Learning friendship: The indispensable basis of a good society

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Aristotle believed that perfect friendship based in goodness is rare because few people seek to be good. Colleges and universities can prove him wrong by helping students understand the ways and whys of being a true friend.

By Frank Shushok, Jr.

LEARNING FRIENDSHIP

The “Indispensable Basis of a Good Society”

“GOT A FRIEND? They’re dwindling, study says.” On a recent flight back to campus, this headline in the Dallas Morning News caught my attention. As soon as I arrived at my office, tracking down the study became a priority. According to American Sociological Review, J. Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew Brashears found that Americans report having only two close friends, down from three close friends when a similar study was completed in 1985. Even more surprising, the number who report having no one with whom to discuss important matters has doubled to one in four during the same time period. This is the culture from which our students are arriving on college and university campuses.

Why should we be concerned? In a time when students accumulate “friends” by the hundreds on their Facebook account, they are also reporting loneliness and mental illness at unprecedented levels. Furthermore, the declining propensity for Americans to engage in meaningful conversations with friends ultimately results in shaky support structures during times of crisis, less involvement in community-based activities, and an overall poorer quality of life. In his book The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies, Robert Lane presents evidence that humans have a genetically programmed need for camaraderie and companionship; thus, friendship is fundamental to our physiological health and well-being.

In Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton argue that the implications of a declining culture of friendship extend far beyond individual happiness. American individualism, they argue, is having destructive consequences for society. Thus, it is not surprising that a conversation about the importance of friendship emerges in their discussion. While Americans who are involved in civic activities (for example, nonprofit organizations, churches, and local government initiatives) value relationships that develop as a result of this participation, Bellah and his colleagues suggest that few understand the moral meaning once attributed to such relationships.
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and thus fail to aspire toward the best kinds of friendships. They argue that friendships embedded in moral commitments provide the fuel to offset the destructive consequences of an American propensity toward individualism. They write, “Traditionally, it was the virtues indelibly associated with relationships that were central to the ‘habits of the heart.’ It is also part of the traditional view that friendship and its virtues are not merely private: they are public, even political, for civic order, a ‘city’ is above all a network of friends. Without civic friendship, a city will degenerate into a struggle of contending interest groups unmediated by any public solidarity” (p. 116).

Even though a utilitarian philosophy of happiness (the greatest good for the greatest number) undergirds the prevailing American political and economic systems, Lane asserts that the primary source of happiness in advanced economies is friendship. In fact, beyond those living in poverty, income levels show little correlation with happiness. Those with friends, however, experience life in qualitatively different ways: they are happy.

Robert Putnam echoes this sentiment and concludes that social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. He notes that environments with less social capital have lower educational performance and asserts that our shrinking access to social capital, the reward of communal activity and community sharing, is a serious threat to our civic and personal health. Of course, those of us working on college and university campuses are no strangers to the powerful influence of friendship on the learning environment. Intentionally arranged communities of students—especially those that insert opportunities to discuss important matters and to explore questions about life, vocation, and purpose—serve as catalysts for behaviors that are critical to learning. It has been consistently documented that learning facilitated by peers is particularly effective. It is no wonder, then, that George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, and Elizabeth Whitt, in their book *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*, found that colleges and universities that were particularly effective in creating conditions that matter for learning were adept at helping students to bond with one another and to deepen the level of conversations among classmates within the context of smaller communities. Educators who advocate the reorganization of campus life into learning communities know well that the strong bonds of friendship are tools for learning, retention, graduation, and participation. It seems that the more students find friendship, the more likely they are to learn.

Friendship is perhaps one of the most important gifts a human being can possess throughout life, and while some are fortunate enough to find it by chance, luck, or blessing, many find themselves surrounded by familiar faces but overcome by loneliness. The good news, it seems, is that the pursuit of friendship is something that can be learned, and colleges and universities should be in the business of teaching it if we seek to make the world a more just, civil, and humane place. Friendship, it appears, may have an amplifying effect. The better we teach friendship, the stronger our learning environments become. The stronger our learning environments become, the better our graduates are prepared to transform their communities and pursue virtuous and meaningful lives with friends.

