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From Campus Involvement to Career Success: A Case Study in Student and Alumni Networking

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Abstract: ***Higher education institutions increasingly recognize that academic coursework alone is insufficient to prepare students for long-term career success. Networking, community engagement, and a sense of belonging play critical roles in student academic success, employability, and alumni involvement. Drawing on existing research related to student engagement, social networking, and alumni connectedness, this case study demonstrates how experiential learning can simultaneously enhance technical skill development and strengthen institutional community. The proposed platform from a student-led project enables students to connect with peers, promote events, and potentially collaborate across campuses. This case study illustrates how integrating networking into university programs can foster belonging, support student success, and create sustainable pathways for engagement, ultimately contributing to improved career outcomes and institutional vitality.***
Keywords: Student Clubs, Alumni Connection, Networking Connection, Social Media, University Events, Communication, Surveys, Alumni, Reunion Group

I. INTRODUCTION

What is the goal of higher education? One might argue that it is to prepare students for their future career, but oftentimes the curriculum must be supplemented by on-the-job training. Studies in a declared major begin building the foundation needed for success in the "real world," but hiring can be influenced by "who you know" not just "what you know." This paper argues that colleges and universities can increase career success after graduation by fostering community, teaching networking skills, and involving students outside the "bubble" of campus. Networking skills and an effective networking platform increase outcomes from the student's time at school to alumni engagement, from initial employability to career success.

II. A SOCIAL NETWORK

The time spent at an institution for higher learning is ideal for discovering oneself, making lasting friendships, and beginning to build a network of peers. Students have the opportunity to participate in sports, social and academic clubs, and internships. It can be easy to foster these relationships within the "bubble" of campus, but faculty guidance to ensure students are plugged in to the local community and the alumni network can have lasting benefits long after graduation. The department of Student Affairs has been a concept since the 1930s when the necessity of "effectively supporting the whole student" was recognized (Tillpaugh 2023). Students should be encouraged to develop skills outside classroom learning that will benefit them long-term: notably, networking.

There are many organizations to choose from when it comes to networking. The picture of classic networking is business owners meeting for a meal, listening to a speaker, and perhaps taking some time for conversation—examples are Chamber of Commerce meetings, Business Network International (BNI), Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO), Business of Professional Women (BPW), or industry-specific groups like the American Marketing Association, or service clubs like Rotary International, Kiwanis, or the Lions Club. These meetings are typically limited in size, due to scheduling, facility capacity, and prerequisites for joining but remain effective in connecting professionals. Participation in the local economy is important for business owners—and by extension for the college students who want to eventually join their ranks—but the way they are connecting has evolved. Can social media serve as an effective alternative or supplement to these in-person meetings?

Facebook was founded in 2004 at Harvard University and made publicly available in September 2006. Two decades later, it's hard to remember a time before social media! According to Statista, as of early 2026, Facebook has over 3 billion active users worldwide and despite declining engagement, remains the most popular social network, followed by Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok respectively. LinkedIn, a platform targeted specifically toward career networking, has 1.2 billion registered members, with 310 million active users.

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Thoughtful, intentional social networking, joined with real-world opportunities, creates an advantage for students after graduation and helps them in several key areas as well as the college or university and the local community:

- Belonging
- Communication, Teamwork, and Leadership
- Building and Sustaining Relationships
- Future Alumni Support
- Increasing Employability

A. Belonging

The first benefit of being part of social network—whether online or in person—is belonging. The idea of belonging is especially important for student success in higher education. Students who take classes part-time, commute, or are nontraditional in other ways often don't foster the same connections that students who live on campus and are immersed in the culture do. Kahu et al (2022) followed first-year university students to determine the importance of belonging. They determined that while "Students talked about belonging in three distinct but interrelated ways: familiarity, interpersonal belonging, and academic belonging," "academic belonging, students' sense that university, their discipline, and courses were 'right' for them, was critical for perseverance." Thus we see that being part of the campus community contributed to academic success. Kelly et al (2023) expanded this truth to show that "having supportive relationships and social activities in college" increased the odds of respondents rating themselves as "happy," lowered the need for public assistance, and increased "positive outcomes post-college," relating to financial and emotional well-being. A feeling of belonging is fostered by being engaged on campus and these positive feelings seems to continue post-graduation. Those with a sense of belonging looked back favorably on their time in college and were more likely to contribute alumni donations and mentor current students (Goh & Kim 2023). "College aged students are in the process of developing their adult personalities. Today, more than any time before, the development of multimedia has given them the ability to personalize much of their lives" (Manko 2024). Students with the strongest ties to their college or university continue to cite it as a factor in their character long after graduation.

