

Friendships and Student Success in College

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has investigated college students' friendships and how these relationships can both enable and constrain students' success. I review this body of literature, describing the characteristics and processes of college students' friendships. First, I review work that describes characteristics of students' friendships, particularly focused on the roles of similarity and proximity in shaping the friendships students make. Second, I focus on what students do with friends that promote college success. Taking a broad view of success, I focus on how friends facilitate a sense of belonging and identity development as well as specific types of support that students provide, emotionally and academically. Third, I discuss processes related to friendships that impede students from success. I conclude by noting some implications for practice and promising areas of future research on friendships and success for post-secondary students.

Keywords: friendship, networks, peer relations, social support, belonging

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Friendships and Student Success in College

Researchers studying postsecondary education have long acknowledged the important role that peers play in student success. Work on this subject dates back more than 50 years; for example, a mid-century edited volume *College Peer Groups: Problems and Prospects for Research* discusses peers as both a “problem” and a “resource” for student success (Newcomb & Wilson, 1966). Widely used theories of student success, persistence, and dropout focus on the crucial role of peers in ‘academic integration’ and ‘social integration’ (Tinto, 1993, 2012), ‘social involvement’ (Astin, 1993), and ‘social engagement’ (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, Astin (1993) states that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). This research shows that student success and well-being are tied to feeling a sense of belonging in college, and friendships play an important role in that belonging (e.g., Nunn, 2021), yet also impede student success in significant ways.

This specific focus on friends as a category of peer relationships did not become central in postsecondary research until the past two decades, with most of this research occurring in the past decade. Much work in the 2000s focused on friendship composition, particularly documenting the extent of interracial networks. Following the Supreme Court case *Grutter v Bolinger*, this work sought to document how racial diversity may provide educational benefits and strengthen the quality of education offered to all students. Interracial friendships are one mechanism through which these educational benefits could arise. After a 2008 review piece on the sociology of higher education called for “further inquiries into network dynamics at the experiential core of college” (Stevens et al., 2008, p. 134), research expanded into other areas of friendship, notably processes through which friends facilitate and constrain student success. Research on the “experiential core” also has tackled friends’ role in supporting students in institutional environments where they face racism, microaggressions, isolation, and mental health crisis on campus. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore “the idea that students don’t go to college simply to gain knowledge but also to connect with others” (Lu, 2023), thus, emphasizing the importance of friendship ties. Indeed, scholars note that it is during the college years (ages 18–25) that “friendships may reach their peak of functional significance” (Arnett et al., 2011, p. 27). Their significance appears in research both in how college friendships can support students’ success and how they can get in the way.

In this paper, I review this body of literature, describing the characteristics and processes of college students’ friendships. I, first, review work that describes characteristics of students’ friendships, particularly focused on the roles of similarity and proximity in shaping the friendships students make. Second, I focus on what students do with friends that promote college success. I take a broad view of success, including an examination of how friends facilitate a sense of belonging and identity development as well as specific types of support that students provide, emotionally and academically. Third,

I discuss processes related to friendships that impede students from success. I conclude by noting some implications for practice and promising areas of future research on friendships and success for postsecondary students.

Characteristics of Friends

Who are students' friends? Research describing students' friends focuses on network size, demographic composition, and tie structure. At its most basic, research shows that just having friends is crucial to college success. For example, in their book *How College Works*, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) assert that students get more out of college when they find “two or three good friends, and one or two great professors” (p. 21, emphasis in original). They detail that students need “at least one or two friends . . . for psychic survival at college” but that their “feeling of being ‘at home,’ as if this is ‘my campus’” is strengthened by having a “broader network of acquaintances” (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014, p. 89). Having a few good friends increases persistence and makes students' college experiences more meaningful and impactful.