**FRIENDSHIP AND THE LIBERAL ARTS EXPERIENCE**

In John Henry Newman’s classic essay “The Idea of a University,” he argues that one of the most important things that happens as part of a liberal arts education is the coming together of bright young students around ideas and meaningful discussions, even if there were no classes. When students gather, he writes, “they are sure to learn from one another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting day by day.”

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When Newman penned these words in 1852, he was hardly imagining the modern college or university that gathers students together by the thousands. While the aims of the liberal arts education arguably remain the same today as they were in Newman’s time, the context in which they must be pursued has changed substantially. Although many colleges and universities have made efforts to organize the larger institution into smaller communities through living-learning centers, residential colleges, and the like, many undergraduates still find themselves outside the confines of a community of faculty.

As early as the 1930s, Yale University saw the potential challenges to its liberal arts aspirations when its campus grew to 3,000 undergraduates. In response, Yale opened its first of many residential colleges, which Mark Ryan describes in his book, *A Collegiate Way of Living*, as designed to cultivate “ideas such as ethics, character, citizenship, friendship, and learning from one’s peers” (p. 44). In recalling his twenty years as dean of Jonathan Edwards College at Yale, he points to powerful friendships among and within faculty, staff, and students as the key ingredient of learning in the context of Yale’s residential colleges.

According to Patricia King, Marie Kendall Brown, Nathan Lindsay, and JoNes VanHecke, “The overarching goal of a liberal arts education is to provide students with the necessary skills to construct lives of substance and achievement, helping them become wise citizens” (p. 2). Given that civic responsibility and engagement are fundamental outcomes of a liberal arts education and that friendship is a key facilitator of these outcomes, it behooves educators to create experiences for college students that encourage friendship. Why? Brian McGuire poignantly argues, “Each individual friendship has a certain impact on the society in which it is formed. Conversely, the larger community and even the state as a whole have a significant influence on the quality, content and roles allotted to friendship” (p. xlix).

**Learning Friendship**

Colleges and universities have come to accept that learning is a process and spans experiences both in and out of the classroom. However, when I ask my students, “What are you learning?” responses typically include a list of courses, texts, theories, or ideas that have been presented in the formal curriculum. Mark Smith categorizes this kind of learning as “learning-conscious or formalized learning” because students are more aware that they are engaged in an experience in which the purpose of the activity is to learn. By making learning more conscious, the idea goes, it is often enhanced.

As educators, our initial inclination is to suggest that learning about friendship occurs most frequently through daily tasks—something Smith delineates as “task-conscious or acquisition learning.” Students are involved in hundreds of tasks—eating a meal, shopping at a bookstore, playing a video game, talking to a roommate in a residence hall, or attending a meeting of a student organization. If they are asked to reflect on these kinds of experiences, students more readily make connections between participation in these activities and their learning. Without facilitated opportunities for reflection, however, students frequently fail to mark these experiences as moments when learning takes place. In contrast, students immediately respond with a myriad of topics, theories, or ideas they are learning while enrolled in a course. What would happen if we learned about friendship differently—more thoughtfully and intentionally? What if students were informed that an institution aspired to use classroom and out-of-classroom experiences to assist them in learning about, finding, and sustaining friendship while an undergraduate and beyond?

