Connections Are Everything

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Conclusion

*Take These Ideas with You*

YOUR COLLEGE IS FULL OF PEOPLE and programs designed to support and challenge you as a student. You are not on your own. You are surrounded by resources that can and should contribute to your academic success and your personal well-being in college. Connecting with people and programs will help you learn, thrive, and succeed.

We close by synthesizing six overarching ideas about relationship-rich education, and then we share wise advice from four of the students we interviewed. They have been in your shoes, and they have powerful advice to offer. On the book’s website (ConnectionsAreEverything.org), you will find a variety of resources and activities to guide you through the process of preparing to make your college education relationship rich. We hope you will work through some of those online activities with someone you trust: a professor, advisor, peer, or family member.
Six Things to Know about Relationship-Rich Education

1. **Relationships will help you succeed in college.** The time and effort you spend establishing and nourishing relationships will help you persist through the challenges of college and increase the value of your college experience. Research on higher education clearly shows that the quality of relationships students form with peers, faculty, and staff is closely linked to the quality of experiences students have, including how much they learn, how likely they are to graduate, and whether they feel they belong and matter in college. Relationships will enable you to succeed academically and to thrive personally in college.

2. **Relationships will make your college experience more meaningful.** College is a time to ask big questions: Who am I and who am I becoming? What are my talents and passions? What contributions do I want to make to the world? What do I want to do in service to others? These questions, and others like them, are best explored in conversation with people who know you well. The peers, faculty, and staff who both support and challenge you in college will help you critically explore these big questions. Sometimes they will see your potential and passions more clearly than you do yourself. These kinds of meaningful interactions can transform your college experience from the pursuit of a degree into a life-changing opportunity for growth.

3. **The relationships you form in college will matter long after you graduate.** The time and effort you spend establishing and nourishing relationships in college will contribute to your professional and personal well-being years after college. Research shows that graduates who had mentoring relationships while in college report thriving in their careers and lives more than their peers who did not. Students who have meaningful rela-
tionships with faculty and staff may also discover that some of these connections last for decades, and your deepest peer connections may become friends for life. Maya Angelou is often credited with saying “people will never forget how you made them feel.” Even if you do not maintain lifelong ties with everyone in college, you will always remember the ways these people made you feel valued, smart, included, capable, and hopeful.

4. **Relationship building in college prepares you to work and live in a diverse world.** The relationships you form in college offer you a unique opportunity to prepare for working and living in our complex world. Higher education institutions bring together people from varied backgrounds and cultures, immersing them in an environment that is ripe with possibilities to learn about identities, beliefs, viewpoints, and other important dimensions of humanity. The relationships you develop with peers, faculty, and staff who are different from you will help you understand and formulate your own values and will encourage you to appreciate the perspectives and lived experiences of others. By doing that, the opportunities you take to interact with and across differences in college will prepare you to exercise the leadership and citizenship that will be required to meet the great challenges ahead, including strengthening our democratic society, seeking peace, and restoring the health of the planet.

5. **You will both benefit from and contribute to relationships in college.** Relationship building is a virtuous cycle, one in which you will give and receive simultaneously. Of course, you can and should reach out to people when you need help, but you shouldn’t connect with others only when you need assistance. Remember that you have a lot to offer too. By intentionally reaching out to support, guide, and mentor your peers, you can positively influence the experiences of many other students. The skills and capacities you develop by doing that in college
will empower you to contribute to positive change in organizations and communities after you graduate.

6. **You have what it takes to build relationships in college.** Your first year in college, or after you transfer to a new institution, can be particularly important in establishing meaningful connections with peers, faculty, and staff. Don’t wait to get started! At the same time, don’t worry if you have not found your people yet. Keep taking small steps, and you will build significant relationships. You don’t need hundreds of connections. One or two can be transformational. Also regularly remind yourself of your strengths and values, and remember that you have made connections before; you can absolutely do this.

The knowledge, skills, and relationships you cultivate in college will matter throughout your life. The more you take advantage of the many opportunities available in college, the more successful and the happier you will be after you graduate. And it’s not all about you. The world needs more citizens, neighbors, employers, co-workers, friends, spouses, parents—more people—who recognize the value of human relationships and who build meaningful connections with others, particularly people who are different from them.

**Student Words of Wisdom**

In our interviews, we heard from smart and thoughtful students—people just like you. Because their voices and perspectives have profoundly shaped our thinking and writing, we want to showcase their wisdom as we conclude the book.

1. **Strive to know yourself.** When we interviewed North Carolina A&T student Brandon Daye, he said that the foundation of every student’s time in college is clear:
You have to find yourself. You can’t show up in spaces, you can’t become a leader, if you don’t know yourself. Because it’s not genuine, it’s not authentic, it’s not true. If you don’t know yourself, you can’t help others. Everybody’s not going to know their whole self, but developing your true self to where you can just be so much better for every person you meet. What are you doing each day to become an agent of change, to better yourself, to awaken your full potential?

Brandon went on to tell us that the best way to find yourself, “to awaken your full potential,” is to spend time in college with peers, faculty, and staff who will challenge you to grow and to be true to your values.

2. **Use the resources at your college.** San Antonio College graduate Nellie Bourne advises, “Use the resources available to you. No one can help you unless you let them.” Drawing on and connecting with the many people and resources at your college who are there to support students is a sign of strength and a personal sense of agency—being in charge of your own destiny. Nellie insists that “no one can stop you unless you let them.” The resources of your college, from inspiring faculty and compassionate staff to an array of student support offices to peer mentors, are there for you. Use them.

3. **Challenge your doubts.** Sydney Stork, from the University of Iowa, says she knows it’s not easy to ask for help or believe in yourself. Every college student has doubts. Still, Sydney told us:

   Challenge every anxiety that you have. I feel every time I look back on my 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. So, it’s a time full of anxieties, but challenge each and every one.
That’s good advice, even though it can feel hard to do. Talking with a trusted peer—or a professor or advisor—at your college might be the crucial first step you need to work through your fears.

4. Don’t do college alone. Logan Thomas, a mechanical engineering student at North Carolina A&T, told us about a strategy that worked for her and that research suggests works for most students—don’t go through college alone. When we asked her what she does as a student peer mentor at A&T, Logan said, “We take them with us. I have all these tips, all this knowledge. I’m not going to let other students sit around and fail their classes.” Logan realizes that there are consequences when students don’t form relationships or have peer support. We find great inspiration in Logan’s summary of her overall philosophy about being a mentor to peers: “We have a very close connection, and I really love mentoring them and guiding them, making them as great as they can be—even better than me. I try to pass on the passion.”

We are certain if you know yourself like Brandon, seek help from the people and resources at your college like Nellie, challenge every doubt like Sydney, and do college with others like Logan, you too will have a successful, meaningful, and rewarding college journey.

College is rarely easy, but we are confident—based on our research and our decades working with students like you—that you are capable of thriving academically and personally. The peers, faculty, and staff you connect with will make your time in college more meaningful and joyful and will prepare you to flourish professionally and personally after you graduate. Small steps can take you on a long journey. Start today.

You can do this!