business environment.

Keywords

College graduates, human capital, social capital, soft skills

College graduates expect, and are expected by businesses, to emerge from college fully prepared for a career in their field of study (Chan and Gardner, 2013; Holtzman and Kraft, 2011; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014). However, in recent surveys, employers have stated that college graduates are '*not* prepared' for real-world work challenges (Hart Research Associates, 2015: 2). Of the businesses surveyed, 58% indicated that college graduates needed to improve their skills for success in an entry-level position (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Moreover, 64% of the businesses reported that, for recent graduates to advance in their company, they must improve the skills and knowledge gained in college (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Employers are saying that universities need to do more to ensure that graduates are ready for the workforce (Hart Research Associates, 2015), and businesses evaluate a graduate's readiness based on specific skills that they classify as essential for achievement in their organization (Chan and Gardner, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Holtzman and Kraft, 2011; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014).

The skills that recent graduates are missing are not technical skills but soft skills, such as leadership, problem-solving, communication and teamwork capabilities. Soft skills also include social, personal and self-management behaviours (Elliott, 2015; Farrington, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Klaus, 2007; Magogwe et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2010, Spencer, 2015). The survey data from businesses and college graduates reveal a collective belief that colleges are not preparing their graduates for the workforce; however, there may be another reason for recent graduates' deficiency in soft skills – the decline in social capital (Bartolini et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to explore two possible reasons why college graduates lack the soft skills necessary to accomplish business objectives that require interpersonal interactions: first, that colleges are not adequately preparing students, as indicated by the missing soft skills, and, second, that there is a noticeable decline in social capital, as indicated by graduates' decreased involvement in social, civic and religious organizations (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Putnam, 2000). In order to assess the general business population's opinions of the causes and impacts on business of missing soft skills, this article will consider

Corresponding author:
Sarah Andreas, Johnson University, 9246 State Route 250 NW, Strasburg, OH 44680, USA.
Email: sarah.andreas@johnsonu.edu

recent surveys of companies, feedback from recent graduates, and articles stating that colleges are not preparing their students for success (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Magogwe et al., 2014). The assessment of the decline in social capital comes from Putnam's (2000) extensive study of the decline in social capital in the United States and from other recent studies of social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Bartolini et al., 2013).

When researching social capital, it became apparent that there might be a connection between the soft skills that some college students were missing and the decline that Putnam (2000) identified. Putnam (2000), Bartolini et al. (2013) and Becker (1996) all studied different aspects of social and human capital. Becker explored the economic impacts of social and human capital on health, education and discrimination in families. The study by Bartolini et al. (2013) confirms Putnam's assertion that social capital is in decline in the United States.

In one study, Coleman (1988) focused on how parents' social capital affected the human capital of their children, thus influencing the dropout rate of high school students. Coleman, Putnam and Becker all researched social capital and its effects on education, thus connecting human capital creation to social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). However, there appears to be no connection between the decline in social capital and soft skill creation in business articles, papers and surveys of the current business perspective; there is also no connection in Putnam (2000), Coleman (1988) or Becker's (1996) work regarding college graduates lacking soft skills (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008; Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Miller, 2016; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014; Putnam, 2000; Stank et al., 1998). Given the possible connection between the decline in social capital at community level and the soft skills that some college graduates lack, this article explores the relationships found within social capital and the creation of human capital in the literature, showing that the creation of social capital has an effect on the creation of soft skills (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Therefore, the article highlights how social interaction through organizational, civic, religious and social involvement can build soft skills in human capital (Coleman, 1988; Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000).

Because a focus on the decline in social capital at the macrosocial level is used as a basis for this article, it is important to acknowledge that in several studies, researchers have found that college students have more social capital than ever before due to virtual connections (Hsu, 2015; Pénard and Poussing, 2010). The building of social capital via virtual connections has a drawback, however; it does not allow for the face-to-face interactions that are needed to learn and master soft skills in human capital (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Wenger, 1998). This will be discussed in more detail later.

For the purposes of this article, clearly defining the terms used will assist in facilitating the conversation. While Putnam's (2000) research is essential in identifying the decline in social capital, his description focuses on the macrosocial modality in relation to social capital and discusses the effects of the decline in education, safety and efficiency of neighbourhoods, economics and the overall health and happiness of the community, thus leaving out the individual aspects of the decline in social capital. The macrosocial modality focuses on the societal level, and the microsocial modality focuses on the individual level of a population (Adams and Sydie, 2001; Henslin, 2015). This article uses Nahapiet and Ghoshal's definition, connecting social capital based on both macrosocial and microsocial modalities:

> the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Social capital thus comprises both the network and the assets that may be mobilized through that network. (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998: 243)

This definition of social capital is used because it includes social capital at both community and individual levels, as well as the network and the assets within the network, whereas Putnam's (2000) definition encompasses social capital only at the community level.