B. Communication, Teamwork, and Leadership

In addition to feeling they are part of a larger group—that they belong—students also foster important skills as part of a social network. These skills include improved communication, teamwork, and leadership. Foley et al (2024) recommend universities "create greater opportunities for their students to participate in extracurricular activities" because they found "student leaders of university-based sporting, social and academic clubs…developed a range of graduate attributes in areas such as such as leadership, teamwork, communication and resilience" (Foley et al 2024). To prepare students "to navigate the complex landscape of sustainability in their future working career," they must be equipped with knowledge and skills that can be learned through "active on- and off-campus experiences, promotion of students' leadership, [and] leisure and engagement" (de Mar Martinez-Bravo et al 2024). Certainly there are opportunities within class assignments to practice communication, and leadership—such as group projects—but extracurricular activities create more of these opportunities on a larger scale. This can especially be accomplished when the institution is involved in the greater community, as professionals from the surrounding areas collaborate on initiatives and take on mentorship roles for the students.

C. Relationships

Relationships are important in college and throughout a person's career. Everything is less efficient when people operate in a silo instead of building connections. Vargas et al (2026) suggest building relationships is "the very first thing you should focus on when entering the field, each time you begin a new job or role, and when you change institutions or organizations." Students should be encouraged to cultivate relationships outside other students, taking advantage of the opportunity to grow their network. These relationships may include supervisors, colleagues, families, alumni, boards, vendors, educational nonprofit agencies, professional associations, etc. "relationships of all types are valuable, and [students] may establish professional connections in places or through channels that [they] never considered at first" (Ibid). Social media education is important for all, not just for marketing students. Social media is ever-changing and educators have a duty to prepare students for "future opportunities and challenges—to help them recognize the positive and overcome the negative" (Childers 2022). Teaching students about the benefits of social media networking encourages them to embrace lifelong learning and fosters professional development, as well as helps them develop their brand and present themselves effectively (Childers; Whithaus et al 2023).

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D. Alumni Connectedness

As mentioned above, students who have positive experiences, build relationships, and participate in campus activities tend to continue to be more involved than students who merely complete coursework. "Connectedness" combines student experiences with university services at school and afterward and "consists of relatability, dependency and a sense of community" (Maulana et al 2024). The sense of belonging as a student should be fostered to continue the relationships between alumni (Amani 2022). Using thoughtful branding of the alumni association causes students to intentionally participate as active members after they finish their time on campus (Ibid). Politis et al (2024) liken it to an ecosystem, saying, "Graduates who value their network of peers and professionals can thus be expected to show higher levels of alumni engagement, where a higher importance placed on these networks translate into activities that make them more involved in providing and connecting functions in the ecosystem." This participation then positively affects current students and continues the upward trajectory of success for all parties. Broom et al (2023) suggest, "Alumni engagement is a critical component of enabling academic programs to remain connected to an ever-changing … industry and to provide an optimal learning environment for the … industry leaders of tomorrow." In addition, alumni associations have the opportunity to help "in areas that are critical to [a program's] success, while giving the alumni an opportunity to engage in personally rewarding and meaningful activities" (Ibid). Stronger relationships between the alumni community and the university enhance student success and allow for "other forms of alumni engagement such as philanthropy and advocacy" (Ibid). As the network grows and spreads, there are more opportunities for positive impact.

Alumni may work in a variety of ways to "enrich the entrepreneurial education ecosystem and create a more cohesive and thriving environment for current students" (Politis et al 2024):

- Serve as guest lecturers
- Engage in mentorship
- Utilize their businesses in case study opportunities for student learning experiences
- Connect students to potential customers, collaborators and investors

E. Employability

Finally, encouraging networking from the first year of higher education reaches the bottom line—enhancing employability for graduates. While some value education for its own sake, most pursue a degree for the career opportunities it provides. Jackson and Dean (2023) found that (as one would expect) "extra- or co-curricular activities that focus on career development, leadership, service or recognition can lead to positive employability and employment outcomes." However, "Club/society roles, leadership/award and mentoring programmes offered valuable development opportunities for most graduates" in an Australian study "with graduates from regional areas, of low socio-economic status and with disability garnering strong benefits" (Ibid).

