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Higher Education Change and Social Networks: A Review of Research

This article reviews literature on the potential for understanding higher education change processes through social network analysis (SNA). In this article, the main tenets of SNA are reviewed and, in conjunction with organizational theory, are applied to higher education change to develop a set of hypotheses that can be tested in future research.

Social network analysis provides strong confirmation of the inseparability of fundamental planned change and social networks. Schemata are embedded in communities and emerge and are maintained through interpersonal interactions. Lasting change does not result from plans, blueprints, and events. Rather the changes must be appropriated by the participants and incorporated into their patterns of interaction. It is through the interaction of the participants that the social system is able to arrive at a new network of relations and new way of operating. (Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman, 2001, p. 321)

We live in a time where there is the potential for people to be increasingly connected through formal and informal networks; technology has made these types of social networks more common and accessible.¹ Social media such as Facebook, in particular, has connected people in vastly different countries that otherwise would not have contact; it makes networks more commonplace within our modern world. We

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need only think about the various political changes in Syria, Egypt, and Libya to see the power of social networks/media for creating change. Social networks are defined as people loosely connected through some form of interdependencies such as values, preferences, goals, ideas, or people (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social networks can serve many functions such as social support, knowledge, and change.

Recently, policy makers and foundations have begun to capitalize on the potential of networks to create education reforms (Lumina Foundation, 2010). Leaders who have attempted to address complex problems realize that multiple stakeholders need to be engaged and that these problems are multifaceted and require quite different expertise and groups to address them (Spillane, Healey, & Chong, 2010). The Lumina Foundation, for example, is investing in a variety of statewide and national networks to help improve access to higher education. The Lumina Foundation recognizes that the goal of increasing access in higher education to 60% by 2025 will not be met unless a variety of groups are connected and work together (Lumina Foundation, 2010). Networks have also been used to scale up change in science disciplines. The National Science Foundation has invested in networks to connect STEM