BEYOND A DEGREE:

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS

/ THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE LANDSCAPE

Community colleges were established 100 years ago as deeply democratic centers of educational opportunity and they carry on this legacy today. Community colleges are open to all who want to learn, regardless of income, background, or previous academic experience.[1] In 2015, nearly half of all undergraduates in the United State attend community college.[2] These institutions play a critical role in providing low-cost access to a post-secondary credential for students traditionally underrepresented in higher education—first-generation college-goers, low-income students, and minority students[3]—and offer on-ramps to four-year colleges and universities and pathways to the workforce. A college education, including a two-year degree, is strongly associated with employment prospects and increased earning potential.[4] Middle-skills jobs, which require education beyond high school but not a four-year degree—jobs which often require an associate's degree or certificate—make up the largest part of America's and Illinois' labor market.[5] Community colleges are essential in providing training and credentials to fill these jobs and community college graduates are a key component of a competitive workforce.

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THE IDEA EXCHANGE @ ONE MILLION DEGREES

/ THE CHALLENGE:
LOW GRADUATION RATES, SKILLS SHORTAGES

Despite the labor market's increased need for the types of credentials that community colleges offer and the increase in community college enrollment, graduation rates at America's community colleges remain stubbornly low. **Only 21.2% of the nation's public community college students graduate within three years.[6]** Attrition rates at community colleges are attributable to multiple factors, including student academic under-preparedness;[7] high advisor to student ratios; lack of understanding among students about how to leverage available student supports;[8] and myriad responsibilities and challenges facing community college students, including working full-time, financial hardship, and familial responsibilities.[9]

At the same time, high-growth industries seeking middle-skills labor are struggling to find enough skilled workers to fill job openings. Kochan, Finegold, and Osterman of the *Harvard Business Review* suggest that "shortages of workers for these types of jobs are already undermining U.S. competitiveness and causing firms to shift their operations abroad. Figuring out how to train people to fill those well-paid jobs could help remedy the wage stagnation gripping the country and close the growing gap between high- and low-income households."[10]

However, there is a growing body of research promoting solutions to community college attrition, which demonstrates that targeted and comprehensive academic, financial, and other support services at community colleges can increase student achievement and mitigate these overwhelming attrition rates.[11]

/ ANSWERING
THE CALL

One Million Degrees (OMD) was founded in 2006 in Chicago by a group of social entrepreneurs who sought to address the specific challenges facing community college students in the Chicago area. OMD's mission is to empower low-income, highly motivated community college students to succeed in school, in work, and in life by providing participants with the academic, professional, personal, and financial supports critical to their success in the classroom and beyond. Since its founding, OMD's ecosystem of focused and intensive support, sustained encouragement, high accountability, and expansive social capital has had transformational effects, helping its scholars become leaders in their families, schools, communities, and careers. OMD Scholars graduate at a rate of 70% within three years, **over three times the national average.** Upon community college completion, OMD Scholars are transferring to four-year colleges and universities and earning living wages in high demand fields, such as health care, IT, and engineering.

/ BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2013, OMD partnered with Jiffy Lansing, a PhD student in Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University, to undertake a research study designed to elicit key program components and highlight the mechanisms at work in OMD's successful outcomes. The research design involved descriptive and qualitative analysis of data collected over the 2013-2014 academic year through interviews with, and shadowing of, OMD staff, focus groups with scholars and volunteer coaches who mentor scholars, observations of OMD workshops and events, and analysis of all OMD program materials, including OMD Scholar applications.

Through analyses of these data, a conceptual framework emerged that links the building and effective use of different types of capital to identity development. Findings from this study suggest that not only are OMD Scholars accumulating human capital in the form of educational persistence to an associate's degree (and in turn economic capital related to expanded career options resulting from a college degree) but that OMD is also fostering scholars' accumulation of social capital in the form of connections to new social networks and cultural capital in the form of increased working knowledge of academic and workplace norms, strategies, and behavioral expectations. Moreover, OMD seems to be having some effect on how scholars understand their identity that may increase their ability to make use of their newly accumulated capital in increasingly effective ways.

