Tutor/Mentor Connection

Chicago Case Study

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Officially founded in 1993, Tutor/Mentor Connection defines itself as a non-profit organization devoted to developing a network of tutoring and mentoring programs in the Chicago land area and providing supportive information and resources. Throughout the Chicago land area, tutoring and mentoring programs have developed in many neighborhoods to help at-risk children and teenagers graduate from high school. Over 200,000 kids in Chicago could benefit from tutoring and mentoring programs.[1] While many programs exists that help to serve these students, Dan Bassill, Director of Tutor/Mentor Connection, realized in the 1970s that these programs lacked the inter-connectedness that can help support them and enable success. While volunteering as the head of a tutoring group, Cabrini Connections, Dan began to reach out to similar organizations. In 1993 Tutor/Mentor Connections was incorporated to serve as an over-arching organization. Since 1993 it has grown to host bi-annual conferences and a large web-plat form serving a variety of needs that will be discussed below. Tutor/Mentor Connections acts as a prime example of utilizing technology to impact social networks/capital. Kate Williams and Joan C. Durrance state, "technology use is directly influenced of social networks, and social networks are directly influenced by technology use."[2] Tutor/Mentor Connection demonstrates an organization seeking to use technology to build the social network that enables a strong social capital. The goal of creating a strong social capital parallels the effects of social capital, to gain and provide resources beneficial to that community.

Tutor/Mentor Connection mission is to "provide an organized framework that empowers and encourages adult volunteers to contribute their time, effort, ideas and

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[1] Tutor/Mentor Connection 2
[2] Williams & Durrance, 355

advocacy toward creating life-changing solutions for children in educationally and economically disadvantaged areas," thereby "affect[ing] behavior and information channels." [34] The objectives of the organization, in their goal to support the mission statement, are to provide the resources that enable such programs to launch and grow. There is Dan has designed a four-pronged strategy to meet enable the meeting of this objective. First, he believes in collecting knowledge and information needed to support every step of the process, from brainstorming about a tutoring or mentoring program through implementation and into a sustainable stage. Secondly, Dan embraces an aggressive approach to marketing the collected knowledge so that many people see and access it. Third, Tutor/Mentor Connection seeks to facilitate and understanding of this knowledge by people both inside of tutoring and mentoring programs and on the outside to increase the effectiveness of these programs and help to secure funding and other resources for them. Finally, the fourth prong is to increase and improve the flow of resources from community leaders and funders to these programs. The four parts of the strategy are very interconnected and all are focus around the word understanding. When interviewed, Dan emphasized that the root of success for creating a network of programs, resources, and information is enabling understanding of the many different parts of the process. Dan says that "Tutor/Mentor Connection is an information base upon which others can build strategies that support kids living in high poverty areas."[5] Studies suggest that internet-based social networks generally contain "meaningless" links and that "the hidden social network; the one that matters when trying to rely on

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[3] Tutor/Mentor Connection 2
[4] Pigg & Duffy Crank, 60
[5] Bassill

word of mouth to spread an idea, a belief, or a trend" is more important.[6] However, Dan seeks to turn the hidden social network into a transparent one that encourages people to share based on the useful information they hold and seek.

Serving the community of tutoring and mentoring organizations spread across Chicago, Tutor/Mentor Connection is housed in the site of a tutoring program, Cabrini Connections, just west of downtown Chicago. The positions them centrally geographically in the community they serve. However, the physical location of the organization is minimally important to the services they provide. While it does serve for small training sessions and meetings with individuals interested in starting programs, these events are held irregularly. Tutor/Mentor Connection provides an internet-based network of websites for the use of the participants in the organization. These websites are actually hosted by Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, and updated by volunteers globally. These websites are the true central-location of the organization. They also host two conferences a year to bring the people associated with tutoring and mentoring programs physically together in an atmosphere where they can share experiences and lessons learned. These conferences are not held at the home base of Cabrini Connections, but at donated space at various area universities or convention spaces.