While most research focuses on describing characteristics of students' best friends, some research instead documents how many friends students have. For example, in a study of a highly selective private research university, Stearns and colleagues (2009) use data on up to 8 friends and excludes family members, asking specifically, ‘Other than your immediate family members, think about your closest friends or most important people in your life’ (p. 179). Similarly, in a study of University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) students, Antonio (2004a) asks students to name up to 7 UCLA students with whom they spent most of their time and who they considered to be their ‘best friends’ on campus. Using a more open-ended approach in her research on students at a large public university, McCabe (2016) finds that students name 18 friends, on average, with most students reporting 6–25 friends. While asking about students' 7 or 8 closest friends yields useful insights and may be better suited to larger and more representative samples (i.e., Antonio's research included 677 students and Stearns and colleagues' research included 800 students), it does not capture the full range of ties when students' networks average 18 friends (McCabe, 2016) and it means that we know more about the characteristics of students' best friends than their broader friendship network.

Another important consideration if research intends to capture the friendship ties related to student success is including a wider group of friends than just those attending the same college. Most undergraduates have both campus friends and hometown friends in their friendship networks (McCabe, 2016). Representative samples have not documented the exact mix. However, a study of 67 students at a large public university finds that, on average, 53% of students' networks were comprised of friends they met at their college, 12% were friends from home who attended the same college, another 26% were friends from home, and 9% were from other settings, such as someone they

met at a job or summer camp (McCabe, 2016). Given the ability of students to stay connected with friends on social media, perhaps distance is less of a constraint than in the past in maintaining these ties.

Social class also may impact the composition of students' networks. McCabe (2016) finds that lower-class students' networks contained fewer friends from home, but little difference in network size overall, with lower-class students reporting 20 friends compared to 18 among middle- and upper-middle-class students. In contrast, Stuber (2011) concluded that working-class students had smaller friendship networks with more friends from home and family in their networks compared to upper-middle-class students. Both studies looked at Midwestern universities, but they differed in methodology, with McCabe (2016) analyzing network data on students' friendships and Stuber (2011) students' discussions of their friendship groups. The possible impacts of differences in the size or composition of students' networks would be in friends' ability to support students and facilitate belonging on campus, as discussed later in this paper.

Homophily

Studies of the composition and demographics of students' friendships established that homophily—social similarities in terms of race, gender, and academic orientation—shapes those with whom undergraduate students form friendships (e.g., Fischer, 2008; Flashman, 2012; Stearns et al., 2009). People are typically drawn to those who appear similar to them, and students are no exception from this general trend.

Research documents racial homophily in students' friendships networks and variation by racial group. Overall, students of color are more likely to have interracial friendships than are White students (McCabe, 2016; Park & Kim, 2013; Stearns et al., 2009). Research also documents variety in the racial composition of friendship networks, with one study noting that students fell along the full range, with 0–100% same-race friends (McCabe, 2016). Across multiple studies, White students have the most racially homophilous friendships, with Black, Asian, and Latina/o students having more racially diverse friendships (e.g., Fischer, 2008; McCabe, 2016; Stearns et al., 2009). This stands in contrast to perceptions that “all the Black kids sit together in the cafeteria” (e.g., see discussion in Tatum, 1997), or, more generally, that minoritized groups are the only ones who are self-segregating. Patterns of same-race ties in multiple studies resemble those found by Stearns and colleagues (2009) among first-year students: White students have the highest percentages of same-race friends (84%), followed by Black (69%), Asian (48%), and Latina/o (20%) students. When researchers take structural diversity on campus into account, however, these trends show that students of color are friends with same-race others at rates higher than would be randomly expected more so than White students. For example, in McCabe (2016), White students report 84% same-race friends and make up 85% of the undergraduate population at “Midwest University” (MU) a pseudonym for the campus she studied, Black students report 76% same-race friends and make up 5% of the MU population, and Latina/o students

report 61% same-race friends compared to 2% of the MU population. To support success for minoritized students, it is important to consider what is driving this trend towards homophily.

