Connections Are Everything
Miranda Tapia, Oscar R., Artze-Vega, Isis, Lambert, Leo M., Felten, Peter

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Miranda Tapia, Oscar R., et al.
Project MUSE. doi:10.56021/9781421443126.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/111986

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3453545
This page intentionally left blank
IN THE LAST THREE CHAPTERS you’ve read about why and how interactions with peers, professors, and college staff can contribute to your learning and well-being in college. The final three chapters of the book invite you to think about what you can do to make your education relationship rich. Remember, your college has many people and programs to support you in that work; you’re not on your own. And again, it’s the quality, not the quantity, of the relationships you develop in college that not only can help you succeed but can have long-term benefits for you, contributing to your career success and your civic engagement after you graduate—and even making it more likely you’ll thrive personally throughout your life.1

This chapter shows how certain experiences called high-impact practices (or HIPs) can be particularly significant, even transformational, for students in college. These include internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, first-year seminars, and learning communities. We call these experiences “relationship accelerators” because that’s what they do: they supercharge the educational interactions you have with peers, professors, staff, and community members. You should be alert to opportunities to engage in these
experiences because they could be some of the most engaging and meaningful things you do in college.

Research demonstrates the many benefits of these practices for students, including greater engagement, deeper learning, and increased likelihood of graduating. These experiences are relationship accelerators in part because they immerse students in circumstances that offer both challenge and support. Sometimes these are classroom-based experiences, such as a first-year seminar or a senior capstone course. Other times, they take place off campus at internship sites (in business and government settings, for example) or through civic engagement experiences with community partners (such as weekly tutoring of children in reading at a local school). Importantly, many HIPs require students to apply their academic knowledge to real-world settings. Research demonstrates that HIPs are meaningful for all students, and they tend to be particularly significant for first-generation undergraduates and students of color.

How Can You Find Relationship Accelerators?

Many colleges have programs designed to help students find and engage with these high-impact practices. Table 7.1 lists a few of the most common ones, including an explanation of how each can be a relationship accelerator for you. That list is not complete. You will encounter other relationship accelerators in college. Peer leadership roles, such as being a resident assistant in a residence hall or a peer tutor in a course or serving

“Everyone’s experience is different, but for me, getting involved with student government was the number-one thing because joining something automatically gave me a way to meet people that I have something in common with.”

—Amena Shukairy, University of Michigan–Flint
in student government, often have these characteristics. Participating in athletics, whether at the intercollegiate, club, or intramural level, puts you into intense relationships with peers and coaches who are working toward a shared goal. Throughout this book you’ve read about other examples, including campus employment and student clubs. You also can turn almost any in-depth college experience into a relationship accelerator if you intentionally seek to build connections with the people alongside you.

### TABLE 7.1 High-Impact Practices and How They Accelerate Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGH-ImpACT PRACTICE</th>
<th>HOW THIS HIP ACTS AS A RELATIONSHIP ACCELERATOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-year seminars</td>
<td>Interact intensely with faculty and new students in a small class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad / study away</td>
<td>Meet and study with peers and others from a different culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capstone projects and experiences</td>
<td>Connect what you have learned in college to produce something significant, guided by faculty and often collaborating with peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internships</td>
<td>Connect with supervisors and coworkers in a professional setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing-intensive classes</td>
<td>Write for a real audience, and give peers feedback on their writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate research</td>
<td>Pursue an intensive research or creative project while being mentored by a faculty expert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service and community-based learning</td>
<td>Partner with people to apply and develop your academic knowledge and skills to challenges that matter to the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning communities</td>
<td>Collaborate with other students, including peer leaders, to explore shared academic interests. These can be classroom or residentially based.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You Can Pursue Relationship Accelerators

For many students, the idea of pursuing an internship, studying for a semester in another city or country, asking a faculty member to be your research mentor, or becoming a leader of a student organization seems daunting. If you are working long hours outside of school, or are studying fully online, or are a parent, or are the first in your family to go to college, these experiences may seem unattainable. However, relationship accelerators are in your reach if you do two things:

1. **Develop a relational mindset.** Many colleges are embedding high-impact practices directly in the curriculum, so you likely will experience relationship accelerators in some of the courses you take, such as a required first-year seminar, a capstone experience, or a writing-intensive course in your major. Sometimes, though, students don’t fully embrace these potentially powerful opportunities. Group work can be difficult to manage on a busy schedule, but if you approach the assignment and your peers with a relational mindset, you’ll be more likely to learn some of the interpersonal skills that will serve you well even after you graduate (like collaboratively working toward deadlines and giving constructive feedback to peers), as well as earn a better grade.