When considering definitions of human capital, Coleman captures its essence: 'Human Capital is embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual. It is created by the changing persons so as to give them skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways' (Coleman, 1990: 100). Soft skills are part of an individual's human capital; for the purpose of this discussion, we use Robles' definition: 'Soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors – rather than technical aptitude or knowledge. Soft skills are the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator' (Robles, 2012: 457). Defining soft skills as character traits, attitudes and behaviours helps to identify the importance of mastering these factors in a 4-year college degree programme.

Soft skills

Since soft skills are the central topic for this article, it is essential to delve deeper into this field. The literature supports the notion that soft skills are critical in business; these skills apply to all disciplines (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008; Miller, 2016; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014; Stank et al., 1998). They are occasionally identified as 'interpersonal' or 'people' skills, which allow an individual to relate to others successfully (Magogwe et al., 2014: 21). Soft skills are significant in careers that

require interaction with other people (Spencer, 2015). Attributes that individuals should possess, such as communication skills, team building, ethics, problem-solving, adapting theory to practice, time-management skills and the ability to understand and work with a culturally diverse group of people, are all soft skills (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Magogwe et al., 2014; Miller, 2016; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014). Of all the soft skills, employers rank communication highest in several surveys, thus prompting further exploration by researchers (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2010; Robles, 2012).

Communication

Communication is a fundamental soft skill set since many other soft skills, such as team building, relationship building and leadership, require communication to be successful (Magogwe et al., 2014; Robles, 2012). The quality of communication in business can make the difference in successfully developing a long-term working relationship (Datar et al., 2010; Schoop et al., 2010). Communication skills can influence future business opportunities for both the individual and the company (Schoop et al., 2010). In addition to the quality of communication affecting external business opportunities, it may also affect internal business opportunities (Putnam, 2000; Schoop et al., 2010). Misunderstandings can be created in an organization due to miscommunication, poor word choices and incongruent body language (Putnam, 2000; Schoop et al., 2010). The positive and negative impacts of communication may explain why it ranks so highly in surveys of missing soft skills in recent graduates (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Schoop et al., 2010). There are numerous components to communication (Magogwe et al., 2014); however, it is critical to consider both verbal and non-verbal communication (Magogwe et al., 2014; Putnam, 2000).

Verbal communication

Verbal communication is essential in business: The abilities to give an oral presentation, to speak with customers, co-workers and upper management with confidence, and to use words to defuse potential problems or make a sale are critical to success (Datar et al., 2010; Magogwe et al., 2014). It is considered 'the most effective form of communication in any human society' (Adejimola, 2008: 204). Also, the correct choice of words is crucial for clear communication – using slang or ambiguous terms can confuse the listener (Adejimola, 2008). In addition to the words, other factors also support and enhance communication such as tone, speed and volume (Adejimola, 2008).

Non-verbal communication

Clear verbal communication skills are the foundation of effective communication in business; however, some individuals are excellent at sensing and reading non-verbal messages from each other, particularly non-verbal cues about sentiments, support and trustworthiness (Mehrabian, 1980; Putnam, 2000). Body language, facial expressions, gestures, posture and movements can convey a message that contrasts with the words used (Mehrabian, 1980). In addition, non-verbal communication can convey a message clearly without the need for verbal communication (Mehrabian, 1980). Furthermore, facial expressions can have a greater impact than words or the tone of voice on the message being conveyed (Mehrabian, 1980). Understanding the nuances of non-verbal communication, therefore, helps an individual to become an effective communicator (Kolb, 2015; Mehrabian, 1980; Putnam, 2000).

Besides the complexity of non-verbal communication in a conversation, there is an additional layer of difficulty in business today, arising from international trade between different cultures (Hiebert, 2008). Since an individual's ability to understand and communicate non-verbal cues in a business environment is imperative, it is essential to understand that different cultures may have various modes of non-verbal expression (Adejimola, 2008; Hiebert, 2008). This complexity involves additional responsibility to the individual who is communicating to ensure that the listeners are receiving the correct message (Adejimola, 2008). If college graduates have not mastered non-verbal communication in their own culture, their attempts to communicate with people from other cultures may cause problems (Hiebert, 2008; Mehrabian,1980).