White students and students of color may form same-race friendships for different reasons. White students rarely commented that they desired same-race friendships. Instead, most White students drew on color-blind ideology, stating that they did not notice race in their friendships (McCabe, 2011). White students also frequently commented on how diverse the campus was, whereas students of color frequently noted a lack of diversity at the PWIs they attended (Grigsby, 2009; McCabe, 2016). White students typically saw the campus as a friendly place where it was easy to make friendships because “everyone was in the same boat,” as one student put it (McCabe, 2016, p. 30). As a racialized space, campus was not experienced in the same way by all students. Rather than students of color wishing to segregate themselves, they are often seeking (and receiving) support from those with common experiences, which they often find in same-race friends (e.g., Gilkes Borr, 2019; Leath et al., 2022a, 2022b; Martínez Alemán, 2000; McCabe, 2009, 2015; Nenga et al., 2015; Villalpando, 2003). Some students of color, moreover, pursue racially homophilous friendships while others prefer racially diverse friendships (Antonio, 2004b; Gilkes Borr, 2019; McCabe, 2015). Racially diverse friendships also can be challenging. Without institutional support for interracial friendships, the burden falls to minoritized students to educate their friends or to tolerate racism and prejudice in these relationships (Hudson, 2018).

Structural diversity on campus impacts the number of interracial friendships students have. Using a sample of 28 selective colleges, Park and Kim (2013) identify both direct and indirect effects of structural diversity on students’ interracial friendships. Interactions in student organizations matter; in particular, students who participate often or frequently in Greek and religious organizations have fewer interracial friendships. They also find that “while students of color tend to have a higher likelihood of participating in racially homogenous environments such as ethnic student organizations, they maintain both inter- and intra-group friendships during the college years” (Park & Kim, 2013, p. 19).

Propinquity

Along with perceived similarity (i.e., homophily), another crucial factor shaping the friendships students form involves proximity, specifically who they encounter in regular and close ways (e.g., Moffatt, 1989; Newcomb, 1961; Newcomb & Wilson, 1966). Researchers use the term “propinquity” to refer to this close contact. Students make friends through the regular and close contact that happens when they take classes together, live in the same dorm or residence, participate in clubs or student organizations together, or engage in other shared activities (e.g., Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2006; Newcomb, 1961). In other words, this body of work discusses where students develop friends.

Because the connection made in student organizations is around an activity, friendships made there can be both diverse or homophilous. When the organization is based on an identity, students may form more homophilous ties through the organization than elsewhere on campus, particularly if they are intentionally seeking same-group ties. For example, research into the process of how students form homophilous ties finds that Black students strategically build same-race friendships through regularly coming into contact with other Black students in the African American culture-themed residence hall and in Black clubs and activities, such as the Black Student Union (Gilkes Borr, 2019). Many other qualitative studies provide examples of students meeting same-race friends in racial- or ethnic-based clubs, organizations, and activities (e.g., Antonio, 2004b; Leath et al., 2022a; McCabe, 2016; Nenga et al., 2015; Reyes, 2018). Importantly, students also make interracial friendships in student organizations, a finding documented in both quantitative (e.g., Park & Kim, 2013) and qualitative work (e.g., McCabe, 2011).

Proximity not only shapes who students make friends with, it also shapes friendship maintenance. Students' friends can be important gateways to campus organizations, shaping college involvement and belonging. For example, Silver (2020a) notes students whose friends introduce them to a range of extracurriculars, including the Black Student Alliance and a fraternity. Friends can be "connectors" by providing information about clubs and making the involvement more comfortable. Having a friend in a club, however, was not always enough to make it comfortable enough to join, particularly for students from less advantaged backgrounds joining exclusive spaces like sororities (Silver, 2020a).

Proximity works at any time to bring students together; however, it may be even more effective during transition periods, when students are actively looking to make new friends. In a longitudinal and mixed-methods project that follows students attending 7 liberal arts colleges in New England, Cuba and colleagues (2016) find that the first weeks at the beginning of college is a "friendship market," where new students are highly motivated "buyers and sellers of friendships" (p. 72). Students are most active in making new friendships during this time and more willing to reach out to others they encounter through proximity. This also means that making new friends is more challenging later in college (Cuba et al., 2016).