2. **Plan ahead.** Studying abroad, completing an internship, or conducting undergraduate research usually requires substantial preparation. To make these opportunities possible, plan early, seek expert guidance, and apply for funding to support the extra costs that some of these experiences may entail. This will require action on your part, but we believe
that if you can take the first concrete step toward your goal—sending an email, setting up a meeting, attending an information session—you will be surprised by how many people will want to help you realize your dreams.

Remember, quality is more important than quantity. Participating in just one or two high-quality HIPs can have a huge impact on your college experience.

**Classroom-Based Relationship Accelerators**

The curriculum of your college or university will likely include classroom-based high-impact learning experiences that are designed, in part, to help you form strong relationships with your professors and peers. A common example is a first-year seminar. Sometimes these courses are an introduction to interdisciplinary learning and exploration, other times they are classes on special topics designed to immerse students in a field of study, and still other times they focus on academic advising and serve as an extended orientation to making the most of your college experience. Often, your first-year seminar instructor may also serve as your initial academic advisor, another important relationship for you.

Another common example of a classroom-based relationship accelerator is the capstone course, a final requirement in many majors that is designed to help you integrate, synthesize, and reflect upon your learning in the discipline and perhaps also complete a semester-long project. Capstone courses also present an opportunity to celebrate an intellectual journey with your peers and faculty in your closest academic community. Some of these require you to develop and share an electronic portfolio that showcases your academic work and personal development in college. That can
be a good opportunity to reconnect with professors and peers who have contributed to your success throughout college.

By talking with peers, advisors, and faculty you know, you also will be able to identify courses and professors who teach courses in ways that will have you actively learning with peers. José Robles, whom you met on the first page of this book, shows what is possible when active peer learning transforms a course that could have been “as boring as rocks.” You can also take advantage of opportunities to work with learning assistants, to join online study groups, and to engage with academic topics outside the classroom by going to scholarly talks, artistic performances, and other events sponsored by your college—you might be surprised who you connect with and what ideas inspire you when you take advantage of programs and events simply because they capture your interest.

Out-of-Class Relationship Accelerators

Many forms of campus involvement—student employment, membership in clubs, and intermural or varsity athletics—can also be relationship accelerators. Chloe Inskeep of the University of Iowa is a first-generation college student who was invited to join First Gen Hawks, a program that pairs students with opportunities in leadership and engagement, undergraduate research, and on-
campus employment. Chloe’s on-campus job profoundly shaped her initial semester on campus:

My employment is in the office of the vice president for student life. Every single time we see each other, the vice president talks to me about how it’s going and how I’m feeling. And along with her assistant, Eric Rossow, they have been, seriously, one of the best things ever for me and my education. They make you feel like you want to be there, and they want you there.

Chloe also decided to join a club, CHAARG (Changing Health, Attitudes, and Actions to Recreate Girls), as a way to meet new friends in the midst of a pandemic:

It’s a fitness club where we work out together and have these little socials every other week in small groups, so I get to connect with a lot of people. I loved it so much I decided to become a leader. In my first year, it was hard to make connections with anyone because of the pandemic, and I decided I needed to join some clubs. I didn’t go into Greek life because that’s not me. So I found CHAARG and thought, “It will help me stay healthy.” I made so many friends. I was not expecting to be this involved, and I love it.

---

“It is important for us to have a space specifically for males because the socialization process for males—particularly males of color and from certain socioeconomic statuses—does not provide spaces for us to be in community with one another in authentic ways. We are sitting side by side watching games; we are competing on a field or on a court; we are performing masculinity with one another, but we rarely have opportunities to get together and talk about how we are truly feeling and where we are going and what we are carry with us on a day-to-day basis.”

—Matthew Smith, California State University, Dominguez Hills
Chloe is a good example of a student who intentionally sought out relationships, mentors, leadership opportunities, support, and friendship by fully taking advantage of the resources available to her at the University of Iowa. She took an active role in finding her relationship accelerators.

Learning Communities

The term “learning community” implies relationship building, and many colleges and universities have a variety of this type of relationship accelerator. Course-based learning communities, for instance, usually involve the same group of students taking a cluster of classes together. One advantage of this kind of learning community is that you get to know a group of peers quite well during class, without having to spend a lot (or any) time outside of the course together, which can be a barrier for many busy students.

The University of Washington has a well-known learning community program in the form of a first-year seminar. Twenty-five students in a First-Year Interest Group (FIG) take both a FIG seminar and a disciplinary course, like Introduction to Biology, together. A trained peer educator (an upper-level student) leads the FIG seminar, and all FIGs include a Projecting Forward project that requires students to interview community members from a field that interests them. For example, Max Chan, a student who hopes to work in professional sports, interviewed staff from Seattle’s professional football and baseball teams—and then he shared what he learned about their work, and himself, with his peers in his FIG learning community.