/ BEYOND A DEGREE—
CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Theories of capital-building focus on developing specific skills and garnering necessary resources for individuals to achieve well-being and attain self-sufficiency. In particular, this perspective suggests that interventions that develop four key types of capital may be especially important to fostering social mobility: human, social, cultural, and economic capital. Prior research has found each of these forms of capital to promote adult self-sufficiency.

Human capital can be defined as the skills and credentials an individual acquires through education, training, and work experience, which can be used to further one's opportunities in society. Individuals accumulate human capital over the course of a lifetime[12] and through a variety of formal and informal learning situations.[13] Human capital is now considered to include "hard" skills such as technical knowledge needed to perform a job or function and "soft" skills that signal competence and commitment in the labor market.[14] Individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face significant barriers to human capital development.

Economic capital is defined as the financial resources to invest in self-development and actualization of goals.[15] Economic capital provides the financial means to gain access to social networks or institutions that can continue to improve one's position or enable mobility in the social world. Not only do low-income individuals often lack these resources, they may not know where or how to access them. In addition, for certain low-income individuals who have financial responsibility to support their families, immediate opportunities to make money through employment or in the underground economy may outweigh the potential long-term benefits of investing in human capital development and may limit their ability to acquire additional social and cultural capital.
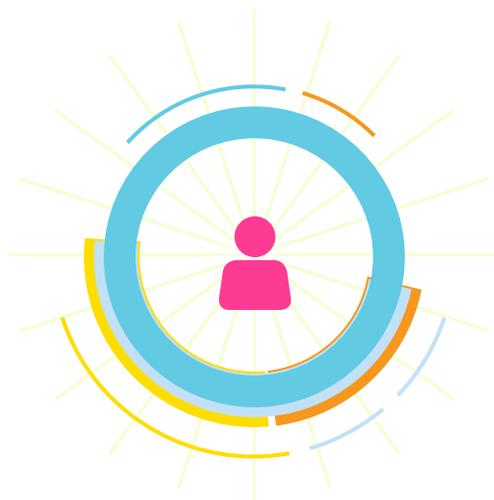
Social capital involves the connections with other individuals that can be employed to help one effectively navigate the social world.[16] These connections can provide resources such as information, guidance, and instrumental support ("bridging") as well as emotional support and encouragement ("bonding"). Social capital is accessed and mobilized through interpersonal relationships situated within social networks.[17] Individuals with resource-poor social networks face additional barriers to accessing and building social capital that can advance social mobility. Key, then, to helping these individuals build and leverage social capital is connecting them to resource-rich social networks through community organizations, social service providers, and educational institutions.

Cultural capital consists of an individual's culturally derived knowledge that shapes social understanding, values, attitudes, and behaviors. It is formed and reinforced by participating in social groups, particularly in the family, school, and work.[18] Because cultural capital is initially shaped early in life by proximal influences, many low-income and first-generation college students lack the types of "college knowledge" that is central to the cultural capital of middle-class American families. Therefore, helping low-income community college students understand how to navigate college processes and professional settings effectively can positively affect not only their ability to succeed in college but also their capacity to acquire and effectively use other types of capital.
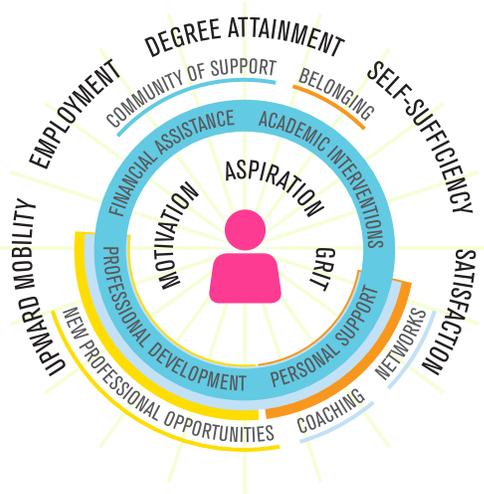
OMD's Support Model

Key to OMD's support model is the promotion and development of these four capitals, which work synergistically, with the building of one type of capital facilitating an increase in other forms of capital. OMD recognizes that individuals, especially individuals from under-resourced communities, often require much more than academic support alone to earn their degrees, and succeed in school, in work, and in life. The multifaceted OMD program model has evolved over time to build the four capitals.

