WHEN WE ASKED  Ruth Moreno from San Antonio College about her most meaningful relationships in college, she told us about two of her advisors, Jim Lucchelli and Bertha Castellanos. Even though they both support hundreds of students through their positions, “when you’re sitting in front of them, they make you feel like the world has stopped and they’re only focused on you,” Ruth told us. Other students shared stories of relationships with academic advisors, dining hall workers, student life professionals, athletics staff, and more. At many institutions, for every one professor there are two individuals who work in a non-teaching role—from librarians, technology experts, student life professionals, plumbers, and landscapers, to physical and mental health care professionals, tutors, and office assistants. It takes all of them to make a college run smoothly.

How can staff facilitate your success in college and even be some of your most important mentors? That is the focus of this chapter. We will profile a few key staff positions that are common at many colleges, and we hope you’ll develop relationships with
people in these and many other roles. When you look, you will find allies and mentors everywhere.

**Advisors: Your College GPS**

Ivette Perez is a student at City Tech, part of the City University of New York. The first time she met her academic advisor, David Latimer, Ivette told us that he welcomed her in a very warm way. “I really didn’t expect it from an advisor or any staff member, because high school is kind of nonpersonal,” she shared. “And the first thing he said was, ‘How are you today?’ And that meant a lot to me, because not many people take the time to find out how you are doing.”

When we asked Sophie Danish, a history major at Davidson College, to think about meaningful college relationships, the first person who came to her mind was her advisor for her history major, a "brilliant" African history professor. Sophie appreciated her advisor’s empathy and the chance to connect to an adult in a meaningful way: “I felt like she was a cool person to connect with, and since declaring my major and working with her, she’s always helped me navigate lots of different things throughout college.”

Sophie’s use of the word “navigate” is an excellent way to think about what advisors do and can help you with. Virginia Union University professor of education Terrell Strayhorn uses the term “cultural navigators” to describe academic advisors. “Cultural” because colleges and universities have their own cultures (including their own language, values, norms, traditions, and rules), and “navigators” because advisors use their deep knowledge of college culture to help students make their way through education and life. Strayhorn compares advisors to tools like Google Maps or Waze:
Like a high-tech global positioning system or “GPS,” cultural navigators do more than merely tell someone where to go; they show them via demonstration, illustration, or simulation of possible paths. Cultural navigators in higher education help guide students until they arrive at their academic destination or at least until they are comfortable steering while their cultural navigators act as guides on the side and keep them on their path.¹

Sometimes advisors work within specialized programs. At Oakton Community College, we spoke to Amber Musette Drew, who was part of a TRIO program, one of many initiatives supported by the U.S. federal government to help provide services for students with financial and academic challenges that could get in the way of their educational progress. In Amber’s case, she says TRIO advisor Joe Palencia changed her life. “He was my mentor and one of the first people that I actually made connections with in college,” Amber recalls. “And he was really great with helping me organize my time and connecting me to work-study opportunities. I had no idea about work-study, so he helped me get a job on campus.” He also connected her to an emerging leaders program, which, in her words, “helps students get out of their shells and be a little bit more confident and step into leadership roles.”

Part of the reason academic advisors can make such a difference for you is that your relationship with them will often span multiple semesters or years. They might partner with you to determine which classes to take and how to register, give you advice on your major or career goals, help you work through challenges with changing life circumstances, and prepare you for opportunities like internships and study abroad. Over time, your advisor will get to know you and come to understand your aspirations, strengths, and
fears—and you will become increasingly comfortable reaching out when you need help or advice.

Your Allies and Advocates: Student Support Staff

You will find many college offices to support student success. Sometimes the name of the program might not make it clear that it’s a space for students like you, but you will find allies in the library, career center, residential life office, civic engagement and service-learning programs, counseling and health centers, campus recreation and outdoor programs, judicial affairs offices, departments for students with disabilities, and offices that support student identities, such as LGBTQ or multicultural student centers. Many colleges also have specialized programs for first-generation college students (like TRIO), tutoring and academic success coaching, and writing centers. No matter what these offices (or others) are called at your college, the important thing is that these places are focused on your success and are staffed by dedicated, professional experts who are anxious to engage with you.

The most effective of these programs provide a comprehensive web of support services to facilitate student success, often times led by professional staff members who represent the “heart and soul” of the program because of their deep commitment to student success. In the Nepantla Program at Nevada State College introduced in chapter 4, program coordinator Johanna Araujo was pivotal to Maria Balleza Franco:

She went way beyond her job description, I am sure. She would take the time to be genuine, and she was really interested in what we had to say. She would remember
things and ask, “How did that go?” She was also a first-
generation college student, so she could see a lot of the
struggles we had to go through that our parents did not
understand. More than anything, it’s a very hopeful
experience when she tells you about her story, because
you know you will be okay.