The lack of true physical infrastructure provides an interesting problem to Tutor/Mentor Connection, that of who is participating in the organization, not on the side of the user, but as a volunteer to the organization. Tutor/Mentor Connection employs one full-time employee and two or three part-time employees. Even Dan Bassill, the director,

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[6] Shrock

counts himself as a part-time employee because he also runs Cabrini Connections. In an interview, Dan commented that the staff has never been sufficient, leading him to rely on approximately 110 volunteers that cycle through. Only twenty of these volunteers, those that serve on the board, are consistently connected with Tutor/Mentor Connection. The reliance on volunteers allows Tutor/Mentor Connection to tap into diverse skills and resources, but also means that a constant risk remains that projects may be left incomplete as volunteers move on. This large volunteer base reflects that Tutor/Mentor Connection has successfully used technology to create a social network of people that actually interact. However, a large part of this is due to the continued outreach efforts of Dan. Yet the infrastructure that Dan and volunteers have created are the "email and other Internet-based forms of communication … [that] … established relationships and serve to communicate the needs for support and sharing of information necessary for maintaining a relationship."[7]

As the goal of Tutor/Mentor Connection is to help connect tutoring and mentoring organizations with each other, information, and donors, Tutor/Mentor Connection has various levels of users and goal groups, but in Dan's words the users are "anyone who wants to end poverty, improve the workforce, help kids do better in school, reduce violence [and] achieve social justice."[8] The primary user group is that of the leadership of various tutor and mentor programs. These individuals may use the resources that Tutor/Mentor Connections has compiled, attend the conferences, use maps that identify the location of high-poverty areas in Chicago, the location of programs, and contact information for other programs, and more. Many of the resources available are focused

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[7] Pigg and Duffy Crank, 63
[8] Bassill

on setting-up tutoring and mentoring programs and how to make them sustainable. These users need information and support to keep their organizations going, and Tutor/Mentor Connection helps to fulfill this need. The second user group that the website is geared towards is that of community leaders and potential donors. The website seeks to pass pertinent information and success stories on to this group of users in order to demonstrate the usefulness and potential of tutoring and mentoring organizations. These users are often donors looking for worthwhile community organizations to donate to. An unexpected third group of users has developed for Tutor/Mentor Connection: parents looking for programs in which to place their children. As Tutor/Mentor Connection contains an online database of area programs, parents have started to access it as a resource. Tutor/Mentor Connection encourages this use, but lacks the resources to further develop the database to support the needs of parents and recognizes that many parents of the students they are trying to reach lack internet access.

Tutor/Mentor Connection was in an interesting position in that when they formed, no similar groups existed in Chicago to facilitate inter-program communication. Therefore, Tutor/Mentor Connection built the network, reaching out to these small tutoring and mentoring groups. The first attempt to formally create connections, which was the foundation of the infrastructure that Tutor/Mentor Connection was built upon, was a printed newsletter that went out across the city three times a year. This newsletter contained relevant information and was accompanied by a printed directory. The directory included 300 organizations the first year it was printed in 1993 and 1300 the last year it was printed in 1300. This increase in included groups shows that Tutor/Mentor Connection was successfully reaching out to these organizations and that

they wanted to be included in the network. The directory and newsletters formed the

foundation for the first website, launched in 1997-8. The move to the Internet was

recommended by a volunteer, but had a rocky-road to implementation. The original group

working on building the website halted the program after six months, leaving it

unfinished. Another group soon picked up the thread and completed and online platform

for Tutor/Mentor Connection. This platform was replaced in 2005 by the current network

of websites, built and hosted by Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis. It

utilizes the open source platform .netnuke, which helps to keep the cost of the website

minimal. Dan and other staff members can edit the website. It is currently in the process

of a redesign, but the launching date for the new website is uncertain. This social media

monitors "the quality of social resources available to an individual within his or her social

network [which] influences the success of achieving desired outcomes or goals."[9] As

social networks often rely successfully on weak ties, quality information makes the weak

ties of the network trust the information found there.[10]

   Tutor/Mentor Connection provides a wide-range of resources for its users with the

goal of providing the important information. Six websites support the efforts of

Tutor/Mentor Connection and are networked through hyperlinks. To understand the

nature of Tutor/Mentor Connection, each general resource area must be defined and then

connected to all the others.

   An important part of Tutor/Mentor Connection involves enabling people to locate

programs. For this, Tutor/Mentor Connection has created a Program Locator. This tool,

located on the main Tutor/Mentor Connection website www.tutormentorconnection.org,

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[9] Johnson
[10] Kavanaugh

enables programs to locate other programs within the same vicinity, volunteers to locate programs they wish to assist with, and donors to identify where programs are and who to give money to. Dan believes that this portal can help increase the funding that programs receive because it raises the accessibility of the program to the public. While distributing resources is important to Dan, he feels that the individual groups are responsible for hosting the actual monetary donation capability, such as PayPal, and that this website will help donors to be funneled to relevant programs by providing the neighborhood, age, and type of program.