This is an especially important point as the emphasis on the need for higher education is facing some shifts as many advocate for trade schools, work programs, or life experience over traditional academic benefits. Andrade et al (2022) summarize the findings from their study and say succinctly that the benefits of education must be evident to students:

Taken together, the findings from the graduating student survey and the alumni survey clearly demonstrate that those who would not seek higher education if making the choice again did not perceive that they had experienced growth in the key areas that one would expect to acquire as the result of a university education. Attitudes toward choosing to attend one's current or former university, to attend a different university, or to not pursue higher education at all had significant effects with learning in this study. The results indicate that perceived growth in various knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as factors typically associated with academic integration and involvement influence student attitudes toward persistence and higher education The findings suggest that students are seeking to learn skills that help them meaningfully integrate into, and assist, their broader society; thus, institutions need to renew their emphasis on learning outcomes and make outcomes and the measures transparent to students. (Andrade et al 2022)

Further, once a student has commenced their career trajectory, social networking becomes a place for communication in their industry. For example: "Social media have become important channels for a growing number of actors in science communication—from universities to funding agencies, journals, scientific associations, and academics to science influencers. Platforms such as X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, or TikTok are increasingly used for public science communication" (Volk et al 2025). Learning to network at school contains lasting benefits that can affect a career long-term.

III. HOW TO INCORPORATE NETWORKING INTO UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS

Most schools already incorporate social media in their outreach and recruiting efforts. These social networks can be expanded to continue to allow communication between enrolled students and then eventually alumni.

For example, before choosing a school, "social media … shows them what schools are like, shares stories from other students, and gives updates on courses and campus life. All this info makes it easier for students to pick the right place to study" (Li et al 2025). Digital marketing can enhance the presence of educational institutions and reach younger audiences where they already spend time—Instagram and TikTok are effective for prospective students and Facebook and WhatsApp for parents and alumni (Yagin & Aini 2025). Essentially a school must develop its brand—this strategy enhances community engagement and fosters that sense of belonging as users internalize the brand as a defining part of their lives (Ibid; Li et al). Digital engagement

- Advertises the university's brand image, its reputation, values, and the perceived quality of education and student life
- Differentiates the university from competitors
- Connects potential students, current students, faculty, and staff to help them share information, build relationships, and create a sense of community. (Li et al 2025)

In addition to this marketing strategy, there is a need for students to receive individual support to flourish within the network or "ecosystem." Typically, each student has an academic advisor to help them fulfill the requirements of their degree. However, seeing the student as a whole persona and addressing their needs to deliver "personalized experiences," may require more direct contact (Oetjen et al 2023). Using predictive analytics, students can be "targeted for individualized support to achieve their degree-completion goals" as well as then fostering that relationship when they become alumni to leverage "professional career achievements, having them serve as mentors" (Ibid). By applying concepts from digital marketing to the student and alumni population, communications can be better tailored toward receptive groups and optimize participation.

Finally, the communication that is established before a student chooses their academic path must continue after they receive their degree. Keeping in contact with alumni, as mentioned, helps the institution connect current students with more opportunities and services. The following case study explores a potential way to reach current students with opportunities for socializing, playing sports, joining clubs, serving in a volunteer capacity, and more. The next logical step is proposed in a study by Kumar et al (2023) who proposed "the creation of a comprehensive online application that makes it simple to connect and communicate with a college's alumni." They explain:

The application needs to support a variety of functionalities, such as alumni registration with the college, an interface to display and inform students about opportunities regarding placements, internships, and workshops that help them advance their careers, participation in mentorship programs from the alumni's end, and an interface that highlights the accomplishments and personal stories of alumni to inspire and inform them about various career paths.

Read on to see what two students are proposing for PennWest University California and how this may be the next logical extension.

A. Student Case Study: Community Portal for Clubs and Organizations

PennWest University encourages students to participate in Capstone Projects: a culminating academic project that integrates knowledge and skills from their major to solve a real-world problem. In the 2025-2026 school year, two students proposed the design for a Community Portal for PennWest University California. They identified the project as a good fit, because there is currently no operational community hub for students to communicate with each other. They proposed that a community hub would benefit the university as it would allow for students to collaborate and engage with one another online; allow for centralized communication, student-to-student support, and build a stronger, more connected community within the university; and be a strong tool for clubs and organizations to manage activities and connect with members and potential members. This hub would allow clubs and organizations to strengthen their presence through improved event promotion, networking, and outreach.