Proximity also shaped students' network ties during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study of students at a large public Midwestern university, using egocentric network data on 263 networks in April 2020 and follow-up interviews with 21 of those students in September 2020, finds variation in how their networks changed (Smith et al., 2022). Notably, proximity shaped who students mentioned as someone they sought out or interacted with. Students who remained in off-campus apartments maintained similar numbers of friends and "socioacademic ties," whereas students who moved in with or closer to family reported more family ties. Students rarely formed new friendships during this time. Instead, the authors conclude, "[b]roadly, students may have maintained friendship ties, but for some students, those were reactivations of old friendships or intentional maintenance of current friendships" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 13).

Network Structure

Network analysis provides a useful window not just into individual friendships or their characteristics, but also students' embeddedness in a larger structure. McCabe's (2016) study includes egocentric network data on the connections between students, meaning that the student she interviewed indicated which of their friends knew each other. Based on responses from 67 students, McCabe developed a typology of "tight-knitters," "compartmentalizers," and "samplers." Tight-knit networks are those where at least two-thirds of students' friends know each other; these networks provide students with social support, including for marginalized identities. Tight-knit networks were more common among Black and Latina/o students than the White students in her sample. Academically, tight-knit networks could provide positive peer pressure towards academic success or negative peer pressure encouraging students to hang out rather than study. Compartmentalized networks were those where about half of students' friends knew each other, divided into two to four groups or clusters. Among these clusters, one group is often more social and another more academic, so compartmentalizers tend to get academic and social support from different friends. Sampler networks are the least dense, meaning that there are few connections between friends. Rather than groups of friends, samplers have many one-on-one friendships. Samplers often feel lonely, expressing self-reliance in their academic life and low levels of social support (McCabe, 2016). Each of these network types posed particular challenges for students as well as particular types of support for their social and academic success.

Processes: How Friends Promote College Success

In the previous section, I reviewed research on the characteristics of students' friendships. In this next section, I focus on processes, that is, how what students do with their friends matters for their success. I highlight three themes in this research: how friends provide students with academic support, how they provide social and emotional support, and how they help with identity development.

Academic Support

Students' friends can support them academically in a range of ways, including directly through studying together and indirectly through normalizing or modeling academic engagement. Although this is often not the focus of research, examples appear in many ethnographies of college life and interview studies focused on peer groups.

Many studies document direct ways that friends support academics. Twenty-five years ago, Martínez Alemán (1997) argued for the intellectual and academic value of same-gender friends for college women. She referred to these relationships as "risk-free testing sites" where students try out ideas with friends in a safe environment, as opposed to the "inhospitable" environment characterized by their classrooms (Martínez Alemán, 1997,

p. 137–138). Women’s friendships support students’ ideas and function as sources of information, advice, and diverse perspectives because they have fewer obstacles to self-expression and learning than do classroom settings (Martínez Alemán, 1997). While there may be unique benefits to women’s friendships, academic benefits have been documented in other friendships as well. Friends can provide instrumental help through studying together, editing papers, giving advice on which classes to take, or reminding each other about due dates (e.g., Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Johnson, 2022; McCabe, 2016; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Friends also can support academics through discussing workloads and deadlines (Brooks, 2007; McCabe, 2006), trying out ideas with each other (Martínez Alemán, 1997, 2000), having intellectual conversations about social or cultural issues (Antonio, 2001; Martínez Alemán, 2000; McCabe, 2006), and enhancing self-confidence and motivation (Antonio, 2004a; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Finn, 2015).

Friends also implicitly support academics by providing an environment where academics were encouraged, or at least tolerated (McCabe, 2016). One way they do so is by studying alongside each other, even when studying by themselves would be more efficient, to normalize and encourage this practice (McCabe, 2020). Friends’ encouragement to keep going and to do better are also ways they support each other’s academic success (Dueñas & Gloria, 2022; McCabe, 2016).

Some students may find same-race bonds to be especially safe places to ask for and receive academic assistance. For example, Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) sometimes hesitate to ask for help because of worry that they burden others or that doing so reinforces racist messages about students of color being less smart or deserving, and they find same-race friends to be safe spaces from this worry (Leath et al., 2022b). They note the relative ease through which they can ask Black friends for help with homework, support other Black students in academic decisions like changing a major, and discuss experiences of race-related stress in the classroom (Leath et al., 2022b). Latinx students also note how commonalities in their experiences and ways of thinking with same-race friends were helpful and different than what they experienced among most peers at their PWI (Dueñas & Gloria, 2022).