Economic Capital

- Financial planning focused on saving for the future, paying for schooling after earning an associate's degree, investments, and financial goal setting
- Scholar stipends provide money to cover additional costs of attending college (books, transportation, childcare) and additional incentive to participate in programming
- Required early completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the State of Illinois Monetary Assistance Program (MAP)

Human Capital

- Academic supports to stay on track to earn degrees or credentials, including tutoring and staff support
- Required periodic meetings with college advisors to develop and update academic plans
- Required tutoring for all incoming scholars who are new to college and for any scholars whose mid-term grades fall below a D.
- Requirement and support for scholars to develop a professional portfolio, including resumes, elevator pitches, and smart goals to assist scholars beyond a degree

Cultural Capital

Social Capital
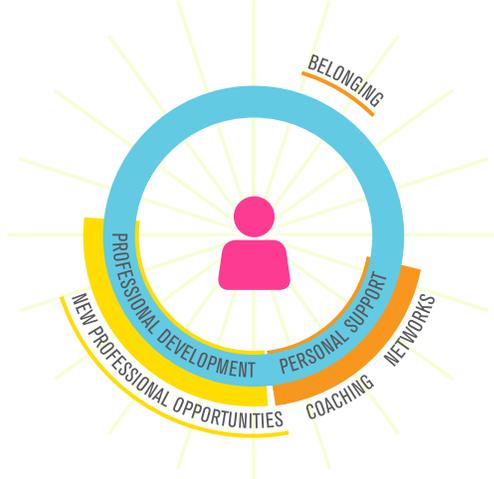
- Professional norms and social norms explicitly taught and practiced in monthly OMD workshops
- OMD Program Coordinators and volunteer coaches model norms of professional communication and interpersonal interactions
- Experiential events, such as Speed Networking Night, Etiquette Dinner, and Suited for Success offer safe, supportive spaces to practice professional dress, etiquette, and behavior
- A new professional outfit and headshot free of charge
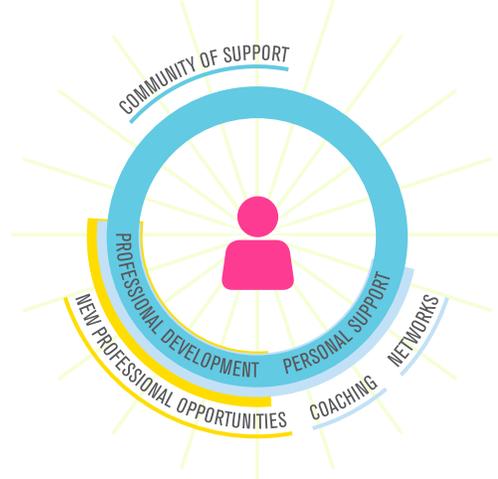
- Support and encouragement through coach-scholar relationship and Program Coordinator-scholar relationships
- Expanded networks through volunteer coaches
- Expanded networks through experiential events, such as Speed Networking Night
- Access and exposure to new professional networks through Wisdom from the Workplace site visits and informational interviews

/ BEYOND CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT—DOING IDENTITY WORK

Capital development perspectives favored by sociology and economic academic fields assume that individuals are rational actors in the process of the accumulation and use of capital. However, the psychological and developmental literature suggests that the key to successfully navigating tensions and challenges in college and beyond relates directly to one's sense of self. Positive identity has been associated with a host of positive economic outcomes[19] as well as outcomes related to well-being.[20] Indeed, during the 2013-2014 study, consistent themes began to emerge in focus groups and interviews with OMD Scholars that speak to a phenomenon beyond theories of capital development. Many scholars spoke about their development as it related to their sense of self, rather than skills-accumulation. Scholars spoke about believing in themselves for the first time and negotiating tensions between their 'new selves' as successful college students and future professionals and past experiences or current familial or social pressures. Others expressed that their aspirations for their futures had shifted and grown, sometimes dramatically, within a short period of time.