The necessity of effective communication is a clear example of why soft skills are in such demand from today's businesses (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Magogwe et al., 2014; Miller, 2016; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014). The ability to communicate effectively with other individuals in a business setting can influence the success of both the business and the individual (Schoop et al., 2010). However, given the highly complex nature of communication (Kolb, 2015; Mehrabian, 1980), deeming colleges to be primarily responsible for the lack of soft skills in their graduates seems simplistic.

How some soft skills are learned?

Because the primary focus of this article is the impact of the decline in social capital at the community level on college students' acquisition of soft skills, it is imperative that we understand how behavioural-based soft skills are learned and mastered. Social cognitive theory highlights the progression of building social capital, thus facilitating the

development of soft skills (Bandura, 1977). In learning theory, behaviour is considered as a response to signals in the individual's environment (Bandura, 1977; Palmisano, 2001). Thus, an individual can observe someone effectively perform a behaviour and then duplicate that behaviour (Bandura, 1977). How individuals learn table manners via their place in a social structure can help to explain the complexities of learning behavioural-based skills; for instance, learning to eat at a fast-food restaurant uses different behavioural skills from those required at a formal banquet with multiple courses (Bandura, 1977; Palmisano, 2001). Similarly, using the nuances of non-verbal communication to convey a message (Bandura, 1977; Mehrabian,1980) requires different behaviours from typing a text message (Salahuddin et al., 2016). Indeed, behaviours and cultural instructions for a behaviour are learned through the process of interacting with others, and by observing their behaviour and the consequences of their actions (Ancona, 2012; Bandura, 1977; Bonk and Kim, 1998).

The social and cultural contexts are important for learning certain skills, and the tools gained as part of the learning process during the situations in which college students find themselves help to prepare them for their next social experience (Ancona, 2012; Bandura, 1977; Baumgartner et al., 2007). Also, the theory that individuals learn behavioural patterns from their culture and associations is connected to the importance of involvement in civic, social and religious groups (Bandura, 1977; Putnam, 2000). Associating with groups helps individuals to learn behavioural patterns that can be beneficial in business relations (Bandura, 1977; Baumgartner et al., 2007; Kolb, 2015; Wenger, 1998).

Actively building social capital may allow individuals the practice necessary to hone soft skills for success in business environments (Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, college students may gain real-world experience through involvement in fraternities, working with faculty mentors, summer internships and other extracurricular activities (Clopton and Finch, 2010; Kolb, 2015). They may become proficient at using their soft skills through observation, practice and repetition, by being involved in building social capital in organizations, and by engaging in social practice; all these activities provide opportunities to strengthen soft skills (Putnam, 2000; Wenger, 1998). However, students taking a full course load in a traditional US college spend an average of about 15 h per week in classroom training, 14.7 h studying and 17.8 h working, taking care of dependents and commuting, leaving about 17 h for co-curricular activities, socializing and relaxing (McCormick, 2011).

Consequently, if college students are not aware of how these valuable soft skills are learned, they may miss everyday opportunities to improve them, since individuals learn every day, whether in their family setting, workplace or community (Kolb, 2015; Wenger, 1998). These settings are sometimes described as a 'community of practice'. A community of practice can be a formal or an informal group connected by a concern or passion; being involved in this community helps the participants, in this case the college students, to learn as they regularly interact with each other (Wenger, 1998). Also, involvement with others is critical when individuals require practice to become competent in using soft skills (Kolb, 2015; Wenger, 1998). Participation in social, civic and religious organizations allows for active experimental learning in a community, and this can help a college graduate to build soft skills (Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000). Therefore, social learning that routinely occurs without direct intervention supports the conclusion that involvement in community, civic or religious organizations facilitates more than social capital; it helps to generate soft skills by facilitating learning between individuals (Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Wenger, 1998). The demands on college students' time (McCormick, 2011) and their lack of participation in those community activities before college may therefore be indicative of reduced opportunities to develop soft skills (Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000).

Social cognitive theory supports the concept that human capital skills, such as soft skills, can be learned in a social context (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Moreover, social interaction builds soft skills by providing the necessary practice to become competent (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 2015; Wenger, 1998). Also, building social capital provides cultural instructions for behaviours that can help to develop many soft skills through interaction with others (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wenger, 1998). If college students are not building social capital through interpersonal interaction, they may not be learning the skills needed for success in business (Putnam, 2000).

