

# It's not just what you know, it's who you know: Testing a model of the relative importance of social networks to academic performance

Tracey E. Rizzuto · Jared LeDoux ·  
John Paul Hatala

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**Abstract** Applying three mathematical modeling techniques, this study proposes and tests the fit of an academic performance model, and then estimates the relative importance of four performance predictors: academic ability, performance goal orientation, educational technology use, and social network density. Drawing on social network theory, findings from this study show that social network density is a statistically important and unique predictor of academic performance, suggesting that “who you know” matters in large classroom settings. However, this study also indicates that academic ability is the most dominant factor in the explanation of academic performance. Practical and theoretical implications for enhancing academic performance through social networks are discussed.

**Keywords** Social networks · Performance · Goal orientation · Educational technology

Performance has long been described as a function of an individual's ability and effortful work-relevant actions, and can be expressed by the formula: Performance =  $f(\text{Ability} \times \text{Motivation})$  (Hellriegel et al. 1995; Ivancevich and Matteson 1987). However, the environment within which one is embedded can enhance or detract from performance highlighting the importance of the psychological, social, and infrastructural resources within the work context (Lewin 1943). Although the influences of such contextual influences on individual-level performance have long been explored in the organizational workplace literature (e.g., Bernardin 1989; Blumberg and Pringle 1982; Noe 1986; Olson and Borman 1989; Peters et al. 1985), less attention has been given to the social and infrastructural factors that shape performance in academic-settings

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T. E. Rizzuto (✉) · J. LeDoux · J. P. Hatala  
Louisiana State University, 236 Audubon Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA  
e-mail: trizzut@lsu.edu