WHEN SAM OWUSU left home in Chicago to attend Davidson College, he wondered what life would be like as a Black man living on a predominately white campus in a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina. His first few days went great as he got to know his peers and settled into his dorm. And when classes began, he jumped right in: “During my very first class, I was excited and nervous. I wanted to major in political science, and my professor was one of the big names in that department.”

Looking back a few years later, shortly after graduating from Davidson, Sam still remembers how he felt as a new college student: “Yeah, it is intimidating. It’s not an easy process of building relationships with people you consider to be some of the brightest people that you’ve ever met. You just have this feeling that you always have to be right about everything and this sense that you’re an imposter. ‘If I’m not right then I shouldn’t be saying anything.’”

But then one day, when Sam struggled with a class project, the same “big name” professor emailed to ask, “Hey what’s going on?” And she specifically asked “Are you okay?” first. “The project can
come second, but are you okay?” Experiences like this one taught him that professors could care for him as a person, not just as a student. They have feelings just like you. They can have good days and not so good days, and some of them can tell when there is something wrong. Until you’ve interacted with them enough to know if they are not kind or not caring, assume they want you to succeed.

It is common for undergraduates to feel intimidated by professors, and that feeling tends to be particularly strong for students who have doubts about whether they belong in college. You might be wondering about this yourself. Despite these understandable apprehensions, the classroom—whether in person or online—is the place where most of your learning will happen in college. The interactions you have with your professors, and the relationships you build with them, can and will be transformational for you. Decades of research show that the quality of student-faculty relationships is one of the most important factors

FACT: Helping professors get to know you pays off. Students who believe their professor knows their name and cares about their success are more likely to ask for help and to work hard to succeed.* Introduce yourself to your professor so they can learn your name, and don’t be surprised if you need to remind them of your name later—many professors teach a lot of students.

* Katelyn M. Cooper et al., “What’s in a Name? The Importance of Students Perceiving That an Instructor Knows Their Names in a High-Enrollment Biology Classroom,” *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): ar8, https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.16-08-0265.
in a whole range of positive experiences in and outcomes from college for all students, and especially for first-generation undergraduates and students of color.¹

If you’re just starting college and think it’s too soon to start connecting with your professors, keep in mind that 60 percent of graduates in a national poll reported meeting their most influential college faculty or staff member during their first year.² Students usually meet these professors in their courses, meaning that the classroom experience, and particularly the first-year classroom experience, is pivotal.

None of these research findings make interacting with faculty easy, but they do suggest it will be important for you to devote time and effort to cultivating relationships with your professors. This chapter will help. We’ll share stories of students connecting with faculty in ways that help them learn and be successful in college and that have long-term implications for their work and lives after graduation. You’ll read about both in- and out-of-class connections between students and professors, including specific opportunities, like office hours, that can deepen your faculty relationships. The chapter concludes with some stories of negative student-faculty interactions and some advice about handling these.

**Students (Yes, You) Are a Priority**

At the beginning of this chapter, Sam already described one reason it can be hard to connect to professors: the perception that they might be “some of the brightest people that you’ve ever met.” Other students were worried about interrupting faculty work. Growing up in Miami, Paula Lisazo knew she wanted to be a doctor, so she was a serious student—and she always did well in school. However, her science courses at Florida International University
could be “intimidating.” Paula says she had to get out of her comfort zone and get over the idea she would be bothering her professors by reaching out to them: “I don’t like thinking I’m pestering teachers.”

It’s true that your professors have many responsibilities. These often include teaching, conducting research, providing leadership to their department and school, mentoring students, and much more. Some of them may teach full time at just one institution, while others may teach part time at multiple colleges. Some classes have graduate students who are instructors or teaching assistants, while others may be led by a professor with undergraduate students serving as learning assistants. Regardless of who is teaching the class or what other responsibilities they may have, that person is responsible for teaching your class, and as a student, you are one of their priorities. Paula says that over time she realized not only that she was not pestering her professors but that they appreciated it when she stayed in touch with them.

