**David Braslow Capstone Project**

# Machine Learning Engineer Nanodegree

## I. Definition

### Project Overview

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education has received renewed interest in the USA as people and organizations have become increasingly reliant on computers and other advanced technologies. Labor market demand for workers with technical skills often outstrips supply, and wages for STEM jobs tend to be high and are expected to rise. While this could be an opportunity for many disadvantaged students to find high-paying jobs and improve their life prospects, they often experience low performance in or don’t have access to secondary STEM courses. As a result, disadvantaged students have low representation in STEM post-secondary programs and make up only a small percentage of STEM graduates.

Despite the challenges they face, some disadvantaged students do go on to pursue post-secondary STEM education. We can learn from these students what factors are most important for their ongoing interest in STEM. Increasing the STEM attainment of disadvantaged students in post-secondary programs is an important goal not only for the industries that require a robust supply of STEM college graduates, but also for efforts to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged students.

For this study, I use data from the High School Longitudinal Study, 2009-2013 (HSLS:09) conducted by NCES[[1]](#footnote-1). The study follows a nationally representative group of high school students through high school, recording a number of student, school, and family variables. In total, 23,503 students responded from 944 high schools.

The sample of interest – low-income students – are defined as those from families with household income below 185% of the Census poverty threshold (5,558 students). The inputs of interest will be credits earned in various specific STEM courses, total credit earnings in various STEM disciplines (e.g. math, biology, engineering), and GPA in various STEM disciplines. The outcome of interest will be whether the student is enrolled in a postsecondary program as of November 1, 2013 and considering a STEM major, which I call *Postsecondary STEM Pursuit*.

### Problem Statement

The problem I aim to solve is to determine which high school STEM experiences are most important for predicting whether low-income students want to pursue STEM post-secondary education. To answer this problem, I will train a neural network to classify students by postsecondary STEM pursuit using the inputs described. I will use the approach developed by Garson (1991)[[2]](#footnote-2) to identify the most important variables in the neural network.

### Metrics

The evaluation metric I use is F1 Score. This is appropriate because the outcome of interest is skewed and because it incorporates both recall and precision. I have no reason to weight one over the other, so a balanced F score is used.

## II. Analysis

(approx. 2-4 pages)

### Data Exploration

Among the 5,558 low-income students in the HSLS dataset, there is a wide range in STEM experiences and outcomes.

One unusual feature of this dataset is that different categories of missingness are coded into each variable. For example, the question asking students whether they intend to pursue a STEM major has separate codes for “Don’t Know”, “Item not administered: abbreviated interview”, “Item legitimate skip/NA”, “Unit non-response”, and “Missing”. These missing values comprise most (51%) of the values for this variable. For the purpose of this study, I want to include students as “No” observations for this category if they were not asked this question because they were not enrolled in post-secondary classes (which corresponds to the “Item legitimate skip/NA” option). All other values were coded as missing, and the 1,538 students with missing values on this variable (27%) were dropped from the dataset. Other variables were also coded as missing using similar logic, but no further students were dropped from the dataset.

* If a dataset is present for this problem, have you thoroughly discussed certain features about the dataset? Has a data sample been provided to the reader?
* If a dataset is present for this problem, are statistics about the dataset calculated and reported? Have any relevant results from this calculation been discussed?

### Exploratory Visualization

In this section, you will need to provide some form of visualization that summarizes or extracts a relevant characteristic or feature about the data. The visualization should adequately support the data being used. Discuss why this visualization was chosen and how it is relevant. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Have you visualized a relevant characteristic or feature about the dataset or input data?
* Is the visualization thoroughly analyzed and discussed?
* If a plot is provided, are the axes, title, and datum clearly defined?

### Algorithms and Techniques

In this section, you will need to discuss the algorithms and techniques you intend to use for solving the problem. You should justify the use of each one based on the characteristics of the problem and the problem domain. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Are the algorithms you will use, including any default variables/parameters in the project clearly defined?
* Are the techniques to be used thoroughly discussed and justified?
* Is it made clear how the input data or datasets will be handled by the algorithms and techniques chosen?

### Benchmark

Among the 5,558 low-income students in the dataset, only 446 (8%) are pursuing post-secondary STEM education. I will compare my model to a random assignment model with an 8% probability of assignment.

In this section, you will need to provide a clearly defined benchmark result or threshold for comparing across performances obtained by your solution. The reasoning behind the benchmark (in the case where it is not an established result) should be discussed. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Has some result or value been provided that acts as a benchmark for measuring performance?
* Is it clear how this result or value was obtained (whether by data or by hypothesis)?