IV. FUNCTIONALITY

The elevator pitch for the project is as follows:

Connect is a social connections service that allows students to connect with each other, share media, and organize meetings/schedules. These are all very important aspects of college life, and this platform is a one-stop shop for it all.

A fully functional web and mobile interface is projected for Spring 2026, taking into account stakeholder feedback from staff, faculties and beta users. This community portal will follow the basic CRUD operations of database design, allowing creation, viewing functionality, updating, and deletion of records. User roles will also be implemented so that specific functions require role-specific control. This will prevent any user from editing any record, while giving some degree of control to the owner, and admins. The same practice will also be applied to specific pages which will further control user-based access throughout the portal. (See Figure 1 for an example of the written code.)

```sql
CREATE TABLE members (
    group_id INT NOT NULL,
    profile_id INT NOT NULL,
    role BOOLEAN NOT NULL, -- True = Admin, False = User
    status BOOLEAN NOT NULL, -- True = Approved, False = Pending
    PRIMARY KEY (group_id, profile_id),
    FOREIGN KEY (profile_id) REFERENCES profiles(profile_id) ON DELETE CASCADE,
    FOREIGN KEY (group_id) REFERENCES groups(group_id) ON DELETE CASCADE
);


-- Insert Sample Data
INSERT INTO profiles (profile_fname, profile_mname, profile_lname, profile_email, profile_password, profile_major, profile_class, profile_desc) VALUES
('Admin', DEFAULT, '001', 'admin001@guest.edu', 'Admin123', 'Staff', DEFAULT, DEFAULT),
('Test', 'User', '001', 'test001@guest.edu', 'Test123', 'Computer Information Systems', 'Senior', 'Hello, I am a senior this year, and am excited to graduate'),
('Test', 'User', '002', 'test002@guest.edu', '123Test', 'Computer Science', 'Junior', 'Hi! I like video games, and hope to work that into my future employment'),
('Test', 'User', '003', 'test003@guest.edu', 'Testing', 'Accounting', 'Freshman', 'As you can tell by my degree... I like numbers!!!'),
('Test', DEFAULT, '004', 'test004@guest.edu', 'Tester', 'Computer Information Systems', 'Sophomore', 'I was born without a middle name.'),
('Test', 'Graduate', '005', 'test005@guest.edu', 'Graduate', 'Master in Business Association', 'Graduate', 'Hello, I am a grad student this year, and am excited to continue my studies!');

INSERT INTO groups (profile_id, group_title, group_desc, group_main) VALUES
(1, 'Campus - Main', 'Main feed for PennWest California Campus', TRUE),
(3, 'Coding Club', 'Coders Club, send a request or email test001@guest.edu to join!', FALSE),
(2, 'CIS Senior Capstone', 'Group for sharing, and discussing CIS Senior Capstone', FALSE),
(4, 'Fitness Group', 'Getting people together for exercise, or activities', FALSE);

INSERT INTO posts (profile_id, group_id, post_title, post_content) VALUES
(1, 1, 'Guidelines', 'Please be respectful of others, and conscious of what you say as this is monitored under Pennsylvania Western Community Guidelines'),
(2, 1, 'Experience Help', 'Hi, I am graduating this year, and am struggling to find experience. Could anybody point me in the right direction?'),
(2, 3, 'Welcome Post', 'Welcome to my discussion board regarding CIS senior capstone.'),
(3, 2, 'Welcome', 'Welcome to the coding club! We meet in Eberly 3rd floor Tues & Thurs @ 5PM.'),
(4, 4, 'Lifting Times', 'Hey all, I lift Mon & Wed @ 4PM in the community gym if anybody would ever like to join me!'),
(4, 1, 'Fitness Group', 'Hello, I created a Fitness Group if anybody would like to join it request or email me test003@guest.edu'),
(6, 1, 'Campus Question', 'Hi, I am usually off campus, and was wondering if there are any upcoming events or plays I could join?');

INSERT INTO members (group_id, profile_id, role, status) VALUES
(1, 1, TRUE, TRUE), -- Admin 001 = Campus - Main: Admin
(1, 2, FALSE, TRUE), -- Add all to Main
(1, 3, FALSE, TRUE),
(1, 4, FALSE, TRUE),
(1, 5, FALSE, TRUE),
(1, 6, FALSE, TRUE),
(2, 3, TRUE, TRUE), -- Test 002 = Coding Club: Admin
(2, 2, FALSE, TRUE),
(3, 2, TRUE, TRUE), -- Test 001 = CIS Capstone: Admin
(4, 4, TRUE, TRUE), -- Test 003 = Fitness Group: Admin
(4, 2, FALSE, TRUE),
(4, 3, FALSE, FALSE) -- Test 002 Request to join Fitness Group Pending
;
```

Figure 1. Example of Code development for Connect+ Portal.