Tutor/Mentor Connection provides a library for users. All articles included in the library, which are publicly available with direct links hosted on the Tutor/Mentor Connection website, have been selected by Dan and other interested staff. They are checked for relevancy and sorted into a links library that enables browsing by topic. This library provides useful resources for program managers, including topics such as "College and Career Education Resource" and "Funding/Philanthropy,"[11] which then narrow into more specific categories when clicked on. In essence, Dan developed his own organizational schema for this specific topic of tutoring and mentoring. The library contains a total of 1868 links.

An offshoot of the library and a major marketing tool for Tutor/Mentor Connection is a variety of maps that show many different groups of information. These maps, some of which are geographic and some of which are visual maps of ideas or social network analysis maps, help people to visualize the necessity and benefits of tutoring and mentoring programs. Dan has a career history in advertising and strongly

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[11] Tutor/Mentor Connection 2

believes that maps enable the visualization of data. This helps people to develop stronger understanding of situations and motivates them to act on what they see. Dan says that "without a map we can have a long list of programs, … spend millions of dollars, yet not be reaching all of the places we need to reach."[12] In this sense, the maps also help to ensure that areas that need these programs are reached out to. The maps are associated with the links library, but are also posted in other places to encourage people to view them. As the "results in any given network having particular features," these maps show both the network and results of the network that Tutor/Mentor Connection has formed.[13]

The website hosts a discussion forum where people can post questions of comments and have discussions about topics relating to running these programs. This forum is not widely used, with most posts being by staff from the program. However, Tutor/Mentor Connection also utilizes Ning as a social networking site for staff, volunteers, and anyone interested in learning more, which includes program users. This site is heavily trafficked with 307 users word-wide.

In addition to Ning, Tutor/Mentor Connection maintains a blog that updates current accomplishments, ideas, and events for the organization. When new maps or articles are produced, Dan or other staff members will post them on the blog to make them publicly accessible and enable public discussion. The blog, www.tutormentor.blogspot.com, holds a large amount of information and contains links back to the main website of the program.

Also included in the many resources that Tutor/Mentor Connections offers is a website devoted to educating program leaders titled the Tutor/Mentor Institute. This site,

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[12] Bassill
[13] Williams & Durrance, 333

http://www.tutormentorexchange.net, is organized in a manner that is friendlier towards people seeking education about how to run and set up tutoring and mentoring programs. While many of the links are similar to those in the link library, it has a better search function and is more intuitive to use. An interesting note is that Tutor/Mentor Institute self-defines the information on the site as addressing the issue of "poverty in inner city neighborhoods, [which] is complex, and extensive. Thus the information hosted on this web site provides a wide range of information in many different sections."[14] This slightly different focus addresses the need aspect rather than the implementation, but many resources do involve implementation as well. One of the large differences between the websites is that this has more maps dispersed on web pages, making the visualizations a more constant reminder of the issue.

The final website that Tutor/Mentor Connection hosts is dedicated to its biannual conference. The website includes information on the conference, about participants, and testimonials from previous conferences. It serves as the web support for these conferences that enable people to meet each other and interact.

While these websites provide important resources and communication tools for the community that Tutor/Mentor connection serves, there are certain barriers to using the websites. As indicated by the long list of sites and resources on them, they contain an extremely large amount of information. This makes the sites clunky and difficult to navigate. A solution to this would be approaching the resources, such as the articles, with a strong database that has a search. However, the implementation of such a system and costs associated with the time to create the metadata prohibit Tutor/Mentor Connection

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[14] Tutor/Mentor Connection 1

from going this route. Other barriers observed by Dan are that most people lack the time to find information and continue visiting the site and learning, that a large gap exists between what people understand about Tutor/Mentor Connection and what Tutor/Mentor Connection is attempting to do, not enough advertising to raise awareness of the organization's existence, and too few facilitators. Despite these drawbacks the website is used actively and reaches a large number of individuals, promoting the growth of the social network devoted to tutoring and mentoring organizations. Below is a table with statistics of website use from May-August 2010.[15]