**Connecting in the Classroom**

Paula told us about another professor, one she liked so much she took three of his classes. But he did something during class that scared her at first: calling on a student by name to answer a question in front of everyone in a large lecture hall. After talking with him, she saw that he wanted to get to know his students, even in big classes: “If you went to his office hours, he’d answer your questions and learn your name. And he was so interested in your life—he always asked what other classes I was taking and what I hoped to do with my degree.” If she saw him in the hallway before or after class, he’d greet her by name.

Slowly she came to realize that what at first made her nervous—his habit of asking specific students a question in class—was his
way of checking in to see if everyone was understanding the material. When he’d ask in class, “‘Hey Paula, what do you think of this?’ I sometimes would say, ‘I don’t know,’” and he would then slow down. “If you didn’t understand something, you always felt like you could tell him, and he’d help you learn.”

Those kinds of connections might not surprise you for a student who took three in-person classes with the same professor, but what about online classes? When Nellie Bourne at San Antonio College signed up for a fully online required writing class, she did not think she would interact much with her professor. Nellie struggled to balance school with her job and her home life (including her husband and two active dogs) during the pandemic, and she worried that having to write two papers a week for this class would feel like a chore. However, the professor gave her such helpful, prompt, and affirming feedback on her writing that she found herself working extra hard: “On some papers, she would have this little paragraph in the comments saying, ‘You did this super well in your paper,’ and that little bit of encouragement, even though you’re not face-to-face with this teacher at all, made a world of difference to me.” Nellie appreciated her professor’s feedback so much that she took a second course with her, even though she wasn’t required to do so. Although they have never met in person or spoken to each other, Nellie insists this professor “has made a huge, a positive difference” for her—which, she notes, “is kind of hard to do when you’re not actually interacting with students in a classroom or on Zoom.”

Other students connected with professors who share aspects of their identities or passions. Lance Lindsay developed his strongest faculty relationship with Professor Valerie Johnson, the chair of the political science department at DePaul University, who knew Lance intended to go to graduate school: “She sometimes took a hard stance toward me. She would ask, ‘Do you know the
Small Steps to Connect with Your Professor

Here are some basic strategies to begin building a relationship with any professor:

1. Read the syllabus, which explains course content and procedures like homework and grading. If you still have questions about the course after you've read the syllabus, ask the professor. Start your email or comment to them with something like "Would you please help me understand this part of the syllabus?" or "I have a question that I didn't see answered in the syllabus."

2. Be ready to participate and be engaged in every class. Do the reading and the homework. Ask a question or join in classroom discussion, and use technology (your phone, a laptop) only for educational activities in class—and as described in the syllabus. And come to class! If you absolutely must arrive late or be absent, email your professor letting them know and asking what you need to do to make up any work that you miss.

3. Communicate with your professor if you are having difficulty with (or are excited about) the course material or if you will be late with an assignment. Sometimes professors are willing to provide a deadline extension if you communicate with them in advance. Do not "ghost" your professor, leaving them wondering why you have missed class or not submitted assignments. Let them know what is happening with you, and oftentimes you will find that moment can become an important point of connection for the two of you.
percentage of people of color in higher education? Your work needs to be tight.” Similarly, Jennyflore Andre felt drawn to Professor Sat Gavassa, a biological sciences professor at Florida International University, because “I saw similar traits in the two of us. She has a little shyness about her, and she works hard to do everything perfectly.”

**Connections That Challenge and Support**

Part of why effective professors contribute so much to students’ college experiences is that they both challenge and support them. This echoes the research about what the best college teachers do. In our interviews, we heard this over and over from students who described their favorite professors as the ones who knew them well enough to push them academically and to encourage and believe in them personally. Sophie Danish, a history major at Davidson College, said of her favorite professor: “By challenging me, not just handing over a grade, she was demonstrating that she really wanted to help me improve. And I decided that I really wanted to impress her with my work.” Tajhae Barr, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan–Flint and a published author, teared up as she recalled her first-semester writing professor, who had high standards for her students. “At first I thought she was indifferent toward freshmen,” but over the semester Tajhae realized her professor was doing her best to prepare first-generation students like her to be successful in their classes: “She wanted us to understand what was going to be required of us throughout our academic and professional careers, and she wanted us to know she believed we were capable of developing our learning and writing skills to distinguish ourselves.”
Sometimes Professors Help You See Yourself