The user interface has been designed by the team, with a secure login that connects users via their school email address (seamlessness). Student testing will include two groups: tech students and non-tech students to ensure the interface is user-friendly. They are currently fashioning a workable prototype that they hope to eventually implement and offer through the university website. (See Figures 2 and 3, mockup examples of the Connect portal and a profile screen.)

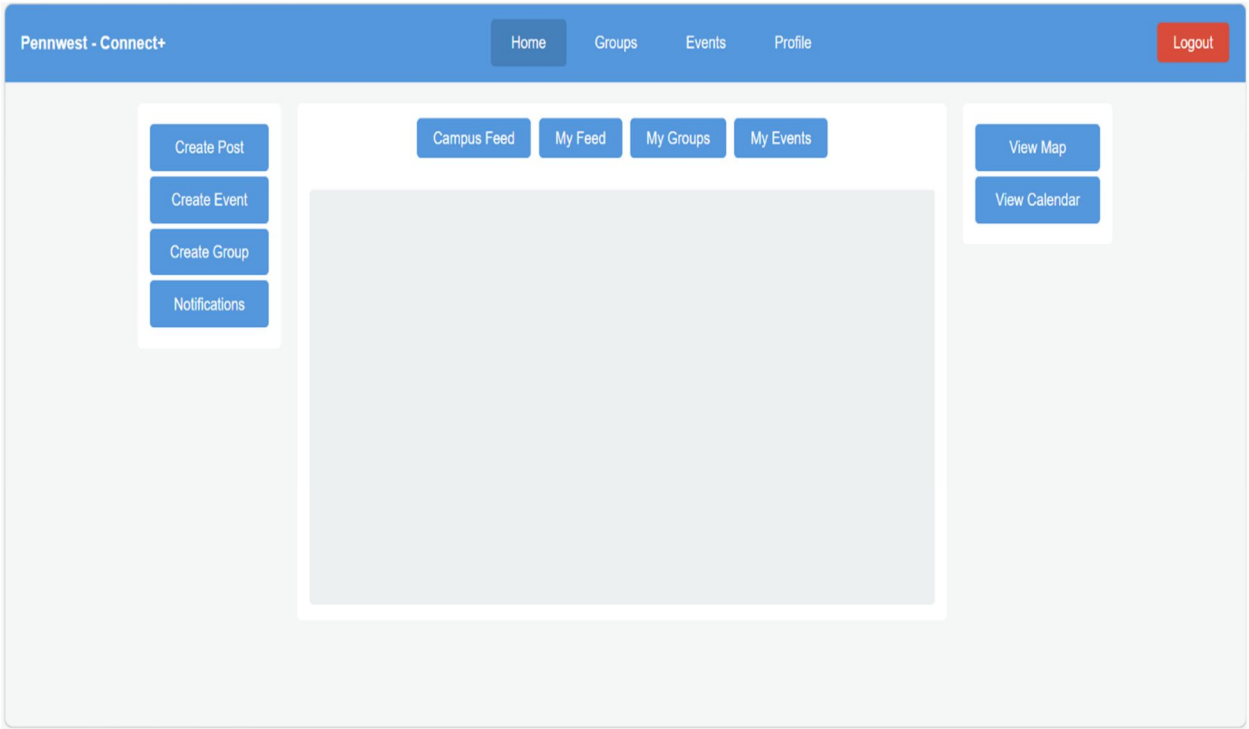


Figure 2. Mockup of Connect+ Portal.

