Connections Are Everything

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WHILE THE LAST CHAPTER zoomed in on individual mentors and mentoring conversations, this chapter zooms out and invites you to picture the total web of your relationships—what we call your constellation of relationships and mentors. Sydney Stork, a student at the University of Iowa, describes the idea of a constellation like this:

If I compartmentalize my life in college, I’ve had two separate jobs, plus research, and I’ve worked in my department on diversity and inclusion issues. For each of these areas, I’ve had at least one significant person, and they all fulfilled a different role for me. So I do think it’s important to have a constellation, because you can’t rely on one group or one person for all your needs or to help get you to where you want to go or to help you in your struggles.

As Sydney points out, one of the main reasons you want to work toward having a constellation of relationships while in college is that you are a multidimensional person. And as a college student,
you will develop a variety of academic and personal interests. The idea of a constellation means that instead of trying to find one person or a small group of people to support your multiple interests and needs, you can cultivate a whole web of relationships to enrich your life in—and after—college.

Developing this constellation is one of the most significant parts of your college experience, particularly if you create it intentionally over time. This chapter will share how several college students built their constellations and guide you through a process of building your own network of relationships during your college years.

**Types of Constellations and Purposeful Connections**

The image and idea of a constellation come from Brad Johnson, the psychology professor you met in chapter 8. Johnson explains that most people do not have just one mentor. Instead, successful and happy people tend to have "a constellation of mentors," which he defines as "the set of relationships an individual has with people who take an active interest in and action to advance the individual's career by assisting with his or her personal and professional development." In other words, anyone who actively supports you—whether as a student or as a person—is in your constellation.

Imagine that you are a star in the night sky and that you are connected to many other stars who might represent your most important professors and teachers; people with whom you share intellectual passions; peers who "show you the ropes" about succeeding in college; individuals who represent your personal and emotional support system and affirm your identities; a person who inspired you to go to college in the first place or to consider a career in a specific profession; the coach of your athletic team; your job
and internship supervisors; a religious or spiritual leader in your life; and the friends with whom you are comfortable sharing your daily laughter and tears. These people, both individually and collectively, make up your constellation—and they will be important to you as you navigate college, develop in your career, and pursue your goals for a meaningful and purposeful life.

It may be helpful to think about your constellation or web of relationships in terms of categories that describe the roles individuals will play in your life. Some relationships will be mostly academic or intellectual; they make you excited about learning or help you develop new skills. Other connections will support your emotional or spiritual belonging, your well-being, or your sense that you matter. A third set of individuals may play a more practical role—showing you how to navigate college or introducing you to an organization or job. Finally, others may have a longer-term impact, helping you become an engaged citizen of the world.

In terms of what your constellation looks like, there’s no formula or perfect shape. Some people have constellations or networks that are tightly connected—everybody knows everybody. Other people have constellations that look more like octopuses—a set of people over here and a different set of people over there, and they don’t know each other.² Dylan Costo from Florida International University (FIU) told us that both in high school and in college, he intentionally looked for relationships that were not connected to one another:

Let’s say that you have a tight network of friends and professors. You can consider that our solar system, because the planets are close to each other and to other stars. And you can learn a lot from that particular system. But in my experience, I was never a part of one group. I would always jump around to different groups because
I can learn something different from them. So instead of staying in one solar system, I would go and try to find other systems and see if I can learn something from them. They’re not connected. They don’t share the same qualities, but you can learn a lot from the different systems, the different sets of friends. And that was my experience in college as well.

Dylan’s fellow FIU student Moon Medina told us that the individual relationships in their constellation may have differed, but “in the end, they all converge on different aspects of my own identity.” From a best friend and roommate to co-workers and mentors, in Moon’s case, “we all have a similar goal. We all have some similar mindsets.” Moon also found it important to try to deepen their relationships by asking individuals from their constellation to engage in other aspects of their life, like asking a co-worker to participate in a social activity: “That’s when you really learn more about them and move from being just an acquaintance to being a mentor or a friend.”

Who Could Be in Your Constellation?