Some colleges and universities also offer learning communities located in residence halls, sometimes with a faculty member
mentoring or even living in an on-campus apartment as part of the community. These residential experiences typically have an academic or intellectual theme, and students might be enrolled in a core course, with common out-of-class activities (meals, discussions, films, or trivia nights) held in the residential community. In chapter 4, you met Abby Pearch, who had a powerful experience her first year in Lichty Hall, her residential learning community. As Abby’s experience showed, a residential community connects students with peers and staff or faculty, often forming a strong cohort that persists long after these students no longer live together.

Whether residential or not, learning communities are an appealing and powerful relationship accelerator for many students.

---

“\[Quotable text here.\]"

---

Internships, Field Experiences, and Co-ops

Internships, field experiences, and cooperative work experiences (called co-ops) are opportunities to apply knowledge from your discipline or professional field in a work setting. They allow you to build relationships with working professionals who have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share, some of whom might become long-term mentors—or even employers. These experiences also help students build strong networks, gain experience on teams
(more relationships!), observe both good and bad professional practices, and build resilience. Many organizations do some or part of their work remotely, including remote internships, allowing students to participate without having to physically move to the internship site—and also making it possible for students to learn important skills such as how to collaborate using digital tools.

In some majors, internships and co-ops are required for graduation. This is increasingly important today, as many companies and organizations prefer to offer entry-level, full-time employment to people who have already completed an internship, field placement, or co-op with them. Why? Because your demonstrated performance is an opportunity for hiring managers to observe many important skills, like how well you work with others, how you bounce back from mistakes, and your resilience and work ethic. In every field, these experiences are prime opportunities for you to make sure a field is a good career fit and to find some of your first professional mentors.

Your college’s career services office (it might go by another name, like the internship and career placement office) has staff who can advise you about internships, field experience, and co-op placements—and many other things, too. Sometimes these offices are centralized and serve the entire institution, and other times they are based in specific schools and colleges, serving students with particular majors. Staff in these offices (as well as faculty and others at your college) can help you connect with alumni of your institution, many of whom would be delighted to take a phone call or have coffee with a current student who is seeking career advice or looking for an internship. It is never too early to begin building connections on LinkedIn and to understand that prospective internship and co-op hosts will be reviewing your social media content before making you an offer to join them.
Regrettably, some internships are unpaid, and they may be located in expensive or distant locations, adding to the cost of gaining internship experience. Many colleges offer need-based financial aid to help offset the costs of doing internships and co-ops, so ask about sources of support in your financial aid and deans’ offices.

**Undergraduate Research**

One of the most powerful relationship accelerators is doing research under the mentorship of a faculty member. Undergraduate research gives you an opportunity to pursue a research question that fascinates you, usually over the course of a summer or multiple semesters. Students who do undergraduate research gain experience in a discipline’s processes of inquiry, discovery, and creativity, and they practice professional skills like writing for and speaking with experts in their field. If you are considering graduate school in the future, there is simply no better preparation than undergraduate research. Most important of all, the relationship you form with your mentor over the course of your undergraduate research experiences will often turn out to be one of the most important of your academic career.

You might find an undergraduate research mentor by talking to experienced peers in your major and learning how they got started with their research. Or you might look over faculty bios on a departmental website and email professors to ask whether they are open to you stopping by their office hours or having a

“*My undergraduate research mentor right from the start was really careful about how I thought about science and making sure that my voice was validated and that I was asking questions in lab meetings. She also would carve out time to talk one on one about science. She’d ask what I think and really listened to what I said.*”

—Samantha Paskvan, University of Washington
quick online meeting to talk about taking on an undergraduate research student (like Sam Owusu at Davidson, whom you met earlier). Most often, undergraduate research relationships begin in the classroom, as was the case for Samantha Paskvan at the University of Washington. Samantha came to UW planning for this relationship accelerator: “I kept waiting for the class or the teacher that would spark my interest so I could jump on their research project.” For her, the spark appeared in a particularly engaging genetics course in which students would collaborate to solve problems. At the end of the term, she approached her professor: “I brought in my résumé, and we talked about all the different projects they were doing in the lab and also all about me. It was incredibly invigorating to talk about science, research, and life.” You will find that many faculty will be receptive to talking to you about undergraduate research if you approach them with preparedness, enthusiasm, and respect.

**Civic Engagement and Service Learning**

Community-based learning, whether as part of a class or outside of your course work, exposes you to the people, priorities, and needs of the neighborhoods and communities that surround your institution. Civic engagement and service-learning programs will engage you with community partners (some of whom may become your mentors), expose you to both the talents and needs of community members and organizations, help you hone your professional and interpersonal skills, and teach you about the value of civic engagement in a democracy—all while you contribute to positive change in your community.