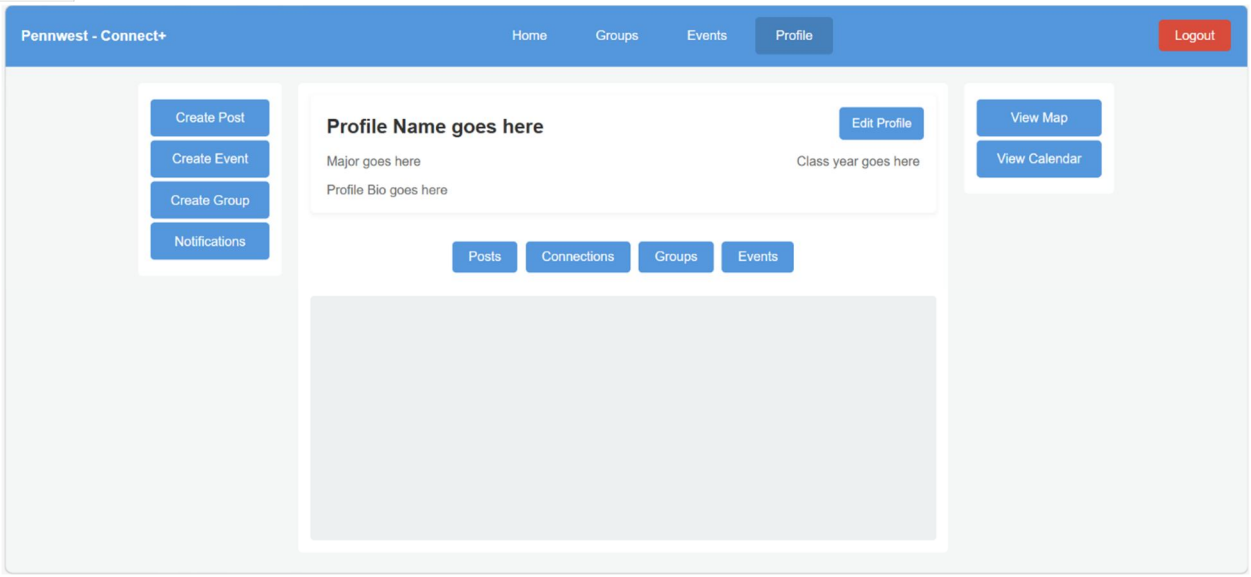


Figure 3. Mockup of a profile screen on the Connect+ Portal.

B. Capstone and Networking

This Capstone project is a twofold demonstration of the importance of networking within the university setting. First, the project itself is designed to prepare students to implement foundational knowledge from our degree. They are already working with systems design, database design, web-application development, and privacy and security implementation producing professional documentation in a supervised environment. In this way, students gain hands-on experience based on coursework and are able to display and present the knowledge they have gained throughout their time in university.

In addition, the team is practicing collaboration and demonstrating their ability to work together in positive and open work relationship to bring their ideas to fruition. Members of the team report lessons in patience, problem-solving skills, time management, and project analysis.

The second benefit extends to the university and students with ongoing use of the developed application. Having a central portal to organize groups and events allows students to know what's going on and plan for participation accordingly. They benefit from stronger participation and relationships forged around common activities and incorporate real-world lessons into future scenarios. This is a timely resource to develop. Pennsylvania Western University (PennWest) was formed in 2022 by merging California, Clarion, and Edinboro universities. They operate as one entity and the campuses share resources while retaining local identities. Having a communication source across campus locations allows intercampus participation in events and increases the strength of the network and opportunities post-graduation

V. CONCLUSION

As higher education institutions continue to navigate changing student expectations, workforce demands, and declining perceptions of the value of a college degree, fostering meaningful engagement beyond the classroom has become increasingly critical. This case study demonstrates that intentional networking opportunities, supported by existing organizations, social networking sites, or thoughtfully designed digital platforms, can enhance student belonging, improve long-term career outcomes, and strengthen alumni connectedness. Research consistently shows that students who engage in campus life, build relationships, and develop communication and leadership skills are more likely to persist academically and remain connected to their institutions after graduation.

The student-led Capstone project presented in this study illustrates how experiential learning can serve as a powerful vehicle for achieving these outcomes. By designing and developing a centralized community portal for clubs and organizations, students not only applied technical and analytical skills gained through their coursework but also practiced collaboration, problem-solving, and professional communication in a real-world context. The project highlights the dual benefit of Capstone experiences: preparing students for the workforce while simultaneously addressing institutional needs for improved communication and engagement.