Evident in this feedback was that OMD programming was effectively fostering more than capital development—it was promoting a focus on identity among participants. Though many education and workforce programs are explicit about encouraging skills and capital development, few address identity development. Thus, the 2013-2014 study involved exploring the ways in which OMD was promoting identity development among participants, examining if identity development seemed to be a factor in participant success, and, if so, how OMD and other educational and workforce programs could intentionally 'do' identity work.

/ WHY IS IDENTITY IMPORTANT TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS?

Research has shown that challenges beyond access to capital can derail low-income students, first-generation college goers, and minority students on their paths to degrees and careers. "For upwardly mobile individuals, it is imperative to find ways to cope effectively with the multiple stressors associated with upward mobility. Psychological distress can result from a number of sources for a person who is changing social statuses. There can be pressure to code-switch, distress resulting from being physically distant and ideologically different from their family of origin, as well as distress related to feeling overtaxed by the family."[21] Uncomfortable transitions, new environments, discrimination, and exposure to stereotype threat can have short- and long-term effects on upwardly mobile populations as they navigate college and the workforce.[22] Since community colleges serve a large number of low-income students, first-generation college goers, and minority students, much of the student population may be faced with these very challenges.

For these students, a positive sense of self, self-efficacy, and meaning-making can help mitigate these challenges. "...It is during life transitions, those times when individuals face new situations, roles, expectations, or environments, when the individual is faced with navigating the tension between consistency and change. Sometimes, making a successful life transition requires transformation. This may be in the form of one's behavior and self-presentation, in the decision-making process, or in how an individual sees himself and his place in the world. A focus on identity development may help us understand how such transformations can be managed."[23]

> "You hear all the time how people let their past define who they become; and because of this they end up living off the government instead of trying to get an education and change the statistics. I won't be one of those people."

(OMD Scholar, 2014 focus group)

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/ SO WHAT MIGHT A FOCUS ON IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT MEAN?

Drawing from human development theories, McAdams and Zapata-Gietl[24] identified three overlapping layers of identity: self as social actor, self as motivated agent, and self as autobiographical author. In essence, this framework highlights the different ways in which we come to see ourselves and our place in the world.

The social actor layer of identity is the first to develop, usually fairly early in the childhood years. It is the most superficial, and the most immediately responsive to environment. It is focused on how we present ourselves in interactions with others. The self as social actor serves the psychological function of promoting a sense of belonging and the social function of promoting group cohesion.

The motivated agent layer of identity is the next to develop, usually during early adolescence. It incorporates a future-orientation, decision-making, and commitment to pathways for achieving goals. The self as motivated agent serves to promote a sense of *becoming*—of having control over one's future and impact on the world. It is reliant on knowledge of potential pathways and information in order to successfully take action towards goal definition and fulfillment.

The autobiographical author layer of identity is the third to develop, usually beginning in adolescence. As authors of our life stories, we begin to narrate stories about our lives to trusted others that help to make meaning of experiences and provide a sense of continuity in action over time and across contexts.

The evolving narrative involves the integration of past events as we perceive them with future potential selves. This narrative helps make our present actions feel authentic and enables us to make life transitions, face new situations, and navigate tensions by helping to interpret and frame past and present experiences as meaningful to both the success of the future self and honest to the experiences of the past self. The self as autobiographical author serves the function of promoting a sense of authenticity and continuity as individuals move across time, enact different roles, and engage in different social contexts.

Even though each layer initially develops during a different life stage, they continue to develop throughout the life course and interact with each other. Moreover, all three layers develop through social processes. As such, none of these three ways of knowing oneself develops in a vacuum, nor are they set in stone. Indeed, the malleability of identity formation and evolution over time coupled with the importance of social interactions to each layer of identity allows for the potential for programs and institutions to better foster positive identity development.