Social and Emotional Support

Friends can provide social and emotional support for one another. Put simply, difficult things in our life feel easier when we have people with us. College students reported that a hill looked less steep when they had friends by their side (Schnall et al., 2008). In meaningful friendships, students leaned on each other for a range of emotional needs, including those related to their classes, romantic relationships, family, financial troubles, and other friendships (McCabe, 2016; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Students report both indirect and direct forms of support from friends. Friends provide support by listening to one another’s complaints and understanding what they were going through, including those about workloads and deadlines (Brooks, 2007; McCabe,

2016). Friends also provide direct emotional support through verbal encouragement and congratulations (McCabe, 2016). Research often reports friendship support as “feeling like a family” (Leath et al., 2022b, p. 16; McCabe, 2016; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Support may be particularly important for marginalized students. For example, Black students’ same-race friendships may provide emotional support for race-based isolation and microaggressions (e.g., Gilkes Borr, 2019; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Leath et al., 2022a; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Perhaps intraracial friendships can engender stronger feelings of emotional connection than those across racial categories (Leath et al., 2022b). Women’s same-gender friendships similarly support students’ ideas and function as sources of information, advice, and diverse perspectives (Martínez Alemán, 1997). Women of color sought friendships with other women of color, providing each other with support and encouragement (Martínez Alemán, 1997, 2000; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). In contrast, boys typically lose close friendships by late adolescence but continue to desire the intimacy they provided (Way, 2013); notably, this is not the case for all men, some of whom report supportive same-race friendships in college (e.g., Antonio, 2004b; Jackson, 2012; McCabe, 2015, 2016). Chinese international students also find support and comfort in their ties with other Chinese international students (Ma, 2020). Supportive friendships among marginalized students are not exclusive to students at four-year campuses, although research on two-year institutions is limited. Interviews with African American women community college students showed that these women valued those relationships that supported their academic performance and ignored—at times discarding—unsupportive friends (Shaw & Coleman, 2000). Friends can be, but are not always, emotionally supportive.

Support may also be more impactful when friends are on the same campus. For example, studies document tension in the relationships with hometown friends for first-generation college students and working-class students (Hurst, 2010; Kaufman, 2003; Lee, 2016). Other research specifically notes how relationships with hometown friends keep students from integrating more fully into campus (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Stuber, 2011). For example, in a study of low-income students attending an elite liberal arts college, Lee and Kramer (2013) describe how attending an elite liberal arts college creates a “newfound social distance from their friends and family” (p. 26). It may be that friendships on the same campus share common experiences that make them more supportive, or it may be that they increase feelings of campus belonging.

Identity Development

Friends also contribute to students’ identity development. Young adulthood is a particularly important time in the life course for identity development (Arnett et al., 2011) and higher education is a relatively unique time and place to develop identities alongside friends (Pahl, 2000). Throughout college, students are developing their friendships and developing their identities and sense of self.

Friends both reflect and create our sense of self. Students construct who they are and who they aspire to be by reflecting on similarities with their friends (Anthony & McCabe, 2015). Students also construct who they are when they separate themselves from friends they define as possessing undesirable characteristics. Through building a temporally ordered narrative to contrast themselves from friends they had outgrown, students maintained moral identities. Anthony and McCabe (2015) refer to these strategies as ‘friendship talk.’ Friendship talk creates self-identity through constructions of friendship. Both the differences and similarities students note between their friends and themselves can be means of personal identity construction.

Students’ friendships also help build specific identities, such as student, racial, and ethnic identities. McCabe (2020) finds that students studying with friends “matter for a students’ sense of self, including feelings of belonging or considering oneself a ‘dedicated student’” (p. 143). Same-race friendships may help students develop a positive racial or ethnic identity (Antonio, 2004b; Martínez Alemán, 2000). In addition, they can enable students to embrace multiple intersectional identities (Leath et al., 2022a, 2022b; McCabe, 2011). Intra-racial friendships can facilitate support for not only racial identities, but also those linked to, for example, class background and sexual identities.