Ultimately, this case study reinforces the importance of integrating networking, community building, and digital engagement into university programs. When institutions intentionally support opportunities for students to connect—with peers, alumni, and the surrounding community—they create pathways that extend beyond graduation. These connections not only enhance employability and career readiness but also contribute to institutional vitality through sustained alumni engagement, advocacy, and philanthropy. As higher education continues to evolve, initiatives that combine experiential learning with community-focused technology solutions represent a promising strategy for fostering student success and long-term institutional resilience.

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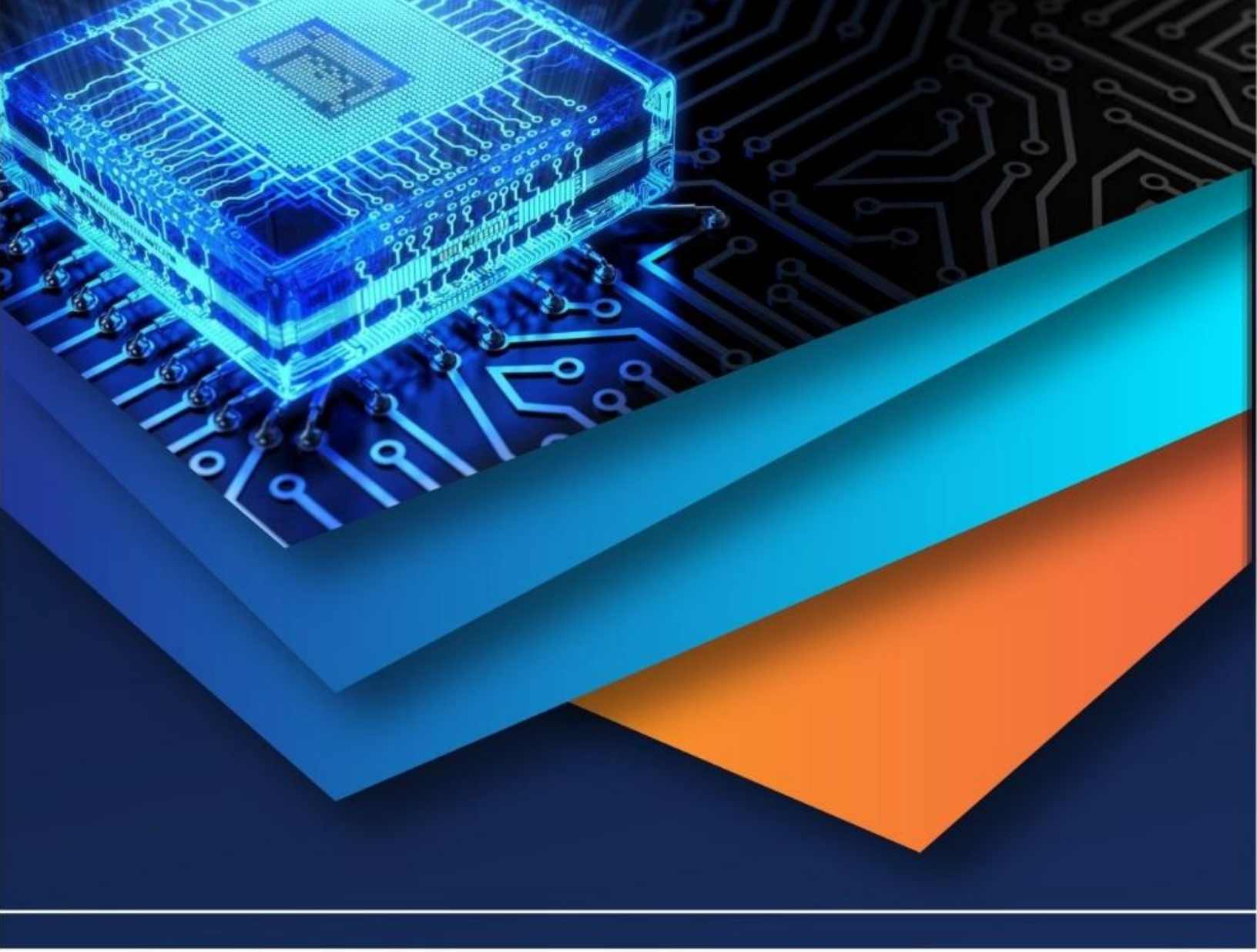
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https://www.amazon.com/Digital-Marketing-Analytics-Corporate-Studies/dp/B0CS9QK3YF

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