Web Site Visitors

	May	June	July	Aug.
T/MC LinksLibrary	3542	3187	3330	3628
Tutor/Mentor Exchange	739	889	739	671
Program Locator	486	490	393	569
Conference	1403	451	292	414
Map Gallery	22	128	85	n/a
Ning	1884	2039	1895	1703
T/MC Blog	408	423	505	516

The essential inter-active activity that Tutor/Mentor Connection supports is the biannual conference that it hosts, called The Tutor/Mentor Leadership and Networking Conference. Interestingly, the neither the conference nor the online material is set-up to directly support the other entity; rather, both are independent projects that work towards

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[15] Statistics gathered by staff of Tutor/Mentor Connection.

the organizations goals, and have a little over-lap in that materials from the websites get used in the conference and vise-versa. Johnson's states that "people choose other people as their preferred source of information," meaning the conferences that enable people get to know one another reinforce that they are valid information sources when not interacting in person.[16] The conference seeks to meet the fundamental need of getting program leaders in touch with one another. Networking enables leaders to share experiences and insights, passing on ideas and information that can help others to succeed with their tutoring and mentoring projects. Each conference is one to two days and has a series of keynote speakers and breakaway sessions. Attending the conference, one sees how interested people are to meet each other; there is a lot of excitement and chatter in between sessions. The staff of Tutor/Mentor Connection set up displays and posters about current projects, mostly relating to the online material, that people actively engage in conversation in. This helps to validate the effort that volunteers invest in these projects, many of which are time-intensive. The conference helps to build volunteers into leaders and provide the support for current leaders. At the conference in May 2010, many leaders expressed frustration about securing funding during the recession, but ability to have a conversation brought to light new ideas.

In addition to the Tutor/Mentor Leadership and Networking Conference, Tutor/Mentor Connection also hosts training sessions for volunteers on a wide variety of topics. An example of a training session is that the creator of InFlow, a social network mapping software, donated a license to Tutor/Mentor Connection, then proceed to teach Dan and a group of volunteers how to use the software to create maps, then how to use

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[16] Johnson

the maps to leverage funding. The Social Network Analysis group is currently working on creating maps of both conference participants and the benefit of tutoring groups to children, using Cabrini Connections for a pool of participating students. This type of exciting training opportunity help to keep volunteers interested while reinforcing the impact that tutoring and mentoring programs often have on at-risk students. By training individuals, Tutor/Mentor Connection helps to continue the cycle of building social capital.

One of the wonderful aspects of Tutor/Mentor Connection, aside from the rich resource pool that the organization developed, is that it connects, either via the Internet or in person, people with extremely diverse backgrounds. Dan enables individuals from low-income neighborhoods that are working in the non-profit setting to make a positive social impact with government and economic leaders. He enables the conversation of how to combat poverty through education and why funding is necessary to do so. In addition to pulling these two groups together, conference participants represent a wide variety of races, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographic location. While the organization is Chicago specific, it acts as a national leader with many individuals seeking advice and knowledge from Dan. Dan would love to capitalize on this and create income from the knowledge that he holds, but has found that many organizations lack the funding to pay him, so he shares it for free. Community Informatics literature talks about how technology can support communities. Tutor/Mentor Connection demonstrates that technology can maintain the "ties and relations that make up … communities" and "how full or partial online interaction, transforms, extends or augments" communities.[17]

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[17] Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 1086.

Volunteers also demonstrate the diversity of the organization as they have various specialties and are an international pool.

As the essential goal of Tutor/Mentor Connections is to enable the growth of infrastructure for tutoring and mentoring organizations, strategy is extremely important. Due to the length of time to make a significant impact, children take twelve years to complete school, the process of both building programs and measuring effectiveness is slow. Yet there is a well-defined strategy that Tutor/Mentor Connection follows. The seven-step strategy begins with identifying the stakeholders. These are the children utilizing tutoring and mentoring programs, the staff of these programs, and potential donors. The second step is building a database, followed by volunteer mobilization. From there, the goal is to build a network of tutoring and mentoring leaders, which enable building a better understanding of needs and opportunities. These steps lead to the growth of social capital, such as building an improved flow of resources to these programs operating throughout the area. Dan asserts that all five of the above listed steps are occurring in low-income neighborhoods. Step six and seven reflect the results of the first five steps: that more children and teens will graduate from high school and start careers. This overarching strategy drives the day-to-day tasks of Tutor/Mentor Connection.