Peta-Gaye Dixon, a former student success mentor at LaGuardia Community College, recalls how two conversations led to her decision to pursue a career as a teacher. She entered LaGuardia intending to study business so she could support her mother back home in Jamaica; she never imagined herself in education because she had struggled with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) throughout her years of schooling:

Professor Silverman, my psychology professor, told me: “Peta, your papers are terrific. Why don’t you go into education?” I’m like, “Me, teaching children? I can’t teach anybody. I barely made it through school. I can’t do that.” Professor Silverman replied, “Think about it.” The next day I got a copy of an email from her to a professor in the education department. It said, “I might have found you an excellent teacher candidate.” I decided to follow Professor Silverman’s advice, so I went to see Professor Cornelia in education, who told me she also had ADHD. She sat me down in her office and showed me all her credentials on her wall, and she said, “I am you. And look where I am. You are going to be a great educator because you know what these kids are going through.” And then she asked me to sit down in her chair behind her desk, and she said, “You’re in the professor’s chair. That’s your master’s on the wall. That’s your PhD. How are you going to tell me you can’t do it? You’re going to be a great teacher.”

Not only did these two conversations with Professors Silverman and Cornelia change Peta’s life, but they will also ripple through
classrooms for years to come as she teaches and mentors her own students.

Karey Frink of Hope College was struggling so much in her chemistry course that she was thinking of dropping the class. Her professor, Dr. Peaslee, found out about this and asked her to talk. Karey says, “I was shaking in my boots. I have to confront my super smart professor and tell him that I’m failing chemistry.” But when they met, he spoke about her strengths and said, “Karey, I see you having skills that others in the class don’t have, like communication skills, understanding the basics of how science works and being able to communicate it in layman’s terms.” Karey became a communications major, inspired by what Professor Peaslee identified in her.

**Office Hours Are Student Hours**

You have many chances to interact informally with faculty, both during class and by “just staying after class to chat sometimes,” to borrow a strategy from Chloe Inskeep, a student at the University of Iowa. Perhaps the easiest opportunity to connect with faculty outside of class is during office hours—sometimes called student hours or other names. During office hours, which tend to be listed on the course syllabus, faculty are available for drop-in conversations with students. You don’t need an appointment or even a formal reason for stopping by a professor’s office hours. Professors set aside this time specifically to meet with students. If you cannot make the times listed, email your professor to ask if there are other times they are available. In addition, teaching assistants (TAs, who are usually graduate students) often have office hours for students, which can be particularly helpful if you’re in a class that has a lot of students.
Office Hours 101

You might never have heard of “office hours” before college. Here are four things you need to know:

1. **Office hours are student hours.** Bryan Dewsbury, a biology professor at Florida International University, found that some students thought the term “office hours” meant that was the time professors were in their offices getting their work done. He renamed them “student hours” to clear up their purpose. No matter what your professor calls them, office hours are for you.

2. **Office hours don’t always take place in professors’ offices.** Professor Dewsbury often holds “student hours” in a residence hall to make it easier for students to attend and so there will be more space for a crowd—because many students tend to stop by. Professors who teach online courses, and sometimes professors who teach on-campus courses, will have office hours virtually (for example, on Zoom) to make it convenient to connect.

3. **You don’t have to go alone.** Professor Dewsbury encourages his students to attend office hours in groups. Students will respond to one another’s questions and work together to solve problems. Even if your professor does not explicitly mention visiting office hours in pairs or groups, feel free to go together with another student from your class.

4. **Office hours are also a time to ask questions beyond the course material.** You might be interested in talking about choosing a major, pursuing undergraduate research, or other bigger questions, from internship or community service possibilities to career or life advice.
The key is to actually go to office hours (online or in person), and ideally to go early in the semester. Research suggests that new students who go to office hours during the first three weeks of the semester are more likely than their peers to be successful academically.4

Despite the benefits, for many students fear can make office hours seem daunting. Abraham Segundo, who returned to college for a second time after initially withdrawing, described his own experience this way:

At first, I was scared of teachers because I was worried about what they would think if I asked them questions or showed them that I didn't understand something. But in reality, they’re here to help. I didn't see that when I was younger. Now I know that teachers will spend time with you to help you learn; you just have to ask. Now that I'm back in school, every chance I get, I ask a question in class or I’ll go to office hours.

