IN CHAPTER 2 you met Gigi Gaultier, a student at the University of Washington who says she spent much of her first year “comparing myself to others and imagining all of their accomplishments. I was freaking out about a lot of things at first.” As we described, Gigi’s doubts—her sense of being an imposter—are shared by many, many college students. A student we interviewed at a selective liberal arts college described being “mortified by my own seeming deficits and by feeling paralyzed by comparison and insecurity.” A very accomplished community college student introduced herself to us by saying, “I come from an academically challenged background. I wasn’t the best student in high school, so I just assumed I wasn’t smart enough for college.” Those feelings are real, yet they do not tell the whole story.

We began this part of the book by showing you that you can start your relationship-rich education by connecting to just one person. In this chapter we emphasize that you are the key actor in forming these relationships and creating a meaningful college experience. No matter where you attend, your school has lots of resources and people to support and challenge you—so it’s not all on
you. The faculty and staff at your college should, and likely will, do a lot to enable your success, and other students also can be your allies, friends, and champions. But it all begins with you, and, as this chapter describes, you bring many strengths to college that will help you form meaningful relationships and reach your goals. Change can be exciting and uncomfortable, but if you choose to act and to raise your voice, you will find that you have what it takes to thrive.

**Recognize the Many Strengths You Bring to College**

Donna Linderman leads the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (known as ASAP), which helps thousands of students succeed every year at the City University of New York. The students in this program typically work while they attend school, and most are the first in their family to go to college. She told us:

Many of our students haven’t necessarily tapped into the gifts and the skills they already have—their own tenacity, their own intelligence. We help them understand that they are fully capable—every single one of them—of earning their degrees. We ask, “What are the things that you’ve worked toward and achieved?” Whether it’s being a great parent, being a productive member of your family, enjoying some subject in school that really resonated with you, or something else that helps them identify the strengths in themselves.

This program is transformational, partly because ASAP’s advisors and faculty help students recognize and draw on the strengths they bring with them to college.
Sometimes those strengths are obvious, like when a student developed strong math skills in high school or has a part-time job writing a blog for a local news station. More often, however, students don’t fully see the strengths they bring to school. Some of you might have trouble seeing yours. Tara Yosso, a professor of education at the University of California, Riverside, has written about these powerful but often unrecognized strengths.¹ A student who grew up speaking a language other than English might feel hesitant about writing and speaking in a college classroom, not noticing the sophisticated thinking and communication skills they have developed as they navigate the world in more than one language; Yosso calls this “linguistic capital.” And a student who has struggled against social inequities or personal tragedies in their life brings to college an “aspirational capital” that helps them maintain hope and persist in the face of great difficulties.

In a similar way, a student who works full time or is a parent will have to juggle many pressing responsibilities yet may not recognize that they bring to college the ability to manage time and prioritize what’s most important. Students who have experiences as athletes, musicians, artists, and gamers know the value of practicing, learning from mistakes, and continuing to work through the most challenging times—all essential to college success. Many students know someone who believes in them more than they believe in themselves, and that person’s encouragement can give them the extra boost of energy and commitment necessary when things get hard.

We are not saying that being a student is easy or the same for everybody. Of course, it’s not. Instead, we encourage you to spend some time noticing your strengths that will help you succeed in

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“Another strategy that I have: telling myself when I wake up in the morning that I can do anything. Tell myself: if I put my mind to it, I can achieve it.”

—Brandon Daye, North Carolina A&T State University

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college. As Donna Linderman told us, that is essential for you to be able to say and believe, “I am good at things, I can commit to things, and I can finish them.”

You don’t need to do this on your own. In fact, talking with peers or an advisor can be a particularly effective way to recognize the strengths you have. Asma Shauib credits her professors at LaGuardia Community College with helping her see through her struggles as a first-generation, immigrant, working, and multilingual student to recognize the personal assets that would help her succeed:

The faculty believed in me more than I did in myself. They asked me to share my thoughts and my ideas, my goals, my dreams of what I wanted to be, what I wanted to achieve. I did that, but deep inside me, I did not think that any of that was possible, especially for someone from my background and culture. But they told me that those are great ideas and we can see you achieving them. When they first said that to me, I thought, “No one has ever told me that.” They see that in me, and I keep that in mind whenever I’m stressed out or think that I will not make it.

In the same way, Davidson College student Sam Owusu’s academic advisor made a big difference for him: “She really pushed me to have some faith in myself.” Having a little faith in yourself is foundational. When you weave together your personal strengths with the resources at your college (peers, faculty, staff, and student support programs), you will be even more likely to meet your goals.

Many of the examples of strengths just described are abilities, attitudes (like confidence), or kinds of knowledge, but you have even more sources of strength: your existing relationships and the people in your life. For instance, University of Michigan–Flint student Amena Shukairy, who lived at home during her college
years, told us, “My family members are, hands down, my number-one supporters.” Your closest friends, whether or not they attend your college or any college, can also be assets. They might provide you with emotional support, help you unwind, or remind you of your values or motivations for earning a degree. You might find other assets in your social media networks. Recent DePaul University graduate Brian Chan told us, “I use LinkedIn, and a common piece of advice that I was always given is just reach out to as many people as possible. And eventually, there’ll be someone who will have a similar situation to you or can relate to that level or know someone who they can introduce you to.” Although social media connections are sometimes superficial, each connection has the potential to evolve into a lasting relationship if you devote time to it.

**Recognize That Change Is Exciting and Uncomfortable**

Once you’ve started to think carefully and creatively about who you are—and about the strengths you bring to college—the next
step is to consider who you are becoming. College, after all, is a time when you should learn, grow, and change.

