

Learning How to Network: Career Preparation Through Alumni Interviews

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Abstract: Up to 80% of jobs are filled through networking. However, many undergraduate students do not know how to network with people who are not their peers. One way to teach this skill is through alumni interviews. A political science class meets weekly with a series of alumni working in fields of interest to the students in the class. In the last month of the term, each student is assigned to contact one graduate of our program to set up an informational interview about their career path. The students write a reflection on the interview. This study surveys undergraduate students to learn about their experiences with networking and their comfort level with networking. The treatment group took the political science class and the control group has not. It concludes that repeated and required interactions with alumni helped the students learn how to explain their own qualifications, connect with mid-career professionals, and open doors to better job opportunities.

Introduction

Up to 80% of jobs are filled through networking (Koss-Feder 1999). Networking is an important predictor of career success, particularly for people with “boundless careers” that constantly evolve (Eby, et al. 2003). However, many undergraduate students do not know how to network with people who are not their peers. One way to teach this skill is through alumni interviews. A political science class meets weekly with a series of alumni working in fields of interest to the students in the class. In the last month of the term, each student contacts one graduate of our program to set up an informational interview about their career path. The students write a reflection on the interview. This study seeks to answer two research questions:

- Do the students who experience this course have a higher comfort level with networking when compared to other students with the same major who did not?
- Are the students who experience this course likely to use more networking activities than students with the same major who did not?

The study conducts a survey of upper-level students asking their level of comfort, confidence, and experience with networking. It compares the responses of students who experienced the course with the networking lessons to students with the same major. It concludes that the course’s repeated and required interactions with alumni helped the students learn how to feel more comfortable and confident networking. The students who took the class had experience with a wider range of networking activities compared to the students who did not.

Literature Review

Professional development is an important issue facing the political science community. It becomes even more urgent when facing a demographic cliff where the demand for political science courses may become more scarce (Walker 1978; Bram 2023). Teaching our students how to network is one way to improve their career opportunities and continue to attract new students even in a time of demographic change.

Networking is defined in the literature as “individual actions directed toward contacting friends, acquaintances, and referrals to get information, leads, or advice on getting a job” (Wanberg, et al. 2000). In reviewing the literature, most of the published research on teaching networking is published in the fields of educational leadership and business communication. While these fields have different career paths than that of most political science majors, the theories and teaching techniques may still be of use to political science instructors. There are two main themes that emerge in the literature. The first theme theorizes about the purpose of networking and the second theme describes techniques for teaching networking skills.

The purpose of networking

The two main perspectives on the purpose of networking are the constructivists and the rationalists. Constructivists see networking as a form of social learning. It can give access to alternative perspectives (Weick 1995; Nooteboom 2004). These new perspectives can help networkers break free of the tunnel vision that can occur in more isolated organizations. It can also help to make their organizations more robust when the networkers share the new knowledge with their coworkers.

Rationalists see networking as a way to build social capital through sharing information and transferring skills (Lin, 1999; Hargreaves 2004). In this view, networking is more successful when there is reciprocity and the networking actors are at more equal levels of power (Borgatti & Foster 2003). One study cautions that insider networks may choose to share their political knowledge selectively, choosing to mentor white men more readily than women or ethnic minorities (Blass, et al. 2007).

Teaching networking

A more developed part of the literature focuses on teaching techniques. Many studies have required students to role play or simulate networking in the classroom (Davis and Warfield 2011; de Janasz and Forret 2008; Segrist and Pawlow 2009; Kryder 2011). One study required students to choose a real career role model, conduct an informational interview with them, then return to conduct a mock interview with them (MacDermott 1995). Another study required business communication students to use the six degrees of separation to find a role model to interview. It then qualitatively analyzed student reflective writing to trace changes over time in the way students within the pilot class appreciated networking (Kaufman, et al. 2015). Overall, the research designs were primarily qualitative, using focus groups (Davis and Warfield 2011) or reflective writing (de Janasz and Forret 2008; Kaufman, et al. 2015). A review of the literature did not reveal any studies that compared the students who received lessons on networking with similar students who did not experience the networking lessons. This raises a possibility of selection bias in the research. Increased appreciation and comfort with networking may occur naturally as students mature, regardless to their exposure to networking lessons.