Like Abraham, Paula Lisazo was apprehensive about going to see a professor, but one of her first-year professors encouraged all his students to visit office hours, so she did: "He was friendly, and he asked me how the semester was going overall. We didn’t only talk about the class because he wanted to know a bit about me as a person." For Paula, that interaction convinced her that she could—and should—go to office hours with other faculty, "so it was a good start for me developing relationships with professors even though I’m at a huge school taking mostly big classes.”

“Professors love to answer questions. That’s their job.”
—Amena Shukairy, University of Michigan–Flint
You do not have to be a student in a professor’s course to visit their office hours. Sam Owusu spent his first year “talking to almost every professor in the political science department” to figure out who he wanted to be his advisor.

Also keep in mind that you don’t have to stay for an hour or even a half hour to benefit from office hours. Even a brief visit can help. At Oakton Community College, faculty who participate in the Persistence Project meet one on one with each student for a ten-minute conversation during the first three weeks of the semester. Oakton students, particularly those who are new to higher education, report being “intimidated” and “kind of scared” by the requirement to meet individually with faculty. However, Allison Wallin, who is studying environmental science, explained that “having to have that meeting creates a relationship that you can build on later in the semester if you ever need to talk to them about a problem. And it makes it easier to speak up in class.” Gina Roxas, a student planning to transfer to earn her bachelor’s degree in biology, describes one such meeting with a professor as “very key to my education here because she not only showed that she cared about her students but also was well versed in the resources available to support students, which helped me connect with the honors program and a science mentor and also scholarship opportunities.”

FACT: You need your professors to remember you. Students routinely ask faculty to serve as a reference for a job or to write a letter of recommendation for a scholarship or application. Be sure you have gotten to know the faculty you might ask for a reference or recommendation so that they can be knowledgeable advocates for you.
The connections you establish in office hours often won’t last beyond the semester, but sometimes you will have begun to build the kind of relationship that can blossom into advising and mentoring. Students like Paula who hope to attend graduate or professional school, for example, will need letters of recommendation, and the best letters are written by faculty who know you.

Other students discover their academic passions in office hours. Wren Renquist entered the University of Iowa intending to go to medical school, but a required botany unit in an introductory biology course sparked her curiosity: “I loved that botany section so much, I continuously went to her office hours. At the end of the semester, I knew her and her research well enough that I asked if I could join her lab—and she knew me well enough to say yes!”

Relationship Challenges with Professors

Student-faculty relationships are powerful, even transformative. They also can go wrong. You should not tolerate sexual harassment, racial abuse, or other forms of discrimination in education. It is unacceptable, illegal, and immoral. If something like this happens to you, immediately contact an official at your college; if you don’t know who to speak to, start with the provost’s or dean’s office. These administrators have broad responsibility for students and education—they will know how to support and assist you.

It’s more likely that you’ll come across faculty who are not (or appear not to be) responsive to their students or not connecting meaningfully with them. In our interviews with undergraduates across the country, we heard many inspiring stories of amazing teaching, but we also heard about a professor who promised to make sure many students didn’t pass their class and a first-year
writing professor who collected their students’ first assignments and then—without even reading them—walked to the front of the room and threw those papers in the trash, saying, “I know you guys can do better than this.”

What should you do? Believe it or not, sometimes the best thing you can do in this situation is go to the professor’s office hours, introduce yourself, and ask a few questions about the class. Once you begin to build a relationship with the professor, you’ll be able to judge what your next step should be—perhaps the professor was trying (and failing) to make an important point about their class, or maybe they are not interested in the needs of students. If you think they don’t have your education at heart, then you might need to talk to your academic advisor or the department chair or academic dean to ask for advice about whether to switch to another section of the course.

Sometimes students make mistakes that can damage student-faculty relationships. Brandon Daye, a supply chain management and agribusiness management double major at North Carolina A&T, told us about a big mistake he made his first semester:

I got so involved in football and campus life that I only went to my English class a couple of times throughout the semester. On the last day of the class, I showed up with all my work for the whole course. When everyone left, I went up to the professor and handed her my work. She looked at me and said, “No. I cannot accept this or allow you to pass. That’s not fair to other students, and you won’t learn from this experience.” I was heartbroken. She told me, “Brandon, you fell down, but you can get back up. You need to decide what you want and then focus on that.” That’s why I ended my first semester with a 1.94 GPA. I was struggling. Now I can gladly say I have a 3.51 GPA, and I am interning at two
places. I learned so much from having to figure out what mattered to me.