/ INTEGRATING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT WITH CAPITAL-BUILDING IN THE OMD CONTEXT

The 2013-2014 study illustrated how the three-layer identity framework and capital development perspectives are applied in OMD programming and highlights the strength of integrating capital and identity development in practice. The cornerstone of OMD's approach is the development of a positive adult identity that not only enables OMD Scholars to accumulate capital but also empowers OMD Scholars to make the most of accumulated capitals, which in turn propels them towards achieving their academic, personal, and career goals.
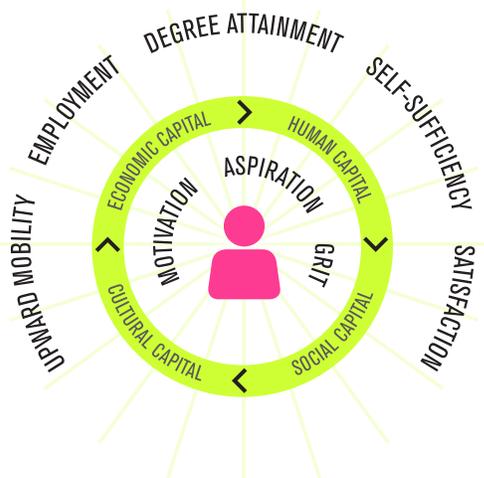
Actor: Promotes *belonging,* feeling accepted and protected; relates to and helps leverage cultural and social capital.

The *self* as social actor requires developing a sense of belonging within the context of college and preparation for the workforce. OMD fosters a sense of belonging among its scholars as college students from its initial communications and interactions with new scholars. OMD's scholar orientation highlights the reasons why scholars were accepted into the program, frames community college as a wise choice for postsecondary education, and elevates their statuses as college students by calling their participants "scholars." Experiencing a sense of belonging increases confidence and openness to measured risk-taking among scholars so that they can take full advantage of OMD programming aimed at developing cultural and social capital. Moreover, OMD's explicit teaching and modeling of professional behaviors and communication increases scholars' repertoires of social behaviors and comfort enacting them.

Agent: Promotes *becoming* and the sense of control over one's future and potential impact on the world; relates to and helps leverage human and economic capital.

OMD programming engages scholars as *motivated agents* in goal-setting, planning for one's future, developing strategies for identifying and accessing supports and effectively advocating for oneself, and teaches strategies for anticipating and navigating upcoming challenges. This long-term planning orientation supports scholars' accumulation of human capital in the form of hard skills (degrees and credentials), soft skills (communication, etiquette, norms of professional interactions), and entry into the labor market. OMD's financial planning and long-term career planning also help scholars prepare to leverage future economic capital.

Author: Promotes sustainability and adaptability during transitions and helps one make sense of one's past with one's future; related to and leverages all four capitals.

The *self* as *autobiographical author* helps scholars make meaning out of their experiences as social actors and motivated agents and helps make the accumulation of the four capitals feel authentic and integrated with one's vision of self. The self as autobiographical author draws upon cultural and social capitals to generate the form and content of one's life story: One uses cultural symbols and signals to craft the stories one shares about oneself with others and one taps into social networks to help generate and edit the shorter stories that become part of one's broader life narrative. In addition, the autobiographical author draws upon knowledge of, or access to, human capital and economic capital in explaining one's future goals and the accompanying social status or social mobility that are enabled by education and money in modern American society. Without understanding a transition within the context of one's own life as a decision or chosen pathway that "makes sense," an individual is vulnerable to being derailed in the transition and thwarted in their development."[25]

OMD promotes authorship by including focused reflective writing exercises after scholar workshops; providing space for scholars to report on successes and struggles during structured meetings with OMD Program Coordinators; encouraging the sharing of good news and challenges with OMD staff, scholars, and coaches at the end of workshops; and having scholars work on 'elevator pitches'—a succinct and persuasive statement explaining who they are, their goals, their vision for their future, and how they plan to get there.