Method

The goal of this study is to determine if these networking lessons increase the likelihood of young alumni networking their way into a desirable first job. The research design uses a questionnaire to measure the level of comfort with networking among students who experienced a series of lessons that bring them into contact with alumni and compare responses to other students who have not yet experienced the lessons. The findings will help to reveal if these lessons improved students' networking skills.

The Treatment: Networking Lessons

The political science class where students receive the treatment is a senior seminar for international studies majors. Every student in the class is a junior or senior majoring in international studies with at least 60 credit hours. The class meets three times a week for a 15-week semester. It includes several different types of networking lessons.

Each week, the students meet as a class with a guest speaker who graduated from Baylor with a major in international studies. Some of these meetings are in person, but most of them are through teleconference. The guest speakers have working experience in a variety of career fields that are interesting to the students in the class. In a recent semester, the class met with alumni working in diplomacy, consulting, corporate law, law school, medical school, entrepreneurship and product development, international trade, international trade compliance, intelligence, defense contracting, high school counselor, university admissions

counselor, and civil servants working as analysts or program managers at NASA, Department of Commerce, and the Department of State. At the beginning of the semester, students learn about career fields that are more common in the program, and they indicate which of these fields they find most interesting. The instructor then invites alumni who work in those fields to meet with the class.

There are some common themes that emerge in these alumni meetings. Alumni share stories of times when a cold email expressing interest in a job has gotten them an interview. They describe a time when sending a thank you message after an interview has gotten them the job. One alumnus related hearing, “We had four finalists and we liked all of them, but you were the only one who contacted us to tell us how much you want this job so we chose you.” The alumni encourage the students, saying that people like to be helpful. When asking for help, most people say yes. Alumni warn the students that hiring managers are flooded with more applications than they can begin to process, so it is essential to find someone who can flag one’s resume. If it is not possible to find a contact who can get the application or resume flagged, then then send your own message expressing interest to the hiring manager or person who would manage this position. When the students hear this same advice week after week from alumni working in many different career fields and a variety of career stages, it sinks in that this is how job searches work.

Another networking assignment in the class requires students to develop a resume using the Career Center’s template that scans well through Applicant Tracking System (ATS) software. The students then use the resume to set up a LinkedIn page. Each week, the students are

encouraged to connect with each alumni guest speaker over LinkedIn. There is a LinkedIn group for international studies alumni, which all the students in the class are invited to join.

In the last month of the term, each student contacts one graduate of our program to set up an informational interview about their career path. Many students identify their interview subject through a LinkedIn group for alumni of the program. The instructor helps to coordinate the selection of interview subjects to be sure only one student contacts each alum. If multiple students want to interview the same person, the instructor suggests other alumni with similar career experiences. The students write a reflection on the interview. If both the student and the interview subject agree, the interview summary is published on a [blog site](#).

Subject selection and recruitment

This study invited 122 students majoring in international studies with more than 60 credit hours as of January 2025. It sent individual emails through Qualtrics with an individualized link. The response rate on the survey was 26.2%. There were 35 respondents, of which 6 were in the treatment group. This study plans to conduct two more waves of the survey in January 2026 and January 2027, so these results are only preliminary. The survey invitations are timed to take place between the fall and spring semesters so it is clear that participation is voluntary and is not tied to any course credit. The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlations. The study will add statistical tests when there are more observations in the dataset.

Results and Discussion

Even with very few observations, there are some striking differences between the treatment group and the control group. The treatment group is more comfortable with networking than the control group is. They are more confident networking. They have experience with a wider range of networking activities. The treatment group is more comfortable and more confident in their ability to connect with mid-career professionals for informational interviews compared to the control group. Interestingly, all respondents report feeling more confident than comfortable with networking.