Nepantla's director Leilani Carreño told us that Maria’s experi-
ence is no accident; the program is designed to combine high ex-
pectations for success, built-in mentoring by professionals and
peers, and leadership development training:

We expect that once you are in this program to be part of
the Nevada State community, and you will have mentor-
ship through this program through the date of graduation.
We make sure that students know that this is not just a
summer bridge program but a four-year support program
for them to grow and develop as students and student
leaders on campus.

More Than a Boss

Working an on-campus job can help you connect more fully to your
college—and campus employment has even been correlated with
earning higher grades. Several students, like Amber earlier in this
chapter, told us that their on-campus job supervisors were an unex-
pected yet essential source of support. Even when your campus job
is not connected to your career aspirations, your work supervisor
and colleagues can help you develop important professional skills.

University of Michigan–Flint senior and political science major
Kayla Neal described their on-campus supervisor as one of their
most meaningful college connections. Kayla has worked as a peer
educator with Sarah Devit, the sexual assault advocate at the Center for Gender and Sexuality, for about a year and a half. “Honestly, she doesn’t even act like my boss sometimes. She’s just a really great person to be around, and she’s really helped me throughout COVID, also with my job and stuff.” She has consistently been someone Kayla knows they can lean on: “It’s really comforting to know that she’s there for me when I need her.”

Aigné Taylor, who double majors in political science and sociology at North Carolina A&T State University, said she was not looking for a mentor or job; she wanted to use her passion for civic and voter engagement and get more involved her sophomore year. But while attending an off-campus conference, she bonded with Tiffany Seawright, the director of A&T’s Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement, as they each sampled vegan snacks. Aigné eventually began working for the center, and Seawright became her mentor, advisor, and “like a big sister; I call her auntie.” Their relationship was strengthened through their intense collaboration on developing programs for voter engagement: “The mentorship, the advice, the late-night talks, just me going into her office and being able to tell her how I’m feeling as a student and talk to her about so many different things that are affecting me as a young Black woman and also regarding A&T.” All of this has shaped her both academically and personally. As Aigné puts it, “I wouldn’t be the student leader or the young Black woman that I am without her mentorship and her guidance.”

For Elon University third-year law student James Donnell, staff members offered critical support on his journey to become a
lawyer. James was an Odyssey scholar at Elon, a program for high-achieving first-generation college students, and the program’s director, Marcus Elliott, got to know him well over four years. Then, years later Elliott ended up being a character reference for James’s application for admittance to the bar (a requirement to practice law). At Elon, James also held a job in the Phoenix Card services office, which issues Elon identification cards. James told us his supervisor, Janet Rauhe, had a big influence on him as an undergraduate. “She really took a liking to me and an interest in my success. Every time an attorney would come into the office, she would be intentional and introduce me to them.” Your supervisor can provide far more than job assignments and a paycheck, as important as those are. Good supervisors will take an interest in your future.

Don’t hesitate to contact a counselor. At most colleges and universities, you’ll find professional counselors—individuals who provide free and confidential one-on-one or group counseling and programming for students on topics such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, stress, alcohol or drug dependence, and wellness. If you think you’re the only one feeling anxious or depressed, you most definitely are not: a 2021 national study found that almost half of the college students surveyed showed signs of depression and/or anxiety.*

Not only is the discussion with a counselor confidential (with only a few exceptions), but most colleges will require your permission to let anyone know you used a counseling service. A quick search on your college website will help you find out what’s available, including group and online counseling. We encourage you to find and contact a counselor for general support or for help during a crisis, to learn coping skills, or to proactively work on your overall wellness.

career, give you increasing responsibilities over time, coach you in professional skills that will help you be successful in the workplace, and be a source of continuing welcome and encouragement.

Lean on a College Leader

Your college also has leaders with the titles of dean, department chair, vice president, provost, director, and many more. We talked with a few students like Brian Chan who connected with a leader at their college. Brian is a recent graduate of DePaul University who works in management consulting. He began his college career at Oakton Community College and one year into his studies was elected to be a student trustee (boards of trustees at universities and colleges are made up of individuals who work with—and oversee—the president and who partner with top college leaders to approve policies and develop strategic plans, manage the budget, and often help with fundraising). Because of his position, Brian had the chance to meet Oakton president Joianne Smith as well as the many trustees who served on the board.