Friends do not automatically construct students’ identities, as Silver (2020b) explains. His research demonstrates how students often end up with ‘cookie-cutter identities’ rather than complex and growing ones. Women students often occupied roles as ‘care-givers’ or ‘associates,’ staying in these roles to maintain approval and avoid ostracism from friends and peers. Similarly, men of color occupied roles as ‘associates’ or ‘entertainers,’ whose contributions were typically overlooked, even by friends. Each of these simplistic identities, including the higher-status roles of ‘educators’ or ‘managers’ occupied by White men, end up limiting students’ feelings of belonging (Silver, 2020b).

Other Benefits

The benefits already discussed are not an exhaustive list; scholars have pointed to other ways friendships support students’ success. The body of research on interracial friendship documents a range of benefits that come from having friendships across racial difference including positive race-related attitudes and reductions in racial prejudice (Antonio, 2001; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Interracial friendships in college also positively impact intellectual self-confidence and educational aspirations for students of color, but not for White students (Antonio, 2004a). More recent research focuses on college friendships that cross other boundaries, such as worldview differences, defined as ‘guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, a spiritual orientation, a nonreligious perspective, or some combination of these,’ positing that these friendships can shift individual attitudes and reduce prejudice (Hudson et al., 2022, p. 3).

Another positive effect of friendships is simply that they are fun for students. While this may seem obvious, it is relatively rare for research to mention directly. One example is

in Tichavakunda's (2021) work on Black joy, where he highlights the positive emotions Black students experience in the time they spend with friends, including hanging out together on campus. McCabe (2020) also mentions the enjoyment students get from studying with friends: "Put simply, they study with friends because it is fun" (p. 142).

Although not directly related to success in college, it is notable that many of students' friendships lasted beyond the college years, continuing to be important relationships in their lives (Martínez Alemán, 2010; McCabe, 2016). Friendships characterized as multiplex ties, which provided students with intellectual as well as emotional support, were especially likely to remain close ties (Martínez Alemán, 2010; McCabe, 2016). Martínez Alemán (2010) noted that the women in her study "explained their female friendships as indispensable relationships they utilized to navigate their tangible and particular life transitions like motherhood, graduate and professional school demands, and work conflicts" (p. 572). College friendships can be lasting sources of support and connection.

Problems: How Friends Impede College Success

While friendships support student success, they also can impede it academically as well as socially. In terms of academics, the main way friends create barriers to success is by focusing on social life instead of academics. A range of scholarly work documents how social life can dominate students' time and energy at college (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Moffatt, 1989). Friends may directly encourage each other to put off studying to go out or hang out; however, students more often described a more indirect, "subtle yet pervasive" peer pressure or a "nuanced . . . study-versus-socialize dilemma" (McCabe, 2016, p. 49). Although friends can implicitly encourage or explicitly pressure students to hang out or go out rather than study, students also had a range of coping techniques to achieve balance between their academic and social goals. Pressure, however, was particularly strong in tight-knit networks, when a students' friendship group were all focused on social life over academics; it was less strong in the less dense "compartmentalizer" or "sampler" networks, where students had other friends who may be more academically oriented (McCabe, 2016). To achieve both academic and social goals, students "cultivated relationships with those who tolerated or encouraged academic involvement and used strategies of separation to protect their academic lives from friends who were academic distractions" (McCabe, 2016, p. 64). In other words, the potential of friends to distract students is real; however, students' responses to this indirect or direct pressure matters for their success.

Friendships can also pose challenges to students' success in terms of social integration or belonging at college. For example, while friendships across difference have many benefits, described earlier, they also pose challenges. In her book on the experience of low-income, working-class students on an elite campus, Lee (2016) discusses difficulties students had in managing cross-class friendships, including the tendency to

not talk about class inequality in these relationships. Hudson (2018) similarly discusses difficulties that students from minoritized groups face in navigating cross-racial friendships, including facing microaggressions from White friends, and the need for institutional support so that the burden to educate their peers does not fall to them and increase their marginalization. Intra-racial friendships can also be challenging to navigate. Leath et al. (2022b) offer a nuanced and in-depth look into this among Black students at PWIs. Ma (2020) discusses how Chinese international students often feel they do not have access to diverse networks, which keeps them from more deeply integrating into American campuses. Having friends does not mean that students feel a sense of belonging on campus.