A few years ago, two surprising things happened in my life. First, the faculty colleague who was directing our great texts program asked me to co-design and co-lead a course called Great Texts in Leadership. In this
course, the cast and characters of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, Cicero’s *On Obligations*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Shakespeare’s plays, and Flannery O’Connor’s short stories provided ample opportunity to analyze how characters did or did not exhibit leadership. The role that friends played in the exercise of leadership crept into almost every conversation. Aristotle and Cicero, among others, offer specific discussion on the concept of friendship. By semester’s end, I found myself knee-deep in discussion about friendship and its role, purpose, and mechanics. I realized, like the students in the class, that I had never seriously considered a theory of friendship, much less my own theory, despite my assumption that I had been practicing it for years through my daily tasks. In daily reflection papers, students began writing about their friends, whether friends helped them live virtuous lives, and whether their friendships possessed depth. One student reflected, “I’m discovering that I have many relationships, but probably no friends in the truest sense. I want this in the future. I wonder how to begin. If Emma and Coriolanus [characters of Jane Austen and Plutarch, respectively] had different friendships, perhaps they wouldn’t have made such tragic decisions.” Another student writes, “Cicero said that all people are naturally social, just like Aristotle did. This being the case, we need to not only exercise the virtues in proper relation to self, but also in proper relation to others. This made me think about how I treat my friends. I’ve done things to my friends that have been unfair and vicious.”

For these students, what was being learned as part of the formal course curriculum was being applied to their daily activities. They were redefining what friendship is (creating a theory or philosophy of friendship) and testing new behavior in the context of their communities.

Like any educator, I know well that theory informs practice, and practice informs theory. Outside of Smith’s “learning-conscious or formalized learning” (my classroom experience), my understanding of friendship—and how I pursued it—was deficient. In the end, I found myself exploring my own definition of friendship, whether my friendships encouraged sustained depth, and even whether my own leadership was affected by the kinds of friends that surround my life. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle offers one of the great commentaries on friendship and describes three different varieties. Some friendships exist for the sake of pleasure and are especially prevalent among the young, given a propensity to be regulated by feelings and opportunities of the moment. This type of friendship is perhaps best demonstrated by college students who filter in and out of relationships as their affections change. When pleasure is the primary aim, the end result is the risk of being in constant transition from one superficial friendship to another. Friendship based on pleasure is not a bad thing in itself; in fact, this is how the most meaningful friendships begin. Even so, these kinds of friendships do not usually transcend the borders of the college experience. Once graduation concludes, so do most friendships based on pleasure.

Another variety of friendship, according to Aristotle, is friendship based on utility. Such friendships change with circumstance and most frequently occur between elderly people, because utility is more important than pleasure at advanced ages. In college students, friendships often develop around a group project, a class, or a coordinating activity, then diminish once the mutual benefit of maintaining the relationship ends. Again, friendship based on utility is not a bad thing in itself; in fact, utilitarian beginnings can be a catalyst for meaningful relationships. In the case of friendships based on pleasure as well as those based on utility, there is certainly a chance that more meaningful, enduring friendships will emerge. We are not in the business of chance, however, and creating environments that encourage pursuit of substantive friendship seems both a responsibility and a necessity given the lonely communities described by sociologists and experienced by so many of the largely lonely travelers who have come and gone through the doors of our campuses.

The third kind of friendship that Aristotle describes is the perfect friendship based on goodness. He writes, “It is those who desire the good of their friends for their friends’ sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he [or she] is and not for any incidental quality. . . . Friendship of this kind is permanent.

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reasonably enough; because in it are united all the attributes that friends ought to possess” (p. 205). Aristotle acknowledges that these kinds of friendships are rare because those who earnestly pursue goodness and virtue are rare. Moreover, time and intimacy are the ingredients that allow a wish for perfect friendship to mature into such a relationship. But perhaps there is another reason why such friendships are rare: we have not been encouraged to seek them. My experience as a student affairs administrator and faculty member tells me that my campus is full of our society’s best and brightest pursuing truth and goodness, pursuing virtue. While Aristotle’s contribution to the conversation about friendship is profound, I differ with him on one particular count. Friendships are rare not because few pursue goodness but instead because too few know how to do so in the context of relationship.