The ability of Tutor/Mentor Connection to store experiences and information means that the information online, and in Dan's head, can have the ability to act as a strategy map for building a program from the ground up. Each step in the process has information available online, helping people to implement these programs both in

Chicago and elsewhere, showing that "people are using the Internet in ways that are driving change in communities."[18]

Tutor/Mentor Connection measures its success in a variety of manners. Recently, Net Impact Chicago completed a Fundraising Benchmark Study of the organization. They compared Tutor/Mentor Connection to eleven other similar organizations nationwide. The study found that Tutor/Mentor Connection has the highest number of people for its region, eight million, while having the lowest amount of expenses, under $500,000. [19] This is one way to monetarily measure the effectiveness of running the program, but Tutor/Mentor Connection also measures success in other manners.

Dan states, "providing a service like this requires being able to find the money/talent over the past eighteen years, while also visioning something that fills a void and provides a benefit. We've done that so far."[20] Part of the way that this is measured is by tracking website usage. The table above demonstrates that the website receives consistent traffic, meaning that Tutor/Mentor Connection is reaching an interested community. Dan keeps statistics on this back many years. Also measured is the number of attendees to the conference. The number has shown consistent growth throughout the years, demonstrating the development of the social network.

Within Tutor/Mentor Connection, interior accomplishments are measured off of the goals and strategy. Assessment is completed on the accuracy and up-to-datedness of the program locator database and maps of Chicago, how many events have been hosted with how many attendees, how many new volunteers have been recruited or retained,

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[18] Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 1083.
[19] Net Impact Chicago
[20] Bassill

how many donors there are, how many mentions of tutoring or mentoring have been made in mainstream media. Dan emphasized that his main question for evaluation is, "At the end of each year, have we done as much as we can with the resources we have to build this blueprint and teach people to use it?"[21] Each criterion listed above answers that question. In light of the comparison to similar programs, this question seems to drive the organization while keeping costs to a minimum, enabling sustainability.

Certain outcomes are expected from this program. Keeping with the theme of visualizing data that Tutor/Mentor Connection embraces, Dan describes one outcome as being able to view a "map of the Chicago region and see icons representing tutor/mentor programs in most neighborhoods."[22] A map with an abundance of such icons suggests that more programs are sprouting up, connected and supported by Tutor/Mentor Connection. A desired outcome still in the works is the development of an infrastructure supporting the growth of tutoring and mentoring programs. Tutor/Mentor Connection does provide this infrastructure, but on a somewhat limited level due to staffing and funding restrictions. Ideally, this infrastructure would engage people from every sector in the discussion, planning, and actions needed for these programs.

Dan describes the program through anecdotal evidence. Several pieces of anecdotal evidence were in letters. One letter describes a mentoring program set up in Appleton, Wisconsin. The woman that organized the program sought and was provided information from Tutor/Mentor Connection. This information enabled her to set up a noontime-mentoring program for children. After thanking Tutor/Mentor Connection for the support she received, the organizer asked to speak at the following conference,

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[21] Bassill
[22] Bassill

demonstrating the network building that Tutor/Mentor Connection facilitates. The woman states that "my last official act is to finally let you know that without the inspiration and example of what you have done in Chicago, MENTORING YOUTH might never have come into being, at least not in the form that now exists."[23]

Tutor/Mentor Connections succeeds at serving a distinct population seeking to improve their communities through tutoring and mentoring programs. Although certain challenges face the organization, such as securing funding during recession years and updating the website for usability, the organization demonstrates successful implementation of its goals and development of social capital. Sustainability for the organization depends upon securing funding, capturing the knowledge that Dan Bassill holds, and bringing on staff for future leadership. The importance of Tutor/Mentor Connection was summed up by Dan: "unless you have known the frustration of not reaching a child, or not convincing a volunteer to stay connected, or not getting a donation that needs to pay the rent, you don't know how important it is for someone like the T/MC to be in your corner, trying to help you get these needed resources." Tutor/Mentor Connections is the only organization of its type in Chicago, providing vital resources to support the many tutoring and mentoring services that seek to help Chicago's at-risk youth. It has successfully built a network that "muster[s] valuable resources and demonstrate a level of self- sufficiency," contributing to the social capital of this non-profit sector.[24]

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[23] Due to the fact that this was a private letter I had permission to use from Dan Bassill, I will not disclose the name of the author, who has no knowledge of its use.
[24] Williams, & Durrance, 342

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