Descriptive Statistics

Networking Survey Results	Treatment	Control	Total
How comfortable do you feel in your ability to connect with mid-career professionals for informational interviews? <i>Average response on a scale of 0-1. 0=none, 0.5 = somewhat, 1=completely</i>	0.67	0.50	0.53
How confident do you feel in your ability to connect with mid-career professionals for informational interviews? <i>Average response on a scale of 0-1. 0=none, 0.5 = somewhat, 1=completely</i>	0.75	0.55	0.59
Female Respondents N (%)	3 (50.0%)	18 (64.3%)	21 (67.8%)
Total Respondents N (%)	6 (17.6%)	29 (82.4%)	35 (100%)

One variable that could be confounding the results is the gender balance. The treatment group is balanced between male and female respondents while the control group is majority female (64.3%). This could be confounding the results if women are less comfortable networking in general compared to men. A correlational analysis found a positive correlation between being in the treatment group and feeling comfortable (0.186) and confident (0.264) networking. There was a negative correlation between being female and being comfortable (-

0.198) and confident (-0.289) networking. A cross-tabulation of the two variables showed that the comfort and confidence gaps were much smaller between male and female respondents in the treatment group compared to the control group. Women in the treatment group were only slightly less comfortable (-0.03) and confident (-0.10) networking than men. This finding suggests that the networking lessons may have a stronger effect on female participants.

Correlation Analysis

	Comfortable Networking	Confident Networking
Treatment group	0.186	0.264
Female	-0.198	-0.289
Treatment x Female	-0.03	-0.10

Information-gathering networking activities

The survey asked respondents which networking activities they have used to gather information about career opportunities. All respondents in the treatment group have held an informational interview with someone who has an interesting career or job. This is not surprising since the class required this networking activity. For the control group, only 65.5% of the control group has held an informational interview. The most common information-gathering networking activities for the treatment group are messaging someone through a professional networking site, volunteering in a field of interest, and attending a Baylor Career Center event. For the control group, the most common information-gathering networking activities were informational interviews and attending a career fair. The one information-gathering networking activity that was about equal between the two groups was meeting with someone to learn how they successfully applied for an internship, fellowship, or other similar activity. This suggests that the students are fairly comfortable networking with peers regardless of their experience

with networking lessons. The lessons help increase experience with gathering information from people who are already in the workforce.

Have you ever used any of these activities to learn more about career opportunities? (Check all that apply)

Networking activity	Treatment group	Control group	Total
Met with someone to learn more about their career path or current job (i.e. informational interview)	6 (100%)	19 (65.5%)	25 (71.4%)
Messaged someone through a professional networking site (i.e. LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed, etc.)	5 (83.3%)	9 (31.0%)	14 (40%)
Volunteered in a field that you may want to work in someday	5 (83.3%)	12 (41.4%)	17 (48.5%)
Attended a Baylor Career Center event	5 (83.3%)	14 (48.3%)	19 (54.3%)
Met with someone to learn they successfully applied for an internship, fellowship, or other similar opportunity	3 (50.0%)	16 (55.2%)	19 (54.3%)
Attended a career fair	3 (50.0%)	19 (65.5%)	22 (62.9%)

Connection-building networking activities

The study asked students what kind of networking activities respondents have used to build connections to people with similar career interests. The goal of this question was to learn how students network with older people who are not their peers. The treatment group has engaged at a higher level in all but one of the connection networking activities compared to the control group. The only connection networking activity that was more common in the control group than the treatment group was giving someone their business card (0% vs. 10.3%). It is not a common activity for this group of students! The treatment group was much more likely to send a connection request on a professional networking site to someone working in a career field of interest (83.3% vs. 24.1%).

Have you ever used any of these activities to build connections to people with similar career interests? (Check all that apply)