Students’ developmental capacities underlie their ability to pursue genuinely mutual relationships. Robert Kegan notes that late adolescents are often focused on self-interest, a dynamic that supports friendships based on pleasure or utility. When self-interest is the guiding force in a relationship, both parties desire good for the other only when it translates to good for the self. Once students develop the capacity to subordinate their own interests on behalf of a greater loyalty to friendship, they are ready to consider good for the other person. Unfortunately, students initially orient themselves so much to another’s needs that they define themselves through the relationship, losing themselves in the interest of acquiring the other’s approval. The powerful effect of peer pressure on college campuses can be largely attributed to this concern for peer approval. Thus, it is not until students develop the capacity to internally define their identity that they are able to enter mutual relationships akin to Aristotle’s perfect friendship. Helping students develop this capacity is crucial because friendships based on pleasure and utility do not support the kind of intellectual reflection and risk taking that meaningful learning requires. In addition, friendships based on pleasure and utility often contribute to common campus problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, relationship violence, and lack of civility.

At roughly the same time that I became reacquainted with friendship theory through reading several great texts, another colleague on campus suggested that we get together for a cup a coffee. When we met, he invited me into friendship. This seemed like an odd request because I was under the impression that we were already friends, which was, I thought, the reason we were having coffee. During our conversation, I realized that my colleague had a more fully formed philosophy of friendship, one that required mutual commitment. He sought a long-term relationship that had agreed-upon moral boundaries. Essentially, he was requesting that the nature of our conversations strengthen in commitment to substantive dialogue about the most important things in life—living virtuously, exploring questions of vocation and calling, as well as providing accountability for each other’s becoming the people we aspire to be. Without labeling it as such, he was suggesting what Bellah and his colleagues say is the least understood notion of the classical view of friendship—a shared commitment to the good. They write: “In a culture dominated by expressive and utilitarian individualism, it is easy for us to understand the components of pleasure and usefulness, but we have difficulty seeing the point of considering friendship in terms of common moral commitments” (p. 115). My friend was asking me to create a relationship in which we sought the best for each other through thick and thin, for today and tomorrow. Our relationship still has elements of pleasure and utility. We are both higher education administrators—something that we find useful. We both like to run, explore the outdoors, and tell funny stories—things we find quite pleasurable. Even so, our relationship has expanded beyond these elements, and though we live a thousand miles apart today, our commitment to calling out the best in each other remains firm.

It is this third component—viewing friendship as encompassing common moral commitments—that seems more difficult to grasp for the present American culture that Bellah and his colleagues describe as “dominated by expressive and utilitarian individualism” (p. 115). They write: “For Aristotle and his successors, it was precisely the moral component of friendship that made it the indispensable basis of a good society. For it is one of the main duties of friends to help one another to be better persons: one must hold up the standard for one’s friend and be able to count on a true friend to do likewise . . . . This profound notion of friendship in which one loves one’s friend but, first of all, the good in
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one’s friend, includes the notion of conjugal friendship as well” (p. 115).

For many students, college life facilitates the exploration of amorous relationships and often marks the beginning of the journey toward a lifelong partnership or marriage. Our culture teaches us that these partnerships require significant investment, discernment, and self-reflection, which is necessary to understand personal expectations and moral philosophy. Students seem to understand that making this type of commitment has far-reaching implications for life beyond college. Perhaps friendships of the non-amorous sort need to be considered with the same seriousness. Understanding that significant life-changing relationships of all kinds require sacrifice is important. Anyone in a long-term committed amorous relationship likely agrees with me on this point. A colleague recently joked that the only sort of relationship more challenging than those of the romantic kind are the non-romantic ones. If this is true (and I believe it is), students must be presented with appropriate expectations: that friendships of the best kind require work and sacrifice.