Amaya Gaines decided in her first year at Elon University to involve herself in the Village Project, a program that provides individualized tutoring in reading and mathematics for students in
early grades in schools that have high proportions of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Amaya chose to get involved because “I believe in the power of representation and leadership of Black and Brown people in our communities.” Amaya also felt compelled to put the resources of her university—including herself—to use for the good of the broader community. Her relationships with her young students and community members are important to her: “I love going to schools and meeting students and families where they are. I like being able to bond with my students over books and games we play at the end of our tutoring sessions.”

Amaya’s service also connects to other parts of education, including her membership in a residential learning community focused on examining social disparities, her double major in policy studies and political science, and her undergraduate research examining statewide antipoverty programs. Her service learning also supports her career goals: “Sometimes policy analysts can get distanced from the communities they are studying. Policies should not be made for communities, but with communities. So having community dialogue is really important, especially through first-hand experiences with people in programs like the Village Project.”

**Study Abroad / Study Away**

In study abroad or study away, students take classes in another country or in another part of the United States. These experiences give students opportunities to see the world, build relationships in different cultural contexts, develop skills in a new language, or gain new forms of intercultural competence, such as appreciation of different worldviews and religions. Many experiences take place over the course of a full academic term, but institutions typically
also offer shorter-term experiences, such as a January term or May term or during an official college break, that can be transformative and relationship rich.

Students hoping to study abroad are often concerned about (1) fitting the experience within their academic plans and personal obligations, and (2) finding scholarship aid to support additional costs, or (3) leaving the country or state for the first time and having to navigate new languages, cultures, food, and traditions. Your college’s study abroad office will have a wealth of information about available programs and scholarship opportunities. Planning is key. If you aim to study abroad during your junior year, for example, your academic advisor can help you arrange your schedule so that you can still fulfill all the requirements for your degree and graduate on time. Many institutions offer special scholarship aid to help students fund the costs of a passport, airfare, and other program expenses, making this relationship accelerator more accessible to you than you might expect.

**Pursue In-Depth Relationship Accelerators**

Since some relationship accelerators unfold over more than one semester and require planning to make sure they align and fit within your college curriculum (such as internships and study away), early discussions with your academic advisor are important. This longer time horizon is helpful for in-depth experiential learning and building meaningful relationships. Obviously, a one-time volunteer experience on a Saturday morning is not at all the same as a semester-long service-learning course that involves having learning goals, building relationships with community partners, completing a long-term project, and reflecting on what you have learned. Relationship accelerators like these require significant time and effort, so we encourage you to pursue them in
Showcase what you've learned in relationship accelerators. Because relationship accelerators are such an important part of your education, you should document what you have done so you can share your learning and skills with prospective employers and graduate schools. Here are some options for doing this:

- **Résumé:** Your résumé should highlight the high-impact learning you have done. Be sure your résumé features internships completed, leadership positions held, community service projects, and more. Also, remember that the relationships formed through these activities might be a good source for professional and personal references. Your college's career center can help you create your résumé, and making a connection at the career center can also help you in many other ways.

- **Electronic portfolio:** E-portfolios document student academic and creative work, along with a student’s reflections on their academic, professional, and personal growth and development. For example, your e-portfolio might include an undergraduate research poster you presented at a conference, examples of work you completed during an internship, an excerpt of a group presentation you did in a course, and short statements from you explaining the significance of each of those for you. Your college's writing center can help you create an e-portfolio, and making a connection at the writing center can help you in many other ways.

- **Experiential learning transcript:** Some colleges issue both a traditional academic transcript (listing the courses you have taken, your grades, and so on) and an experiential learning transcript, which certifies your experience in relational accelerators like study abroad, undergraduate research, and internships. Ask your advisor about this so you know what your school provides and so you can plan to use this resource in future job or graduate school applications.

depth rather than committing yourself to too many experiences and not being able to immerse yourself in any of them.

We hope your college career will allow for many opportunities to experience how high-impact practices can help build some of
the most important relationships of your life. Be bold in pursuing them—again, remember that a journey begins with a single step.

Ask Yourself . . .

1. Which relationship accelerators already exist at your college? Are there any you are interested in getting involved with?

2. If you are already participating in a relationship accelerator, how is it going? Do you feel like you are connecting with faculty, staff, or peers more deeply? If so, what are you learning that you can apply to other aspects of your education and life? If not, is there anything you can do to strengthen these relationships?

Try This!

1. Search your college website to find out which relationship accelerators and high-impact practices are available to you. Use the list shown earlier in this chapter (page 95) to search for relationship accelerators individually. Choose one to learn more about, and email the person who oversees the program. If it’s not listed online, ask your advisor or one of your professors where you can learn more.

2. Visit the career center at your college, and ask how you can find and apply to internships, jobs, or graduate or professional school.

3. Email a professor to ask about their research and to see if they ever involve undergraduates in their research projects.
You might contact a professor who teaches one of your favorite courses. Or you could search a department’s web page to find a professor whose work interests you (as Sam Owusu did), or ask your friends if they know a professor who might be a valuable contact.