An only child who was raised by a single mother, Brian was devastated when his mom passed away while he was attending Oakton. Much to his surprise, at his mom’s funeral “among the first people to show up were Trustee Martha Burns and President Smith.” Brian told us that “one of the favorite things that my mom liked to eat was Italian beef.” To honor Brian’s mom, “Martha cooked Italian beef and served it to everyone after the funeral, and she stayed from beginning to end.”

“My leadership is shaped by my own experience as a student coming from a low-income family with parents who were not college going. Relationships with my faculty and administrators as an undergraduate student shaped my thinking about my future and gave me the confidence to look beyond the limits I had set for myself and to go on and earn a PhD and to think about higher education as a career.”

— Chancellor Harold Martin, North Carolina A&T State University
end. That emotional support was really, really beneficial to me.” Brian said that this experience at an extremely difficult moment in his life is a good example of how President Smith and Trustee Burns shaped his college experience: “For me, that was what the support from those two was like and helped me get through pretty much to graduation.”

Leaders may have impressive titles, but they are people just like you, and chances are, they would love to get to know you. Most have committed their careers to education because they enjoy spending time with students and would be interested in hearing about your experiences. Sometimes these leaders might be able to introduce you to other professionals or connect you with experiences that will enrich your college journey, so do not hesitate to arrange a conversation. Always remember that the college exists for you, and you are a priority, not an imposition. You can reach out to campus leaders simply by introducing yourself at an event, approaching leaders on their walks on campus, or sending an email requesting an opportunity for a conversation.

Campus Heroes Everywhere

You will find talented and kind people on your campus who make your sandwich in the dining hall, clean the building where you study late at night, shovel the walks so you can get to class safely, and respond to a 911 call in an emergency. What you might not anticipate is that one of these individuals might become a mentor, confidant, or listening ear when you need it most. You should approach every staff member on your campus as someone who has the potential to teach you something important about life.

Timothy K. Eatman, dean of the Honors Living-Learning Community at Rutgers University–Newark and coauthor of the
afterword to this book, has built an exceptional program that weaves staff-student interactions into everything from admissions interviews to day-to-day life on campus. He and his colleagues know how important it is for students to see familiar faces and to hear friendly words every day on campus. He also told us a story about an unexpected but powerful student-staff mentoring moment. Dean Eatman’s daughter Jamila is a student at Spelman College in Atlanta. Once when she was having a particularly bad day, Jamila was sitting alone in the cafeteria: “One of the staff walked up to her and said, ‘It’s tough, baby, but you can do it.’ And then she asked, ‘Baby, are you a praying child?’ When Jamila nodded, they sat down and prayed together in the cafeteria. That was so comforting to Jamila, and she never would have thought to ask someone on the staff for something like that.” You might have responded differently in Jamila’s situation, but the offer from the cafeteria staff demonstrated a sincere interest in this student’s well-being.

Ayanna McConnell, who helps lead the alumni office at the University of Michigan, illustrates another way unanticipated student-staff interactions can be transformative. McConnell met a first-generation Michigan undergraduate who aspired to be a dentist and used her professional network to support this student: “My program has a board member and Michigan alum who is a dentist. I told him a bit about this student, and then I made sure she came to a networking event, where I introduced the two of them. They have been in contact ever since, and he has been integral in her career path.”

At your college, many people are eager to help you learn, grow, and connect academically, professionally, and personally. Staff in all sorts of roles will be there for you on bad days—and good ones. You do not have to wait for them to come to you. Seek out connections
with the staff you encounter. You will find allies and champions who will help you succeed.

? Ask Yourself . . .

1. Who have been your most important allies, mentors, and advisors in college so far? Has one been a staff member? What sorts of things do you talk about? What are the most important things you have learned from them?

2. Do you have a job on or off campus? What are you learning from your supervisor? Have you discussed how your supervisor discovered their career?

3. What one simple step could you take to get to know a staff member (and potential mentor) better?

! Try This!

1. Walk into your college library and ask a librarian about the resources and services available through the library. (While you’re there, hang around. It’s a great place to study and meet people.) Many college librarians teach, and most of them partner with professors to find ways to deepen your learning and teach important skills like information literacy. If you’re a fully online student or not yet ready to talk in person, try chatting with a librarian virtually, whether through a chat function on the library website or by sending a quick email to a librarian.

2. Check out student support services on your campus website (such as career services, academic advising, counseling
services, and financial aid), and make an in-person or online visit to at least one to explore a question or interest.

3. Schedule some time to talk with your academic advisor so you can get to know each other before planning your next semester’s schedule of classes. It’s helpful for your advisor to know about your interests and goals.
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