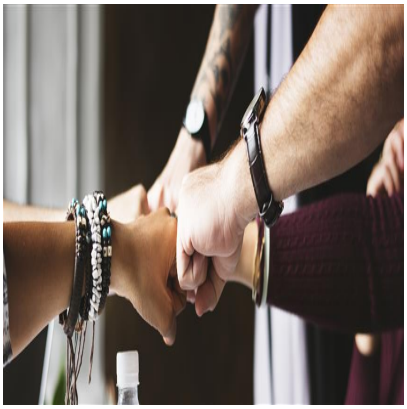


Description

Whether you are a student or a professor, your circle of friends and colleagues can be valuable to reaching your career goals. What does this mean? Should you choose your friends and/or colleagues simply for how they can help you? Should you always be striving to accomplish your goals each day or is there time to relax with friends?

We discuss academic friendships and provide insights on what to avoid and how to increase your network of colleagues.

College Students

College students typically find friends easily in classes and dormitories. According to a 2016 article published by the American Sociology Association, author Janice McCabe reflects on her study of several college students to assess the value of friends to academic success. McCabe found that when choosing friends, there were three types of students:

- Tight-knitters,
- Compartmentalizers, and
- Samplers

“Tight-knitters” typically surround themselves with people who know each other. This network provides social as well as academic support. The tight-knitters might be from the same ethnic or racial backgrounds. They would also share the same interests, and would support each other.

“Compartmentalizers” tend to have clusters of friends that do not usually overlap. For example, friends at college would be one cluster, while friends at home would be another. There might be clusters of serious students and of those who would rather party than study. In any case, either type might serve a purpose at a given time.

“Samplers” remain a bit distant from clusters or groups. They might have a few friends but group dynamics are usually involved. The sampler can certainly excel in college. However, they would most likely do it without a great deal of support from colleagues.

College students might find that their network of friends can be both helpful and harmful. They must set

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their goals in their academic studies and recognize and separate those who are supportive from those who might want to deter them.

Scholars

Professors face the same kinds of issues. If you are part of this group, you should be aware that there are those who can help your career and those who might not want to help you. Whatever the case, the academic setting is, in itself, a social hierarchy that can be rife with both kinds of acquaintances.

In his 2014 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, David Perlmutter discusses this phenomenon specifically for those on the track to tenure. He provides one professor's description of this dynamic. The professor explained that his department comprised colleagues who did nothing but complain when they got together socially. They complained about the university, the department itself, and anything else that happened to surface. It was always a negative encounter and eventually tended to be mentally draining.

On a positive note, Perlmutter, a professor himself, described a group of his own young colleagues who were encouraging and supportive of each other. They would get together to discuss their research and do something productive instead of wallowing in negativity without making suggestions for change.

Most of us, whether in academia or private business, have been in one or both of these types of group dynamics. They happen in just about every work setting; however, as mentioned, the negativity can be emotionally draining and is certainly nonproductive.

Choose Friends Carefully

This does not mean that you cannot have friends who will not help you further your career, but if you have true friends who also happen to be supportive of you, even better. Be mindful of the groups you encounter and of their dynamics.

As mentioned, negativity is found in just about every work setting and is no different at major universities. The academic workplace can be very competitive. The pressure to publish research can result in harsh competition among staff members for funding and promotions. The strive to become tenured can also result in competition among those in the running. In many cases, there is a clear hierarchy among the scholars—new professors and seasoned professors do not usually comprise clusters that overlap socially.

According to Perlmutter, there are "enablers" and "disablers". The enabler will tell you just about anything you want to hear to boost your confidence, while the disabler is the complainer and constantly negative. Perlmutter advises to avoid each of these extremes. Choose someone who is a little of both. A peer should be someone with whom you can share your ideas and who will give you an honest, constructive opinion.

Networking Tips

Networking can be a great way to form positive friendships with peers. Conferences and seminars provide a setting in which there are many networking opportunities that should not be overlooked. In a

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2010 article in *The Thesis Whisperer*, the author offers some sound advice on expanding your academic network as follows:

- Discuss papers: Look for another person who is also obviously looking for someone to join, introduce yourself, and begin a conversation about the papers being presented.
- Bring in more "loners": With the peer from the above encounter, find more who are also looking for someone to join and invite them in. Using this technique, you quickly build a small cluster of peers.
- Help others: As the author describes, conferences and seminars tend to exhaust people and cause stress-related symptoms, such as headaches, backaches, and tired feet. Offering help can result in an instant friendship.
- Look for small groups: Avoid trying to break into a group of more than three or four people. Conversations among more than that are difficult to follow.
- Avoid alcohol in group settings: Know yourself and the effect that alcohol has on you. It's best to avoid it altogether when trying to make a good impression to potential peers.

In all, be positive when seeking new colleagues. In addition, be the type of colleague that is neither an enabler nor a disabler. You might find that your positive and helpful attitude attracts more colleagues into your cluster of peers. Do you have any tips on successful networking for students and young researchers? Share them with us in the comments below!

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