Practices to Promote Student Success

This research on college friendships holds implications for practices to promote student success. Most simply, college administrators, faculty, and staff involved in student life should recognize that friendships are important to students. Not only are they significant relationships to students personally, friendships also matter for their social and academic success, including social support and belonging. Research on proximity shows how friendships often form when people encounter each other in close and regular ways. Campus clubs and organizations are one site where these friendships form. Therefore, colleges would do well to continue to invest in a range of types of campus clubs and organizations, including academic clubs and identity-based clubs for students from marginalized groups. These clubs are places where students can meet others who share their experiences and can provide each other with emotional, social, and academic support, and they also can be places where they encounter meaningful friendships with diverse others. Because friendships across difference can be challenging, colleges should invest in institutional support and training for students on interacting across difference (Hudson, 2018). In addition, by providing space and encouragement for students to study alongside each other or together, colleges can also facilitate students' academic success. Even when studying together is not the most efficient approach (McCabe, 2020), the time students spend together can deepen their bonds and their academic identities. In these study sessions, friends can also provide direct academic support and an environment where academic success is valued—or at least academic effort is not actively discouraged.

Future Research

While researchers know much more than we did 20 years ago about college students' friendships and how friends matter for student success, many gaps remain. Research tends to focus on four-year public institutions or elite campuses, both of which are PWIs, leaving gaps in students' experiences at other types of institutions. We also

know little about how campus structures influence how friends support and get in the way of students' success. Research with cross-campus comparisons of other aspects of students' experiences in the "experiential core" of college (Stevens et al., 2008) note how campus structures influence students' experiences (e.g., Reyes, 2018; Stuber, 2011), so it is likely that friendships matter in different ways for students' success on campuses depending on their structures. Particular gaps remain in our understanding of students' experiences of friendship at non-residential two-year colleges.

Along with cross-campus comparisons, longitudinal studies of students' friendships would also allow researchers to better understand the dynamics, benefits, and drawbacks of these relationships for student success. In their paper on friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic, Smith and colleagues (2022) "advocate for more regular longitudinal studies of college student networks that examine change over time. Longitudinal panel designs would allow for comparisons of routine types of network change with those produced by disruptive events, which may have differing implications for policies and practices that support students" (p. 14). Survey data showing that 43% of college students feel isolated from others "some of the time" and another 23% "often" feel isolated (American College Health Association, 2022) point to the need for continuing research on not just friendships, but meaningful and supportive ones. Better understanding the experiences of making friends, keeping friends, and losing friends over time for a wide range of students would enable greater support for students through these experiences.

Unanswered questions also remain on how students experience homophily, particularly racial homophily, in the current racial dynamics. As Gilkes Borr (2019) stated, "More work must be done to evaluate both same-race and cross-race network development as students experience college in such turbulent times" (p. 20). And times have only become more turbulent in terms of racial dynamics as well as isolation and mental health problems, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent research has focused on documenting differences within the experiences of marginalized groups, including those based on social class (e.g., Jack, 2014) or race (e.g., Johnson, 2019; Leath et al., 2022b; Nenga et al., 2015). This approach seems useful for friendships as well, building on the range of successful strategies noted in prior work, such as intraracial and interracial friendships as well as friendships that occur within and outside of campus structures, like student organizations (e.g., McCabe, 2015, 2016; Nenga et al., 2015). Moreover, researchers have not uniformly focused on all marginalized groups. Research is particularly needed that seeks greater understanding of friendship for Asian American, Native American, and multi-racial students and across intersectional inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability.

In sum, researchers studying postsecondary education have consistent evidence that friendship matters for college students' success. The characteristics of friendships matter as do the processes that support students and those that get in the way of success. Not only do these findings matter for researchers, they also matter for college administrators who can organize campuses in ways that better support friendships and

students themselves who can focus on making and keeping friends that support each other's success.

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