Universities' role in developing soft skills

To understand a popular explanation for the lack of soft skills in graduates, and why these skills are important in business, it is helpful to explore surveys of businesses and articles from business sources. In surveys conducted by both the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Hart Research Associates, businesses report that recent college graduates are missing critical soft skills (American Colleges and Universities, 2008; Hart Research Associates, 2015). Also, articles from various mainstream sources express businesses' concerns about college graduates not being prepared for employment after graduation (Elliott, 2015; Farrington, 2014). Recent articles in *USA Today* and *Forbes* state that colleges are not preparing their graduates appropriately for real work experiences (Elliott, 2015; Farrington, 2014). In addition, there is a shared assumption between the authors, businesses and college graduates themselves that universities may be responsible

for graduates' lack of soft skill sets (Elliott, 2015; Farrington, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Magogwe et al., 2014).

Mainstream articles are not the only source of assertions that colleges have not prepared their students for success in business (Majid et al., 2012; Tekarslan and Erden, 2014). Tekarslan and Erden (2014) indicate that universities may be inflexible and are not adapting to societal changes; this lack of adaptation perpetuates missed opportunities to teach students essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, decision-making and collaboration – success in which can lead to career advancement (Majid et al., 2012; Tekarslan and Erden, 2014). While all these sources identify the problem and the impact of graduates' lack of soft skills on businesses, the cause remains questionable: the obvious answer may not be the expected answer.

The reason given by some critics of colleges – such as companies that are disappointed in the graduates they have recruited, students who feel their career expectations have not been realized and some academic researchers – is that colleges are solely responsible for students not learning soft skills (Kolb, 2015; Tekarslan and Erden, 2014). Despite Tekarslan and Erden's assertion that colleges are not adapting to their stakeholders' needs (Majid et al., 2012; Tekarslan and Erden, 2014), some colleges are trying to meet this challenge by supplementing academic rigour with the teaching of soft skills (Colby et al., 2011; Datar et al., 2010; Lang and McNaught, 2013). Case studies, group projects, reflection, extracurricular activities and internships are being implemented to assist college students in building the skill sets presumed to be deficient by critics (Berggren and Soderlund, 2011; Lang and McNaught, 2013). The School of Business at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana has incorporated capstone projects to expose students to experiential learning and add critical reflection to an internship (Lang and McNaught, 2013). Capstone classes allow both theory and active practice and thus constitute an experiential learning experience for the students (Datar et al., 2010; Lang and McNaught, 2013). The perception that higher education is responsible for teaching soft skills in the classroom may also be a cause of the disconnect in expectations (Kolb, 2015). Universities strive to help their students to build awareness of conflicting assumptions by helping them to understand themselves (Colby et al., 2011; Datar et al., 2010) and working to expand their minds to be open to different world views (Datar et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2013). Colleges also work to add to the body of knowledge in a discipline, while offering opportunities for extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Chan and Gardner, 2013; Kolb, 2015). Co-curricular activities are likely to be an extension of the formal learning experiences offered within an academic programme that are completed outside the formal classroom, while extracurricular activities may be sponsored by the college but are not unequivocally associated with academic learning (Chan and Gardner, 2013). Despite these efforts, businesses insist that recent graduates continue to lack soft skills (Chan and Gardner, 2013; Datar et al., 2010; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Holtzman and Kraft, 2011; Nazem and Gheytasi, 2014).

Both mainstream and scholarly articles proclaim US colleges' inability to prepare students for successful careers after graduation, and national surveys show that the lack of soft skills in college graduates supports the notion that those missing skills are a failure of higher education (Elliott, 2015; Farrington, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Magogwe et al., 2014). However, there is a danger here of taking responsibility for soft skill and social capital formation away from the individual and making it the responsibility of a college. Personal initiative is required to build and maintain social and human capital; if there is no individual recognition of the need to develop these skills, the learning opportunities provided are eroded (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Datar et al., 2010; Putnam, 2000). In addition, the perception that 4–5 years of academic classwork with additional capstone classes can teach skills that may require a lifetime of practice could be characterized as unrealistic (Datar et al., 2010; Lang and McNaught, 2013).