A FRIENDSHIP CURRICULUM

For students to learn about friendship, they must encounter conceptual and theoretical ideas about it in moments that are designated for the explicit purpose of learning. Thinking about the process of learning to write, for example, affords a relevant metaphor. Throughout our educational experiences, we have been confronted with theories and ideas about effective communication through writing. Moments for learning are declared in English composition courses, as well as through a variety of feedback loops through which students receive responses to their papers. In response to formal learning opportunities related to writing, students bring what they have learned to the forefront as they write an e-mail to an instructor, craft a letter for graduate school, or write an essay. Perhaps friendship needs to be taught in the same way: students need to be offered opportunities to learn, explore, and contemplate ideas and theories about friendship in order to apply them as they engage the broader higher education experience in residence halls, coffee bars, and fraternity houses.

At my institution, the idea of teaching friendship has been adopted within a model that describes the learning process we seek for students as part of our aspiration to nurture transformation. Our Prepare-Engage-Reflect (PER) model reminds us to prepare our students for the daily tasks that are part of modern life. Students learn about friendship through practicing it as part of everyday interactions. Educators must prepare students to mindfully engage in these learning moments and to recognize the learning opportunities that such interactions support. The third step of the model, reflection, asks students to intentionally make connections between theory and practice as preparation for participating once again in additional formal learning moments, followed by more experiences, followed by more reflection. This process has an amplifying effect and, over time, encourages deep learning about important outcomes, including the ability to participate in enduring friendships.

This fall, my institution opened its first residential college. The residential college represented a significant departure from the model of residential life that had dominated the campus in recent history. For the first time, students from all classifications, representing almost seventy majors, lived in community side by side with student life educators and faculty members. The newly appointed faculty master, a philosopher with a particular interest in ideas about friendship, joined with others in declaring that the college sought not only to help students learn about ideas, acquire technical proficiencies, or prepare for careers but also to help them pursue friendship in the context of a close-knit community. As students enter the residential college, moments are marked for learning about friendship (prepare). This preparation is followed by a rich array of daily encounters with peers, faculty, and staff (engage) and by opportunities to make sense of these experiences (reflect). As the student life experience in the residential college is planned, reviewed, and evaluated by organizers, every effort is made to assign moments to the PER model. Such a process can easily be adapted to a host of campus environments in the interest of facilitating student learning about the topic of friendship.

Students will no doubt find friendships of pleasure and friendships of utility in the college (as they would in any other residence hall), but our highest hope is that more intentional exposure to the possibility of perfect
friendship will encourage students to seek relationships that endure the test of time and rest in moral meaning. The words of the faculty master of the college during a recent talk convey the priority of friendship in this environment:

Friendship finds its full amplitude, I believe, when it is located within communities shaped by a shared conception of the good human life. Friendship discovers the full measure of its power as the crown of human life, I believe, when the physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual circumstances necessary for its flourishing are not only understood, but prevail. Human relationships are at the heart of everything we are about. If we can help our students aspire for the highest and best kinds of friendships—with one another, within their families, in our community, and with God—then we will have done something truly great. [Douglas Henry, personal communication, September 25, 2007]

In marketing materials, orientation, and discussions, students are invited by faculty, upper-division peer leaders, and student affairs staff into a dialogue about the purpose and character of friendship—and they are asked to seek friendship. The desired outcomes of the residential college are also evidenced in the architecture and structure of the college. Each Sunday night, for example, all 400 members of the community dine together. This commitment, agreed to as part of the admission process, informs students that friendship and community are important goals of the experience. Each Sunday evening, students enter the great hall at precisely six o’clock and stand behind their seat as the faculty master and special guests for the week proceed to the High Table positioned at the front. The master offers an invocation and invites all to be seated for dinner. Students at the corners of the table proceed to the kitchen to collect large bowls of food that will be shared family style amid conversation. On one recent Sunday, the master shared the following short excerpt from Alasdair MacIntyre’s Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue 1913–1922 and then posed several questions for students to discuss over dinner.