## III. Methodology

(approx. 3-5 pages)

### Data Preprocessing

In this section, all of your preprocessing steps will need to be clearly documented, if any were necessary. From the previous section, any of the abnormalities or characteristics that you identified about the dataset will be addressed and corrected here. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* If the algorithms chosen require preprocessing steps like feature selection or feature transformations, have they been properly documented?
* Based on the***Data Exploration***section, if there were abnormalities or characteristics that needed to be addressed, have they been properly corrected?
* If no preprocessing is needed, has it been made clear why?

### Implementation

In this section, the process for which metrics, algorithms, and techniques that you implemented for the given data will need to be clearly documented. It should be abundantly clear how the implementation was carried out, and discussion should be made regarding any complications that occurred during this process. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Is it made clear how the algorithms and techniques were implemented with the given datasets or input data?
* Were there any complications with the original metrics or techniques that required changing prior to acquiring a solution?
* Was there any part of the coding process (e.g., writing complicated functions) that should be documented?

### Refinement

In this section, you will need to discuss the process of improvement you made upon the algorithms and techniques you used in your implementation. For example, adjusting parameters for certain models to acquire improved solutions would fall under the refinement category. Your initial and final solutions should be reported, as well as any significant intermediate results as necessary. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Has an initial solution been found and clearly reported?
* Is the process of improvement clearly documented, such as what techniques were used?
* Are intermediate and final solutions clearly reported as the process is improved?

## IV. Results

(approx. 2-3 pages)

### Model Evaluation and Validation

In this section, the final model and any supporting qualities should be evaluated in detail. It should be clear how the final model was derived and why this model was chosen. In addition, some type of analysis should be used to validate the robustness of this model and its solution, such as manipulating the input data or environment to see how the model’s solution is affected (this is called sensitivity analysis). Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Is the final model reasonable and aligning with solution expectations? Are the final parameters of the model appropriate?
* Has the final model been tested with various inputs to evaluate whether the model generalizes well to unseen data?
* Is the model robust enough for the problem? Do small perturbations (changes) in training data or the input space greatly affect the results?
* Can results found from the model be trusted?

### Justification

In this section, your model’s final solution and its results should be compared to the benchmark you established earlier in the project using some type of statistical analysis. You should also justify whether these results and the solution are significant enough to have solved the problem posed in the project. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Are the final results found stronger than the benchmark result reported earlier?
* Have you thoroughly analyzed and discussed the final solution?
* Is the final solution significant enough to have solved the problem?

## V. Conclusion

(approx. 1-2 pages)

### Free-Form Visualization

In this section, you will need to provide some form of visualization that emphasizes an important quality about the project. It is much more free-form, but should reasonably support a significant result or characteristic about the problem that you want to discuss. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Have you visualized a relevant or important quality about the problem, dataset, input data, or results?
* Is the visualization thoroughly analyzed and discussed?
* If a plot is provided, are the axes, title, and datum clearly defined?

### Reflection

In this section, you will summarize the entire end-to-end problem solution and discuss one or two particular aspects of the project you found interesting or difficult. You are expected to reflect on the project as a whole to show that you have a firm understanding of the entire process employed in your work. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Have you thoroughly summarized the entire process you used for this project?
* Were there any interesting aspects of the project?
* Were there any difficult aspects of the project?
* Does the final model and solution fit your expectations for the problem, and should it be used in a general setting to solve these types of problems?

### Improvement

In this section, you will need to provide discussion as to how one aspect of the implementation you designed could be improved. As an example, consider ways your implementation can be made more general, and what would need to be modified. You do not need to make this improvement, but the potential solutions resulting from these changes are considered and compared/contrasted to your current solution. Questions to ask yourself when writing this section:

* Are there further improvements that could be made on the algorithms or techniques you used in this project?
* Were there algorithms or techniques you researched that you did not know how to implement, but would consider using if you knew how?
* If you used your final solution as the new benchmark, do you think an even better solution exists?

**Before submitting, ask yourself. . .**

* Does the project report you’ve written follow a well-organized structure similar to that of the project template?
* Is each section (particularly **Analysis** and **Methodology**) written in a clear, concise and specific fashion? Are there any ambiguous terms or phrases that need clarification?
* Would the intended audience of your project be able to understand your analysis, methods, and results?
* Have you properly proof-read your project report to assure there are minimal grammatical and spelling mistakes?
* Are all the resources used for this project correctly cited and referenced?
* Is the code that implements your solution easily readable and properly commented?
* Does the code execute without error and produce results similar to those reported?

1. United States Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics. High School Longitudinal Study, 2009-2013 [United States]. ICPSR36423-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2016-05-12. http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR36423.v1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Garson, G.D. 1991. Interpreting neural network connection weights. Artificial Intelligence Expert. 6(4):46–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)