If there’s someone in your life you consider a mentor, this person would indeed be an important star in your constellation. But not all important and meaningful relationships in colleges are necessarily this intense, formal, or high stakes. Yet they can still become part of your constellation. For example:

- A student officer in a club you belong to can teach you a great deal about leadership and running organizations.
- The professor who takes the time to give you encouraging feedback on your assignments might recognize talents in you.
• A librarian can greet you warmly each time you use a library study space or help you make sure you're using credible sources in your research.
• If you are a student-athlete, your coach can help you build resilience and confidence, as well as higher levels of athleticism.
• A campus job supervisor can help you learn about professional skills that are critical in the workplace environment.
• A person who shares an important identity with you, such as race, religion, or gender identity, might be a key role model, supporter, and friend.
• The supervisor of your summer internship might be a critical link to full-time employment following graduation.
• A counselor or therapist might be a crucial person in your life to maintain good mental health.

“\nsydney stork, university of iowa
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“When I look back on my college experiences, the only things I regret are not doing things sooner and not doing more or being afraid of talking to one person or going to office hours or making any connection, however, big or small.”

• A priest, imam, rabbi, minister, or other spiritual leader might be someone to whom you turn for guidance.
• The TA you had for chemistry lab might turn out to be a good resource for learning about the process of applying to graduate school.
• Your group of close friends likely demonstrate many qualities of good character that you would like to emulate.
• A close extended family member, like an older cousin that comes to visit you in college or calls you to check in, may provide some comfort from home and serve as
When you stop to think about it, you likely already have some stars in your constellation.

The Value of a Diverse Constellation

Brad Johnson’s research demonstrates that “a mentoring constellation will be strongest and most effective when the [student] is intentional about forming the constellation and when the constellation contains good diversity.” In the previous chapters, we discussed one kind of relationship diversity by encouraging you to connect to not only your peers, but also your professors and the many individuals who work at your college. Here, we focus on differences in gender, race, socioeconomic class, intellectual viewpoint, and language. If the great problems of the twenty-first century are to be resolved—if we are to reduce inequities in health, wealth, education, and opportunity based on race and ethnicity; respond to climate change; strengthen democracy—citizens and leaders will need to work across these categories of differences more than any previous generation. Your college experience is a unique chance for you to encounter diversity both in and out of the classroom, allowing you to critically examine your values and to develop the professional, civic, and personal capacities that will enable you to make a positive contribution to your community and the world.

One of the most effective ways to prepare to thrive in your future is to intentionally seek difference in your constellation of relationships. This usually requires getting uncomfortable and learning new skills. If everyone in your constellation shares the same political viewpoints or personal characteristics (such as age,
race, gender and gender identity, nationality, abilities, religion, and economic class), you are missing an opportunity to have your perspectives and sense of the world enlarged, your mindset challenged, and your friendship circles enlivened. Keep this in mind as you seek relationships that will challenge you, expose you to new perspectives, help you understand that you have a lot of new things to learn—and perhaps to unlearn. College is an opportunity for you to stretch and grow.

Straightforward Strategies for Beginning and Growing Your Constellation

START SIMPLE AND SMALL
Recall Ruth Moreno, a student at San Antonio College, who was fortunate to meet two people at the beginning of her college career who were her earliest advocates and guides. In Ruth’s words, “My constellation radiates from those two people.” Jim Lucchelli and Bertha Castellanos became essential champions for Ruth’s success. As chapter 1 described, it only takes one or two key relationships in college to begin your constellation. For specific steps you might take to connect with your peers, professors, or staff members at your college, revisit the “Try This” ideas at the end of chapters 4, 5, and 6.

BE AWAKE FOR “TAP ON THE SHOULDER” MOMENTS
In your college career, potential mentors might say things to you like, “You have a talent for this subject” or “I see you really have a heart for community service” or “I admire the leadership you just showed.” These are moments when someone is holding up a mirror to you to help you gain self-understanding, just as Aigné Taylor experienced at North Carolina A&T (chapter 8). Do not brush those moments aside. Reflect on what the person has just told you and
what you have just learned about yourself, and think about whether this is the start of an important conversation that might lead to something more significant.

**SEEK ADVICE, FEEDBACK, AND HONESTY**

Most people begin by placing another person in their constellation because they have shown themselves to be a strong source of support. But many other kinds of relationships will provide expertise that you need as well. The scholar Priscilla Claman emphasizes that many of the people in your constellation “should know more than you about something, be better than you about something, or offer different points of view. Putting only buddies [in your constellation] won’t help you grow and develop.” In this spirit, welcome feedback and listen carefully to honest, constructive advice, even if it might be challenging to hear. Karey Frink from Hope College did that with Professor Peaslee, her “wizard” chemistry teacher who helped her discover her passion outside of the lab (chapter 5). You will soon come to appreciate that honest feedback is truly a gift.

**NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS**

Relationships require attention and care, and they naturally evolve over time. You do not need to check in with everyone in your constellation on a weekly basis, but occasional updates, emails, texts, or coffee dates remind people in your constellation that you value them, that you want them to know what is happening in your life, and that you care about them as well. Asma Shauib did this when she would stop in to chat with her first professors at LaGuardia Community College, and they always reminded her to believe in herself—an important message for each of us to hear regularly. You might also act on an instinct to build a deeper relationship with someone who engaged you in an important
mentoring conversation so that person becomes a part of your constellation.

As you remain connected, you may notice your relationships shifting over time; Dylan Costo found that after four years of office-hour conversations with Professor Rodriguez, he began to think of his former professor as his friend. Other important relationships may be designed to last for a fixed period of time, like a summer internship supervisor or your mentor on a semester-long community service project. It is wise to keep these important people in your network, even if you no longer speak often.

**Prepare to Be a Star in the Constellations of Others**

The primary emphasis of this chapter has been on forming your own relationship constellation. But you will also become a mentor to others, especially your peers. When someone approaches you for help—or when you notice someone who could use a word of encouragement or some practical advice—that is the time to pay forward the same generosity, kindness, welcome, and counsel that was shown to you. This can be as simple as introducing yourself, asking someone how they’re doing, or sharing your story—whether it’s how you overcame challenges, what resources at your college have been most helpful to you, or who your favorite professors have been.

When you reflect on what was most meaningful to you in college—five, ten, or fifteen years after your graduation—what will matter to you most will be the people who helped shape your life during these important years. One of the most meaningful roles you can play throughout your life is to mentor and nurture other human beings, and your college experience is an extraordinary opportunity to practice this art.
Ask Yourself . . .

1. How would you describe your current constellation or web of relationships?
2. What do you want your constellation to become?
3. Comparing your current constellation to the one you want to have, what’s missing? What’s one thing you could do now to help develop the constellation you’d like to have?

Try This!

Danielle Lake, director of Design Thinking at Elon University, created an exercise to help students reflect on a series of questions about four domains of relationships in college: academic/intellectual, emotional/belonging/spiritual/well-being, practical, and becoming an engaged citizen. You will find the full exercise on the book’s website (ConnectionsAreEverything.org). For now, take a few minutes to reflect on the people in your life who are (or who could become) part of your constellation in each of these areas. These questions will help you identify them:

**ACADEMIC/INTELLECTUAL**

1. Which faculty member, peer, or staff member has made you excited about learning, challenged you, and actively engaged you in the learning process?
2. Which faculty member, peer, or staff member has left you feeling inspired, and for what reason?
3. Has a faculty member or supervisor commented on something that you are good at or on work that you have done that shows good potential?
4. Which faculty members do you feel drawn to talk to outside of class?

**EMOTIONAL/BELONGING/SPRITUAL/WELL-BEING**

1. Which peers on campus do you most admire and have qualities you want to emulate? How would you describe them (friend, peer mentor, etc.)?
2. Are there staff members on campus that have been champions of your success?
3. Who do you turn to when you need emotional support?
4. Do you have a person in your life that you talk to about values that ground you?
5. Who in your constellation of relationships shares an important identity with you?

**PRACTICAL**

1. Which people on campus (or elsewhere) have helped you find direction in college?
2. Is there a key individual who has helped you to feel at home on campus and extended a special sense of welcome?
3. If you work on or off campus, is there an individual in your work environment that you consider a mentor, teacher, or confidant?
4. Which peers have helped you develop knowledge and confidence about negotiating the college experience, including academics, clubs and organizations, and social life?

**BECOMING AN ENGAGED CITIZEN**

1. Who do you talk to about how you can make a difference in your community?
2. Who is a role model for you in terms of being a leader in your community?
3. Who helps you see big issues from a global perspective?
4. Who understands your talents and interests and can help you think about what you want to do with your life after college?

5. Who might be best positioned to help you explore a specific career, perhaps through an internship or field experience?
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