Ruth Moreno worked for more than a decade after high school before deciding to continue her education. At first, she “felt like a dinosaur” sitting in class with many younger students at San Antonio College. When her advisor encouraged her to apply for the Honors Academy, “that seemed like a joke to me” because she didn’t see herself as an honors student: “I was scared of having more rigorous classes and then not being able to make As in those classes.” Her advisor’s persistence, however, convinced Ruth to get outside of her comfort zone.

The process was not simple. First Ruth had to really listen to what her advisor said and convince herself to act. After she applied and was accepted to the Honors Academy, she had to commit to new classes, new professors, new peers, and new academic work. That felt scary. Reflecting back, however, Ruth smiled as she described thriving in the Honors Academy, which set her up to earn an undergraduate degree with honors and to pursue a master’s degree in business.

Samantha Paskvan also had to stretch herself further than she expected in college. When she left home in Alaska to attend the University of Washington, she planned to major in chemistry. After taking a few chemistry courses, she did not feel that spark of excitement that she had anticipated, and she began to wonder if she should pursue her passion for dance instead. To her surprise, a genetics course changed her mind. She found herself enjoying the professor, the course content, and the peer conversations in this active learning class. After the class ended, Samantha approached her professor to ask about the possibility of doing undergraduate research. Once she joined a professor’s genetics lab, Samantha discovered she loved both using her “science brain” and being in a scientific community doing meaningful work together:
Beyond the serious science we’re doing, there’s this whole other aspect of caring about each other’s lives. The faculty will make the time to ask, How are your classes going? What are you thinking about for next year? What are you getting involved in outside of the lab? Who do you want to be after you graduate? And then they would really listen and encourage me, even when I wasn’t sure if I knew what I was doing or where I was going.

Samantha continued to pursue her interest in genetics after graduation, going to work in a research lab that uses genomic science to develop new ways to prevent and treat cancer. Her path to that lab wasn’t always smooth, but Samantha persisted and acted when she identified a new passion she wanted to pursue.

You Have Agency

You may be asking yourself, well, where do I start? My college offers so many programs, events, and activities. How do I choose what to do and who to connect with? As a student, you have what some call “agency”—the ability to make choices and to take actions that matter. How you choose to use that agency will have a profound influence on your college experiences. In fact, scholars who study higher education have found that “what students do in college is far more important than the type of institution they attend.”

Don’t just drift through college aimlessly. Like Samantha Paskvan, whom you met earlier this chapter, your agency allows you to act on your intellectual curiosity and passions. If things aren’t going so well, you can use your agency to contact one of your professors when something seems unfair or is getting in the way of your learning. And if that doesn’t work, you have the
agency to reach out to a department chair or dean to express your concerns.

If you have flexibility in your schedule (like elective courses in your college’s core curriculum), you can choose to take a class that interests you but is not connected to your career goals. Join a student club to pursue one of your passions or to try something completely new (like student dance clubs that welcome novices and that can be a great way to have fun and learn about another culture). Go to a musical performance, a play, or an art exhibit offered by other students to see what your peers can do. Contact a few classmates on social media to see if they will form an online study group as you prepare for a big exam or will join forces with you to reach out to college leaders with a suggestion that will help your fellow students. Throughout the book, you’ll read about how students like you used their agency to connect with people, learn new things, and follow their dreams. What you do with your agency is up to you!

In the first couple of chapters, we introduced you to students who struggled to connect because they felt too shy or too busy or too independent or too old or too different or too academically unsure. Not all students are like that. Dylan Costo decided not to waste a minute of his time at Florida International University. In his first semester, Dylan was so interested in a particular topic in physics that he looked up the research interests of faculty in the physics department and then knocked on the office door of Professor Jorge Rodriguez: “He looked up and said, ‘Hi, who are you?’ I told him, ‘I’m not a student in your class, but I want to talk about your research.’ And that short interaction led to a four-year conversation. I still drop by his office regularly to talk about physics.” All it took was a quick search on the university website and then the courage to knock on Professor Rodriguez’s door.
Even if you’re not as bold as Dylan, you still have the capacity to start making meaningful connections with students, faculty, and peers in college. The next section of the book will dig more deeply into why these relationships matter and how you can make them happen.

Ask Yourself . . .

1. Looking back on your life, what are the things you’ve worked toward and achieved? What did you do (for example, practice every day or ask questions of someone who knows more than you) and what did you believe (for example, “I can do this” and “I won’t give up”) that made it possible for you to achieve those things? How can you apply those same practices and beliefs to your college experience?

2. If we asked the people who know you best (for instance, your closest friends, family, spouse, kids, or colleagues) to describe your strengths, what would they tell us?

3. Take a moment to reflect on where you want to be after college. What do you imagine yourself doing? With whom may you want to connect or continue being connected with along this journey?

Try This!

1. Take a few minutes to list your strengths in each of the six categories below, and then think about how your different strengths could help you succeed and thrive in college:
• social (for example, ability to relate to others, ability to maintain relationships for a long time)
• academic (ability in writing, math, computing, or another subject area)
• athletic (skill at a team or individual sport)
• artistic (skill in drawing, singing, music, or other creative pursuits)
• mechanical (ability to build, assemble, or construct)
• cultural/spiritual (knowledge and practices)

2. Make a list of the individuals who are already part of your life, and think about whether any of these people could support you in additional ways—and how you can express your gratitude for what they’ve done for you already:
   • Who do you turn to when you need emotional support?
   • Do you have a person in your life that you talk to about values that ground you?
   • Who in your network of relationships shares an important identity with you?

3. Look through your social network connections to find one or more individuals who attend your college (or who know someone who does). Consider sending a private message to ask someone in your network a question or to see if they would be open to meeting with you to talk about your shared interests.
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