As Brandon discovered, mistakes are almost always powerful teachers.

Katy, a strategic communications major at Elon University, also stumbled in her first year. During her second semester, she was disappointed and frustrated with the B she earned on an exam, so she changed one of her answers: “I abandoned logic and moral reasoning and approached my professor for two small percentage points. I walked into Professor Landesberg’s office and lied to him, showing him his ‘mistake’ where he had marked my answer as wrong.” What Katy did not know is that her professor kept copies of all student exams; he had proof that she had cheated. He quickly informed her that cheating meant she would earn an F in the course. Katy was devastated, but she decided to demonstrate to Professor Landesberg—and herself—that she could recover from this grave mistake. She attended every day of this class the rest of the semester, turning in all the assigned work and studying hard for the final exam. After the semester ended, she asked Professor Landesberg to be her academic advisor and he agreed. Katy says that one of the highlights of her college experience was his telling her “I’m proud of you” as she prepared for graduation three years later. Katy still needed to repeat her failed class, but she counts this experience among the most powerful learning experiences of her life—and she considers Professor Landesberg her most important mentor in college.

Not every student is lucky enough to encounter a professor like Katy’s, but all students can interact with faculty who can be long-term mentors—or mentors-of-the-moment (see chapter 8). Many faculty are eager to build this kind of educational relationship with you. Open yourself up to this possibility by, like Sam
Owusu said at the beginning of this chapter, being willing to take the risk of asking or answering a question in class, chatting with a professor after class, going to office hours, or inquiring about the possibility of undergraduate research or other academic experiences outside of class. In Sam’s words, “I think the first step that I made in building a relationship with professors was being okay with being wrong and admitting that I don’t know the answer to everything. That meant I had to get used to being vulnerable in that moment” of asking a question, sending an email, or stopping by office hours. Small steps like these can make all the difference in your education as you build relationships with your professors.

Of course, you are not likely to make a meaningful connection with every single faculty member who teaches you. Still, you might be surprised to find that a professor in a required course—or one who seems very different from you—is eager to support and challenge you. Nellie Bourne had that experience in her writing course. Sometimes our most significant relationships emerge unexpectedly. Be open to and on the lookout for ways to interact with your professors—which can be as simple as participating actively in class. If all you do is help your professor learn your name, you’ve established a foundation that you can build on when you have questions or need help in class. And you may begin a relationship that will inspire you to learn in ways you never thought possible.

Ask Yourself . . .

1. If you need to contact a professor, how would you reach out? How would you write that email? Do you know how your professor prefers to be addressed? (When in doubt, use “Professor ____.”)
2. Who are your favorite professors—or what are your favorite classes—this year? Would you consider talking to one (or more) of those professors before or after class about what interests and excites you about the course?

3. What are three to five questions you could ask your professor during office hours that are not directly course related? (For example: How did you decide to become a professor? What was the most important thing you did in college to be successful? Did you experience homesickness when you were in college?)

Try This!

1. Find out when one of your professors has office hours by checking the course syllabus. Before you stop by or virtually attend their office hours, write down a couple of questions and bring them with you.

2. Introduce yourself to your professor during one of the first few days of class. You might tell them your name, where you are from, your major or class year (for example, first-year or sophomore), and one thing you are looking forward to in the course.

3. Practice writing an email. Below is one example of how you could write an email to a professor. Yours does not have to look like this, but emails generally follow this format: (1) "Hi Professor _____," or "Hi Dr. _____,"; (2) introduce yourself if the professor does not know you; (3) state your reason for reaching out; and (4) close with something like “Sincerely, [your name].”
Hi Professor Smith,

I hope you are doing well. My name is Oscar Miranda Tapia, and I am a first-year student in your Introduction to Psychology class that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 9:30 a.m.

I am reaching out because I am having some trouble understanding the class material, and my job and class schedule do not allow me to attend your office hours. Are there other days and times you are available to talk through some of the questions I have?

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Oscar Miranda Tapia