WHEN LOGAN THOMAS arrived at North Carolina A&T State University, she had a plan. She had gone to a predominantly white high school in New Jersey, but she applied only to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) where she could study to be an engineer: “Coming to orientation and meeting all these amazing people who look just like me, people who grew up like me, I knew that this is exactly where I want to be.” Since Logan had been class president all four years in high school, she intended to be “super involved” at A&T. She immediately began to campaign on social media and in person for election to a leadership role in the Student Government Association.

Then late one night she received an email explaining that she was not eligible to be a candidate because she had not completed all of the necessary steps: “I was so mad at myself. I had one job, and I did not do it.” The next morning, she went to see the dean of students: “Me being the annoying and ambitious student that I am, I go up to Dr. Murphy’s office. I’m trying to hold my tears in, and I ask her, ‘Is there anything that I can do? I am ready for the role, and I want to contribute to A&T.’ She listened to me pour out my
heart, and then she tells me there are no exceptions.” However, Logan’s impassioned plea made an impression. Dr. Murphy soon invited her to join the dean’s student advisory board: “I went from crying on my couch to gaining a meaningful relationship with Dr. Murphy. And she has been a mentor who has transformed me and opened so many doors for me during my time at A&T.”

Logan’s experience with Dr. Murphy reveals an important truth about college: One meaningful connection can lead to others. Some students will graduate with a large network of friends and mentors, but research suggests that you don’t need a crowd to have a successful college experience:

1. A national poll of 30,000 college graduates found that alumni who reported having one professor “who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and encouraged them to pursue their dreams” were more than twice as likely as their peers to be thriving professionally and personally—even many years after graduation.\(^1\)

2. Another national poll showed that graduates who had a handful of meaningful relationships with staff and faculty were more than three times as likely as those with no such relationships to say that their time in college was “very rewarding.”\(^2\)

In this chapter, we’ll tell you a few stories of a connection that acted as the foundation for a student’s relationship-rich college experiences. We hope you’ll notice how different these initial interactions can be. There is not one path or simple recipe, and some students struggle for a long time to connect with anyone in college. Still, if you are patient and persistent, we are confident you will start to establish the kinds of relationships with peers, faculty, and staff that will contribute to your academic success and personal
well-being in college—and some of these people might even become lifelong friends and colleagues.

Start with a Friend

For recent graduate Sydney Stork, who grew up in Iowa, everything started with Wren Renquist, a native of Okinawa, Japan, whom she met during her first semester at the University of Iowa. Wren says Sydney played that role for her too. Sydney knew Wren’s first-year roommate because they were in some of the same classes their first semester. Wren’s roommate made the introduction, and soon Sydney and Wren began studying together.

The next semester they both took general chemistry, then they each applied to be supplemental instructors (students who help other students learn course material, like learning assistants or peer tutors). Since they were both thinking about careers in medicine, they volunteered together in the same unit of the hospital. “We even started doing undergraduate research at the same time,” says Wren. In undergraduate research, students work with a faculty member as a research partner or as part of a faculty member’s research team, an opportunity that is important for students considering graduate or professional education like Wren and Sydney. Getting started with undergraduate research can be intimidating, so they helped each other feel confident enough to try. Wren describes their relationship as a mirror: “I think everything that Sydney did, I did, and everything I did, Sydney did.”

What did it mean to them to have each other as friends starting in that first year? Thinking back shortly after she graduated, Sydney describes Wren as “probably the most constant thing throughout my college career.” The adjective “constant” may not seem like a big deal, but college is a time of a lot of change, so it helps to have something or someone steady in your life. As Sydney puts it, “We’ve
both changed our minds about everything we started out here doing, but despite that, we’ve carried each other through and supported each other through all the ups and downs.”

**Start with a Professor**

Tianna Guerra, a student at Oakton Community College and an aspiring orthopedic surgeon, remembers that when she got to college, she was placed into the lowest-level math class. She was disappointed because she had a lot of courses to complete to stay on track toward her academic goals. What she did not know was that her interactions with her math professor, Mario Borha, would inspire her through college. Tianna told us, “He really started me off on the path of realizing that few are born geniuses and that if you want to learn and become great, it is through hard work, support, and dedication.” With his help and encouragement, she finished two math classes in one semester and later became president of the math club, where she made many new friends and connected with other professors, all while gaining valuable leadership experience. Professor Borha served as a key catalyst for Tianna’s relationships—and success—in college.

**Start with a Member of the College Staff**

A native of Afghanistan, Meena Alizai had been in the United States for only a few years when she realized she had a choice: she could stay forever in her current job at the Dollar Store, or she could work toward her academic dreams for herself and her two small children. She made the decision to go to college to become a nurse. Even though she had a goal, at first Meena felt lost. Her courses at San Antonio College’s Center for English Language Learning were challenging, and everything about being a student
in the US was new to her. One day Meena learned from a classmate that the Empowerment Center was giving away diapers to help students who were parents, and she went to get some for her baby. Meena had never visited the center on campus, but she had heard that it provided a wide range of academic, social, and economic support and resources for students at the college.

When Meena stopped by to pick up some diapers, she met Bertha Castellanos, an advisor who works at the center. Bertha asked Meena what she was studying, and soon they were talking about Meena’s academic goals and the family, work, and school obligations she juggled every day. Just like that, everything changed. Bertha helped Meena apply for scholarships to pay for her tuition and cover daycare costs, guided her in putting together her course schedule each semester, and offered her advice about studying effectively. Some semesters, they would talk every week. In Meena’s words, “If I didn’t meet Bertha, college wouldn’t be possible for me, because she really helped me during everything.” Meena has since completed her English as a Second Language program and an associate in science degree; she is now a nursing student who has a small but growing network of friends and mentors at San Antonio College.