Networking activity	Treatment group	Control group	Total
Set up an account profile on a professional networking site (i.e. LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed, etc.)	6 (100%)	20 (70.0%)	26 (74.2%)
Attended a career fair or Baylor Career Center event	5 (83.3%)	17 (58.6%)	22 (62.9%)
Joined a student organization for people with your career interests	5 (83.3%)	11 (37.9%)	16 (45.7%)
Sent a connection request on a professional networking site to someone working in a career field that interests you	5 (83.3%)	7 (24.1%)	12 (34%)
Sent an email to someone working in a career field that interests you	4 (66.7%)	15 (51.7%)	19 (54.3%)
Asked someone you already know to introduce you to someone with an interesting career	4 (66.7%)	13 (44.8%)	17 (48.5%)
Volunteered in a field of interest or for an organization that you hope will someday hire you	4 (66.7%)	11 (37.9%)	15 (42.9%)
Attended a networking event	3 (50.0%)	8 (27.6%)	11 (31.4%)
Shadowing (i.e. observing a day in the life) in a field that you may want to work in someday	3 (50.0%)	7 (24.1%)	10 (28.6%)
Joined a professional organization for people with your career interests	3 (50.0%)	5 (17.2%)	8 (22.8%)
Given someone your business card	0 (0%)	3 (10.3%)	3 (8.6%)

Discussion

The treatment group had more experience with 13 of 16 networking activities compared to the control group. This repeated exposure to networking activities appears to be connected to the increased comfort with networking and confidence networking that the treatment group reports. Women who have not taken the class are much more likely to say they are uncomfortable or not confident with networking compared to women who have taken the class. This suggests that repeated exposure to networking practices can help to break down the

gender gap in the quality and breadth of professional networks (Huffman & Torres 2002). Having a broader network can reduce the gender gap in negotiation performance in the workplace (Turetsky, et al. 2023). It can improve the likelihood of securing financing for entrepreneurial ventures (Howell & Nanda 2024). It can improve the likelihood of achieving research productivity and tenure in political science (Hesli, Lee & Mitchell 2012; Barnes & Beaulieu 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion, repeated and required interactions with alumni helped the students learn how to explain their own qualifications, connect with mid-career professionals, and open doors to better job opportunities. In future research, this study will conduct two more waves of the survey. It will also use pre- and post-tests to track the effects of the networking lessons for students enrolled in the course and narrative analysis to analyze the skills and information students gathered from this learning experience. It also will include interviews with recent alumni to see if experience with the networking curriculum influenced the search for their first job out of college.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Student Perceptions/Attitudes

- How comfortable are you networking with mid-career professionals?
 - Very comfortable
 - Somewhat comfortable
 - Not at all comfortable
- How confident do you feel in your ability to connect with mid-career professionals for informational interviews?
 - Very confident
 - Somewhat confident
 - Not at all confident

Networking Experiences

- Have you ever used any of these activities to learn more about career opportunities? (Check all that apply)
 - Messaged someone through a professional networking site (i.e. LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed, etc.)
 - Met with someone to learn more about their career path
 - Met with someone to learn more about their current job
 - Met with someone to learn they successfully applied for an internship, fellowship, or other similar opportunity
 - Volunteered in a field that you may want to work in someday
 - Attended a career fair
 - Attended a Baylor Career Center event
- Have you ever used any of these activities to build connections to people with similar career interests? (Check all that apply)
 - Set up an account profile on a professional networking site (i.e. LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed, etc.)
 - Sent a connection request on a professional networking site to someone working in a career field that interests you
 - Sent an email to someone working in a career field that interests you
 - Printed business cards
 - Given someone your business card
 - Attended a career fair or Baylor Career Center event
 - Volunteered in a field of interest or for an organization that you hope will someday hire you
 - Shadowing (i.e. observing a day in the life) in a field that you may want to work in someday.
 - Asked someone you already know to introduce you to someone with an interesting career
 - Joined a student organization for people with your career interests
 - Joined a professional organization for people with your career interests
 - Attended a networking event

- None of the above
- Please rank the following networking activities in order of usefulness, where 1 represents "most useful" and 7 represents "least useful."
 - Professional networking sites (i.e. LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed, etc.)
 - Directly contacting people already working in the job or field of interest.
 - Attending networking events
 - Joining professional or student organizations focused on a career area
 - Volunteering in a career field of interest
 - Shadowing (i.e. observing a day in the life) in a field that you may want to work in someday.
 - Asking someone you already know to introduce you to someone with an interesting career

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Demographics

- Have you ever taken PSC 4396: International Studies Senior Seminar?
 - Yes
 - No
- What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary / third gender
 - Prefer to self-describe _____
 - Prefer not to say