Economic Capital

Social Actor
Access to professional attire

Motivated Agent
Financial means to reach goals

Autobiographical Author
Evolving sense of self to support economic mobility

Human Capital

Social Actor
Behaviors aligned with educational and labor market norms

Motivated Agent
Skills and credentials that are valued in labor market

Autobiographical Author
Accomplishments and skills as markers in life story

Cultural Capital

Social Actor
Repertoire of, and fluency in, self-presentation skills

Motivated Agent
Adaptability and improvisation within a given context

Autobiographical Author
Integrated sense of self to support movement between social, professional, and personal environments

Social Capital

Social Actor
Honing self-presentation skills within different social networks

Motivated Agent
Enable access to social networks and professional fields of interest

Autobiographical Author
New audiences and potential reframing of self-stories

IDENTITY + CAPITAL

ECONOMIC CAPITAL · HUMAN CAPITAL · SOCIAL CAPITAL · CULTURAL CAPITAL

"I said to myself 'I'm going to school but for what?' I thought "I know how to take care of people, I'm a caregiver, I can do nursing…" It wasn't that I loved science; it was about me taking care of people. But then when I talked to my advisor, I figured science is not my forte… I also needed a job and learned about a recruiting firm through OMD. And when I got the job I have now—I'm a recruiter—I realized I'm more of a leader and not only a caretaker. I never saw myself as a leader for anything. I always wanted to take direction, not give it. As months went by and I was in school, and I was working, and I saw I was capable of doing this—I was doing well in school and my job—I started to believe in myself. When you live in an environment where you believe that you're nothing special, that's what you are and that's what you're good for. You start believing that. I never put myself in any lead role whatsoever. Now I'm confident enough that I can do whatever I set my mind to. Now I'm a supervisor for up to 30 people at a recruiting firm."

(OMD Scholar interview with OMD staff member, summer 2014.)

/ CONCLUSION

"Making a successful transition requires the acquisition and implementation of particular skills and knowledge but that, alone, is not sufficient for sustaining success. Successful and sustainable transitions also require the internalization of the meaning of the transition in the individual's life."[26]

This was evident in a random sample of scholars' application essays,[27] where despite not being prompted to state their reason for embarking on postsecondary education, every accepted applicant provided an explanation of what obtaining a college education meant to them. As such, OMD Scholars as autobiographical authors were already including college completion as a component of their future selves. At the same time, OMD Scholars, like other low-income community college students, face myriad challenges that can derail their educational goals. But they come with stories of how education is consistent with who they are. OMD is able to reinforce scholars' sense of themselves as motivated to seek education by fostering a new community of students, coaches, and staff that is infused with high standards and high supports, and provides the type of programming and feedback mechanisms to help scholars develop the skills of an effective social actor and knowledge of pathways and planning strategies required to be an effective motivated agent.

While the accumulation of different types of capital have been found to increase self-sufficiency in adulthood and a positive adult occupational identity has been linked with adult well-being outcomes, this study unpacked how capital and identity development work synergistically and can be operationalized by programs and institutions to promote positive outcomes for low-income community college students. OMD is now working to adapt its programming to focus more explicitly on, and measure aspects of, identity and believes that the focus on capital accumulation AND identity may be a key driver of success in community college, in work, and in life for low-income, first-generation, and minority community college students.

JIFFY LANSING

PhD Student in Human Development and Social Policy, Northwestern University

Jiffy Lansing is a researcher at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and a PhD student in the Human Development and Social Policy program at Northwestern University. Her work lies at the intersection of sociology and human development with a focus on the role of institutional and programmatic policies on developmental trajectories. Ms. Lansing's research interests include educational persistence and career preparation for vulnerable youth populations as well as identity development during the transition to adulthood.

Ms. Lansing has led research studies on student support services and student characteristics at urban community colleges, new approaches to educational and socio-emotional development for youth involved in juvenile justice facilities, and reentry processes from juvenile justice facilities into communities. She has contributed to federally-funded studies focused on policies and practices related to promoting adult well-being and self-sufficiency for vulnerable youth populations including the development of a framework for youth-serving programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families and exploration of educational and employment supports for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Ms. Lansing received her A.M. in Social Science from the University of Chicago and her B.A. in Sociology from Tufts University.

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