

Learning Among Friends

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Good morning, Class of 2018, and congratulations on reaching this day.

I have the privilege of being the last faculty member you hear from before you receive your degrees and celebrate with your friends and family. I hope to get you to reflect on the years that have brought you to this moment. Graduation really is an important event in your life. It is a celebration of you and your accomplishments, as well as a celebration of the efforts made by others to support you in achieving those accomplishments. Take in this moment and appreciate that you are able to share this experience with your classmates, your families and the friends who have made your time at Colby-Sawyer so special.

As you prepare to depart our college atop a windy hill, I want to remind you of the community you have contributed to and will always remain a part of, and to encourage you to find ways to take it with you wherever you go. That last part is especially important, and I'd like to share with you my story of how I wound up here, on my own continuing journey atop this hill.

In the year after finishing graduate school, I had the opportunity to meet veteran athletic trainer Marty Erb. In our 10-minute conversation, Marty fired questions at me about where I was from, my professional interests and what work setting I desired. He also asked how I was adjusting to the schedule that comes with the work of athletic training. While I don't recall my exact response, I do remember Marty's reply – he encouraged me to remember that “athletic training is about the people, not the business.”

“Athletic training is about the people, not the business.” Almost 15 years later, those nine words remain with me. They have often provided me with perspective and helped to calm me during hectic times. Now, indulge me while I modify Marty's words of wisdom: “*Work* is about the people, not the business.”

I applied to work at Colby-Sawyer in the summer of 2005. As part of the on-campus interview, our department administrator Terri Hermann, my first friend on the hill, provided a welcome package that included the college catalog, which featured the tagline “Learning Among Friends.”

I have to admit that as an outsider 13 years ago, this left me wondering what kind of hippie, tree-hugging, granola college I was applying to join.

Now, I find great humor in that reaction. I have a large collection of tie dyes: I’m not a fan of haircuts or shaving, and have been to not one but two Grateful Dead shows – full band, including Jerry Garcia. I also like trees. In fact, pictures may exist of me hugging trees. And who doesn’t like granola? Rolled oats? Brown sugar? Honey? It’s all goodness. So, with the benefit of reflection and hindsight, and the knowledge that initial reactions are not always accurate, it turns out I was applying to a place that was a pretty good fit ... a place that values not only education but the learning that can happen when we surround ourselves with people we consider friends.

But why talk about friends and friendships? Because there is a direct correlation between friendships and happiness. I am not one to make a statement that bold without facts, so let’s look at the evidence. In 2015, psychologist Cheryl Carmichael and colleagues found that a person’s number and quality of social interactions early in life predict a number of variables. It turns out that having low numbers, or poor-quality social interactions, can predict loneliness, well-being and depression 30 years later. While social interaction may be important, adult Americans only spend 41 minutes a day socializing – this is about one-third of the time we spend commuting or watching TV.

Benjamin Franklin writes that, “human felicity is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen as by little advantages that occur every day.” Believe it or not, Boston’s professional sports teams do not always win championships and provide the great pieces of good fortune that can bring happiness. So, instead of waiting for good fortune to cross our paths, perhaps we need to shift our focus to what Franklin calls the “little advantages.” Perhaps we

can achieve these little advantages through the daily interactions we have with others in our community.

But what is friendship? Has anyone looked up its definition? Let me tell you, Merriam-Webster is not your friend here, as the dictionary defines friend as “one who is not hostile.” Wow, thank you, Merriam, for setting the bar pretty low there. I will do my best not to trip. Let’s instead look at the qualities that make one a friend: common interests and values, history and equality.

At your age, you may struggle to appreciate the difficulty in developing friendships. All your life, you have been surrounded by individuals of a similar age who share a common interest or struggle – a Capstone deadline, for example. Sport fandom is another common interest I often overhear on this campus, with leading questions such as, “What do you think of the Sox this year?” or, even better, “What do you think of the Yankees?” I’m from the hills of Western Maryland, and I’m an O’s fan, but I’ve made many friends with Sox fans by answering the Yankees question with, “I believe that every time the Yankees lose, an angel gets its wings.” I appreciate that this statement is a little irrational, but I also accept that sport fandom is irrational, and the opportunity to be irrational is part of the enjoyment. Such a small interaction creates a little advantage, however, by creating a shared common interest – it can open the door to friendship.

The community that you are a part of here at Colby-Sawyer builds relationships. Walking around this campus, I receive and observe constant greetings between those who are out and about. These are more examples of the “little advantages” Benjamin Franklin references. This was apparent during my on-campus interview 13 years ago. Accompanied by my now-friend, colleague and mentor Jean Eckrich, I experienced how everyone said hello to one another and to Jean. Future colleagues took the time to ask if I were a new employee and introduced themselves. They welcomed me to campus and wished me luck with my interview. You all have been here a while and these interactions seem commonplace, so I will remind you that they are *not* normal. This is *not* how other places operate. You’ll see. When I commented to Jean that this is either a really friendly campus or they

had gone all out for my tour, she assured me that this *is* the culture at Colby-Sawyer. It was then that I began to believe that “Learning Among Friends” was more than just a tagline.

It becomes more difficult to make friends as we get older. There are a number of reasons, but one is that we cannot get out of our own way. We have our work and daily tasks to accomplish. Finding shared interests can be difficult. And we are often unwilling to introduce ourselves to people we do not have a defined relationship with; our fear of rejection actually increases. But stay true to the Colby-Sawyer idea of community. Take advantage of opportunities to say hello to members of your new communities and ask how they are. Create your own little advantages to initiate friendships.

Once a friendship is established, it is important to put into perspective the quality of the friendship. You must invest time in it. Think about the amount of time you have spent with members of the Colby-Sawyer faculty. It is safe to say that you have had the time to improve the quality of your relationships well beyond acquaintance level. Now, how about the staff at the Student Learning Collaborative? In Dining Services? Facilities? Campus Safety? How many casual friends have you developed? How many good friends? Add to the count the friendships you have developed with your classmates. You can't deny that during your time here, you have been learning among friends. These cross-community interactions and friendships are what make this college you are graduating from so special.

But how large can a social circle grow? Oxford University's renowned Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology Dr. Robin Dunbar has examined friendship from a biological standpoint with his social brain hypothesis, which states there is a limit to the number of friends one person can actually have. That number is approximately 150.

With a show of hands, how many of you use at least one social media platform? How many of you have more than 100 friends on any given account? How about more than 150? As it relates to your close friends, social media is good at helping to prevent atrophy in those relationships. As it relates to your acquaintances, it does nothing.

So if technology that is supposed to connect us does not, in fact, provide connections that lead to happiness, what are we to do? The short answer is, regardless of where you find yourself, bring Colby-Sawyer with you. Create the little advantages. When communicating with co-workers, meet face-to-face when you can. Say hello to the people you encounter throughout the day, smile at the new person, perhaps ask them if they know the significance a Yankees' loss has on the well-being of angels.

For me, the phrase "learning among friends" is at the heart of what makes Colby-Sawyer special. It is a culture you have been a part of here on campus, and it is a culture you can share with the world. A focus on people and a respect for their humanity have been constant aspects of this institution's identity as it grew from an academy in 1837 to a junior college for women in 1928 and a baccalaureate college for women in the 1970s, to its current state. You have spent years living and learning in a place that sets the little advantages at your feet, that reminds you on a daily basis that "it is about the people, not the business," and that has allowed you to live and learn among friends. I hope that each of you takes that with you as you leave us. Implement it into all your future adventures.

On behalf of all your friends here at Colby-Sawyer, congratulations. We are so very proud to call you graduates!