Social and human capital

As noted above, this article adopts Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) definition of social capital (see introductory section). In addition to its power in the social environment, social capital can influence the creation of human capital (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Robison et al., 2002). Human capital 'is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways', including both the skills and knowledge that an individual possesses (Coleman, 1988: 100). Serving in a leadership role in a voluntary organization, for example, can teach effective communication, teamwork, leadership and other soft skills (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Roberts, 2013). By mastering soft skills, college graduates can build valuable human capital that may influence their success, thus allowing the construction of additional social capital (Coleman, 1988; Magogwe et al., 2014).

The decline in social capital at the organizational level (Bartolini et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000) has caused college students to miss experiences that would have been valuable to their development long before they started college. The practice of building social capital affects human capital; thus, the decrease in social capital can impact a graduate's human capital, affecting soft skill development (Coleman, 1988). This decline in social capital is a viable explanation for the phenomenon of college graduates' lack of soft skills (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Social capital in organizations began to decline between the 1950s and 1970s (Putnam, 2000). 'Over these two decades informal

socializing with family and friends declined by about 10 percent, organizational memberships fell by 16 percent, and church membership attendance [...] decreased by 20 percent' (Putnam, 2000: 58–59). Organizational involvement continued to decline by 10–20% in the remainder of the 20th century (Putnam, 2000). Between 1973 and 1994, there was a 50% decline in individuals taking on leadership roles in any organization (Putnam, 2000). Recent surveys show that, despite myriad opportunities, volunteer rates are lowest in the 20–24 age group (BLS, 2016). In another survey, of more than 14,000 college seniors, 46% said they were involved in an organization but had never served in a leadership role; 20% said they had never participated in a college organization (Dugan and Komives, 2007). Participation in building social capital provides both the organization and the individual with benefits that include leadership experience, trust, reciprocity, honesty, cultural and behavioural norms, and networks that can improve both society and the individual's personal effectiveness (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). These assets have dissipated with the decline in social capital (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000).

Social and human capital influence each other's development (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988). There are thus two benefits to a college student who uses social capital to build human capital: the connections built within the social capital and the human capital gained in the form of soft skill acquisition (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The assets of social capital are resources that come from knowing other people (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Likewise, human capital in the form of soft skills is gained by the practice of building relationships (Coleman, 1988). The dramatic decline in membership of religious, social and volunteer organizations since the 1970s may impact the core of US society (Baker, 2000; Field, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Fewer people are concerned about involved in or working collaboratively for the creation of social and civic opportunities that will benefit the community in which they work and live (Baker, 2000; Field, 2009; Putnam, 2000). When fewer people participate in that way, communities lose their ability to support each other, and this begins to affect support at the individual level (Field, 2009; Putnam, 2000). More importantly, the decline in social capital may have less obvious effects (Bartolini et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000), including the impact on soft skills (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Social capital in religious, social and civic involvement allows some individuals to acquire skills, such as leadership, communication, teamwork and problem-solving, that can be transferred to business competencies (Coleman, 1988; Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000). If fewer college graduates are building social capital through membership of such organizations, they are missing an opportunity to develop transferable soft skills that will benefit them in the workplace (Coleman, 1988; Kolb, 2015).

Building social capital

Building social capital takes time and investment, facilitating relationships with individuals either one-to-one or in a community setting (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) elevated aspects of social capital that apply to the macro- and microsocial levels: 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital. 'Bridging' and 'bonding' contribute to an individual connecting with other individuals in different ways and for different purposes (Coleman, 1990; Field, 2008; Putnam, 2000). Because of the importance of these concepts, they are discussed in greater detail below.

Bridging and bonding

'Bridging' and 'bonding' are distinct aspects of the creation of social capital (Putnam, 2000). They work to strengthen the connections between individuals and communities; thus, they offer opportunities to an individual to build social capital, providing access to support and resources (Baker, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Both 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital have advantages, such as the strength of close ties and inclusiveness, and the disadvantages of excluding outsiders and not facilitating close ties (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

Bonding social capital available in a community offers strong mutual support to each member, and members are active in their community (Putnam, 2000). Bonded social capital could be created between family members, members of an ethnic group, or a close-knit community of which a college graduate is a member (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital can offer a sound basis for trust, creating loyalty and mutual benefit among community members (Putnam, 2000). It is considered to be a strong tie, since this type of social capital is exclusive, focusing on the member's community only (Leonard and Onyx, 2003; Putnam, 2000). However, too much bonding social capital can be a disadvantage for a graduate; because it is by nature exclusive, the group is less concerned about anyone outside it, and therefore offers less support to individuals viewed as outsiders (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000). This exclusivity also limits the availability of information and the availability of people who may be able to assist the individual by providing access to resources outside the core group (Granovetter, 1973).