Imagine two individuals who encounter the activities of some ongoing community. One of them becomes caught up in its life. She finds herself energized by so doing and makes the purposes of the community her own. . . . She shares the community’s hopes for its future prosperity and, when the community is apprehensive of or saddened by setbacks, she too is apprehensive or saddened. The other by contrast is unmoved by her contacts with this community. She forms relationships with some individuals who happen to be members of the community, but this fact about them is irrelevant to her interactions with them. In no way does she become part of the community. [pp. 109–110]

Three questions were posed: What does it mean for an individual to be open or not to be open to experiences that are communal? What does it mean for an individual to identify or to fail to identify with the purposes of a community? What kind of changes in an individual might membership in a community bring about?

After dinner, students are encouraged to join the faculty in the Junior Common Room (or JCR, as it is most commonly called by students), a student hang-out space for coffee, pool, and conversation. Students and faculty are known to stay for hours, talking. The conversation from dinner changes locations and continues.

The design of the college includes spaces that represent its spiritual, intellectual, and communal aims for students. The chapel has twelve stained glass windows, each representing an intellectual or moral virtue. The community hopes that wisdom, knowledge, understanding, prudence, art, humility, justice, temperance, courage, hope, faith, and love are virtues that will encompass the life of all students in the college. Friendship is an important vehicle for developing these virtues—and it is a frequently discussed aim.

Person-environment theories have long posited that human behavior is a function of the interaction between a person and the environment. These theories suggest that behavior—and, thus, learning—is best understood when the environment is included in the equation. Conversations that stem from discussing why Martin Luther King, Jr., is depicted in the justice window of the chapel, for example, provide opportunities for students to question and test beliefs, as well as explore what matters most in their lives, with peers who are similarly engaged in self-exploration.

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THE MANNER in which colleges and universities prepare students for friendship development and engage them in it will, no doubt, vary from institution to institution. Nevertheless, some practical approaches to nurturing a campus culture of friendship that might be applied at many institutions include the following:

✦ Educate incoming students about sociological trends related to friendship, especially during highly symbolic beginning moments such as orientation. Richard Light reminds us that student memories of critical moments and events cluster heavily in the first few weeks of college. In short, messages and interactions in the initial days of students’ college experience wield a powerful influence on their behavior and the ways in which they will interpret that experience. Remind students of the importance of friendship and encourage the pursuit of substantive, enduring friendships embedded in moral commitments.

✦ Provide students with the opportunity to consider models of friendship through literature, popular culture, and coursework. Campuses with common readings or first-year seminars with common readings provide especially helpful venues for students’ discussion and exploration of the complexities of friendship. Ask students to describe the friendships about which they read and to compare and contrast these friendships to those in their own life. Soon, our university will join with the local chamber of commerce to promote a citywide reading of Ron Hall, Denver Moore, and Lynn Vincent’s book Same Kind of Different as Me, a true story about the unlikely friendship between an international art dealer and a once-homeless sharecropper.

✦ Insist that students seek friendship in their daily life on campus, and encourage students to commit to seeking friendships that have the potential to transcend the boundaries of their college experience. Ask students to practice friendship and find opportunities for them to blog or journal about what they learn about others, themselves, and friendship in general. Remind students that difficult times intrude on all relationships and that decisions to abandon relationships should be made in a spirit of seriousness.

✦ Convene faculty and staff forums to discuss with students their friendships, especially those sustained for long periods of time. Encourage disclosure of moral dimensions of friendships and how these relationships have encouraged growth and development toward more virtue.

✦ Offer students the opportunity to celebrate friendships, especially during their senior year. As students prepare to graduate, faculty and staff can assist them in launching a sustained commitment to friendship in its truest sense.

It is commonly understood that colleges and universities are linked to the future of education, of economics, and of welfare. It is also true that institutions of higher education will shape the next generation of relationships. By default, institutions will contribute to friendships of utility and pleasure; by choice, some will foster friendships of a higher moral value. In so doing, these friendship forerunners will create a new moral norm, an axis of self-sacrifice, and focus on others upon which a better world will turn.

Notes