**What If You Haven’t Connected with Someone Yet?**

Despite these stories, you might still be worried if a semester or more has passed and you have not yet found someone with whom you meaningfully connect. Or you might have transferred to a different institution so even though you’re not new to college, you’re new at your school. Or you might be so busy with work, family obligations, and other things that you just haven’t had the time or energy to build relationships. You’re not alone. In fact, lots of students are in the same situation.
When we talked to University of Iowa student Samer Suleman, he told us that during his first two years of college, he was doing well academically but “was hopping around from place to place” and “spent a lot of time honestly feeling isolated socially.” Although he remained close with some friends from high school, he didn’t feel much hope of connecting with peers or professors at the university. That changed when he found the Multicultural and International Student Support and Engagement (MISSE) program during his junior year: “I’ve been at MISSE for less than a year, and it has been pretty transformative in terms of the relationships I’ve been able to build as well as just the ways I feel supported. Everyone there takes time to get to know you, and then they sponsor and invite you to try new things and connect with new people.”

Samer’s story is far more common than you might think. In fact, when they met, Sydney did not know Wren would become her best friend. Tianna did not expect to connect with her math professor. And Meena went to the Empowerment Center to pick up diapers, not to find a mentor. The opportunities for these kinds of human connections in college are all around you, if you start looking for them. You may be surprised to find out just how many

**FACT:** Non-teaching staff are everywhere. In fall 2019, more than 2.5 million individuals in non-teaching positions worked in US colleges and universities.* Whether they are advisors or counselors, serve as tutors, support student clubs, work in an academic department, keep technology running smoothly, or do something else altogether, the point is that your Bertha Castellanos can be anywhere at your college or university.

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people work at your college or university in offices that exist to support students like you.

When we asked Abraham Segundo, from San Antonio College, what advice he would give to his peers, he stressed the importance of these resources: “Take advantage of all the opportunities available on campus; there’s plenty of different resources. If you have mental health concerns, or if you need counseling services, or if you’re not food secure, there’s plenty of different college resources that students often don’t know about.” And each of these resources is coordinated by professionals who are there to support and connect with you. One of them could absolutely become a catalyst for relationships in college for you.

**Connections All around You**

If you think about it, every student in every class is potentially a meaningful connection for you. And you already have something in common to talk about with them: the class. Getting together to study is a good idea for many reasons (as discussed in chapter 4). Among other things, it will give you an “accountability buddy,” making it more likely that you will actually set aside time to study. You’ll also have someone to explain things to and to test you, both of which are excellent study strategies.³

But connecting to another student does not have to begin with studying. When Olegaria Gonzalez was admitted to Nevada State College, she looked up the school on Instagram. She soon discovered clubs and events that interested her, and she started following students, staff, and faculty who shared her interests. Before she even went to her first class, she had begun to build the foundation for relationships she would develop in person: “Instagram helped me a lot to connect with people at Nevada State. At first, I mostly learned about what was happening and who was involved already.”
You don’t need dozens (or tens of thousands) of connections to be successful in college. One meaningful relationship can serve as a catalyst for meeting new people and developing the skills and confidence you need to get on the path to a relationship-rich college experience. The intentional steps you take to cultivate meaningful

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**FACT:** Social media can help. Instagram and other apps can be powerful tools for making connections. Social media can be especially helpful in forming relationships if you attend college mostly or fully online. Some of the potential downsides of social media are probably familiar to you, including the way it tends to portray “perfect” (or at least misleading and incomplete) versions of life that can leave people feeling inadequate and lonely. And many college students—like other people—tend to believe that everyone else has more friends than they do, even though that’s not usually the case.

But social media can help you establish personal connections and maintain existing friendships as you transition in and through college, which can make the challenges of higher education easier to navigate. The key is to use social media intentionally in ways that support your learning and well-being. For example, social media can be good for creating initial or informal connections between you and new peers, or with staff and faculty at your institution; to make the most of your time in college, you can then take deliberate steps to build stronger relationships with a few of those people, knowing that some of them might become important friends and mentors.

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connections will help you thrive academically and personally in college.

That’s easier said than done, so the next chapter will explore some of the common challenges students face with making human connections in college.

Ask Yourself . . .

1. Have you met anyone yet who might be the “start” to your relationship-rich education? If you have, how will you deepen this relationship?

2. If you haven’t found that person yet, make a list of people who could potentially be an initial connection for you. If you don’t have specific people in mind, you might just list categories of people (for example, a professor, or a student who has already been admitted to the nursing program). How can you begin to establish connections with this person or these people?

3. Could you help someone else start their relationship building? What could you do to help that person make meaningful connections in college?

Try This!

1. Follow your college on social media to find out about upcoming events. Choose one to attend, whether in person or virtually, then hang around for a few minutes after it ends to chat with people there about the event.

2. Find out where the career services staff are located or how to access online assistance (by searching on your college
website), and make an appointment to talk to someone about your career goals.

3. Get to one of your classes early, look for a friendly face, and introduce yourself. A simple, “Hi, I’m ____; it’s nice to meet you” can be enough for an initial connection.