In contrast, 'bridging' social capital offers greater tolerance of outsiders, allows for more individuality within the group, and encourages connections with other individuals, thus allowing access to resources not available in the group (Granovetter, 1973; Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital is more inclusive, and connects people across networks for different purposes (Leonard and Onyx, 2003; Putnam, 2000). Consequently, by building the soft skills necessary to develop effective bridging social capital, college students can gain access to

more resources than with bonding social capital alone (Murphy, 2013; Putnam, 2000).

Both bridging and bonding social capital can be instrumental in an individual's career development (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). 'Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40' (Putnam, 2000: 23). These two dimensions of social capital if taken together build strong connections and also accept a diverse group of people – consequently, their deployment plays an important role in the development of soft skills (Coleman, 1988; Leonard and Onyx, 2003; Putnam, 2000).

Virtual social capital

Despite the conventional wisdom, some studies have shown that individuals now have more social capital than ever before due to virtual interaction, which offers people new opportunities for building and maintaining social capital (Deil-Amen et al., 2016; Hsu, 2015; Pénard and Poussing, 2010; Salahuddin et al., 2016; Shanyang, 2006). By interacting with other people over the Internet, individuals can create stronger bonding social capital; it allows people who have already formed connections to maintain them more easily across great distances (Deil-Amen et al., 2016; Putnam, 2000; Salahuddin et al., 2016). However, this type of interaction does not promote the efficient creation of bonded social capital; face-to-face meetings are still needed to cement the relationship (Hampton et al., 2001; Pénard and Poussing, 2010). Virtual social capital initiates more bridging social capital, allowing individuals who may never meet face-to-face to start a relationship and begin building social capital based on shared interests (Pénard and Poussing, 2010; Putnam, 2000; Salahuddin et al., 2016). Virtual communities seem to offer limitless opportunities for building and maintaining social capital (Pénard and Poussing, 2010; Salahuddin et al., 2016).

Despite the facts that more individuals are accessing and creating more social capital online and there are seemingly inexhaustible opportunities via the Internet, there is, as mentioned above, a drawback – the lack of face-to-face interaction which helps individuals to create specific soft skill human capital (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Face-to-face interaction begins a process that transforms an individual's experiences into knowledge and skills (Kolb, 2015). The mastery of those soft skills that are not required in a virtual world cannot be developed if there is no offline relationship; for example, virtual relationships allow participants to 'unfriend' other participants with little or no consequences, just by clicking a button (Pénard and Poussing, 2010). However, face-to-face interactions with a difficult person demand much more skill than a simple click of the mouse (Kolb, 2015; Pénard and Poussing, 2010; Wenger, 1998). While students can have transformational experiences via a virtual community, virtual socializing is not equal to traditional social interaction, because of the complexity of face-to-face interactions and the experience gained from those interactions (Pénard and Poussing, 2010). A student involved in a face-to-face interaction can experience the transformation that builds soft skills within a community of practice (Kolb, 2015; Wenger, 1998). The interaction between individuals and their environment also helps to create important soft skills (Kolb, 2015).

Students who are building most of their social capital in a virtual environment are developing 'Version 2.0' social capital, but the current business climate is running on the 1.0 version (Pénard and Poussing, 2010). Although some businesses believe they are operating effectively in the virtual world, many do not accept newer technologies as effective forms of communication and discourage their employees from using them (Adejimola, 2008). Students who have mastered these new kinds of communication, unfortunately, tend to lack the face-to-face interaction that affects their ability to read and express non-verbal cues. In a virtual community that relies on written text, the non-verbal elements of communication do not exist (Hampton et al., 2001; Hsu, 2015), thus making it necessary for students to learn to function in 'compatibility mode'. Just as computer software receives upgrades and needs to run in a compatibility mode to work with older versions, students need to be competent in older forms of communication (Adejimola, 2008; Pénard and Poussing, 2010; Putnam, 2000), especially since research highlights a compatibility issue between the two forms of social capital (Hampton et al., 2001; Hsu, 2015).

Moreover, research indicates that communication via online discussion has proved to be more egalitarian and harsher than face-to-face communication (Putnam, 2000). This frank, uncensored form of communication may help explain why college graduates are struggling with face-to-face communication skills in business, making the utilization of additional social capital difficult (Adejimola, 2008; Pénard and Poussing, 2010). If more conversations are handled by online communities, email or via texting, students and recent graduates may be lacking the skills that will allow them to understand and to convey successfully the subtext of conversation (Mehrabian, 1980; Wenger, 1998). Similarly, they may struggle with vocal tone, body language and even word choice if they have not been practising communication via both verbal and non-verbal languages (Adejimola, 2008; Mehrabian, 1980).

The decline in social capital that Putnam highlighted, then, is impacting both communities and individuals. Even with the additional social capital accruing from virtual social experiences, there is a divide between college graduates' online skills and the skills required for success in business (Adejimola, 2008; Coleman, 1988; Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000). Likewise, the methods they use to build and maintain relationships have had a negative impact on

their soft skills acquisition (Adejimola, 2008; Kolb, 2015). Students' ability to convert their virtual social capital into face-to-face interactions, where soft skill mastery can be practised, is essential for maximizing their social capital (Adejimola, 2008; Kolb, 2015).

Practical implications

Raising students' awareness of the importance of building and maintaining social capital throughout their college career could have a positive impact on their future. Professors and instructors who teach classes to new undergraduates may want to talk about the importance of the team projects that are assigned (Kolb, 2015). Explaining why students are required to work together and how this process will help them to work in groups after graduation should help to make them aware of opportunities that would otherwise be ignored as merely a part of the homework (Coleman, 1988; Kolb, 2015; Roberts, 2013). Teachers might also address issues such as having to work with people one does not like, again stressing its relevance to the business world.

A leadership development class should be considered as part of the students' orientation, creating awareness of different personality types, communication skills, teamwork skills, getting along with people who are different and self-management (Colby et al., 2011; Roberts, 2013). Such an approach may go a long way in making the students more aware of the opportunities that the college offers (Colby et al., 2011; Kolb, 2015), thus encouraging them to learn more than the academic content taught, and to build social capital with people who are different (Colby et al., 2011; Kolb, 2015).

A bachelor's degree in US colleges typically consists of 120 credits, which equates to about 40 classes. Depending on the college, the classes will have anywhere from 30 to 100-plus students. Therefore, throughout a college career, the student will interact with a minimum of 1200 fellow students, plus professors and support staff. Building social capital can be achieved simply through being a good team member in a group project or inviting other students for coffee. However, unless students make an effort to start building and maintaining relationships, thus gaining both social capital and soft skill experience, they will graduate without all the benefits a college degree can give them (Adejimola, 2008; Kolb, 2015; Roberts, 2013). The individual student, not the college, has control over his or her willingness and ability to build social capital; colleges afford ample opportunity to connect with other individuals in class and by participation in extracurricular activities.

Conclusion

According to mainstream articles and researchers, businesses and graduates are blaming colleges and universities for graduates' lack of soft skills (Elliott, 2015; Farrington, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Tekarslan and Erden, 2014). Businesses and graduates are experiencing the effect of the decline in social capital, which is manifest in these missing skills, and the phenomenon is being attributed to the inadequacy of higher education programmes (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Putnam, 2000). This contention of this article, however, is that it may not be reasonable to expect that 4 years of academic classes focused on teaching other skills will necessarily develop the soft skills required; it may, in fact, take many years of practice to develop those skills (Bandura, 1977; Datar et al., 2010).

Even though colleges do not focus on teaching soft skills (Kolb, 2015; Schwartz, 2013), they are working towards solutions with capstone classes, internships, extracurricular and co-curricular activities in an effort to supply the missing experiences (Colby et al., 2011; Lang and McNaught, 2013). However, students still need to take responsibility themsleves for their lack of soft skills and work to improve them (Majid et al., 2012; Tekarslan and Erden, 2014). Communication has been identified as an important skill that many other soft skills require (Mitchell et al., 2010), and further analysis shows that abilities in both verbal and non-verbal communication are critical attributes (Miller, 2016; Putnam, 2000; Schoop et al., 2010).

Although the argument of this article is that it is too simplistic to blame higher education institutions for the absence of soft skills in their graduates, businesses, colleges and communities would all do well to seek alternative ways of teaching how social capital can be created. Such intitiatives will help both current students and recent graduates to develop essential soft skills they have not yet mastered.

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