Friendship and student happiness: how the College social milieu affects well-being

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Research questions

• What is the effect of common spaces (especially those in dormitories) on the effect of the social, emotional, and mental health of students at Williams College?

• How do “partial” friends affect a student’s sense of well-being? What do students at the College derive from having partial friends?

• How do students define true friendship? In what ways do they value and promote true friendship?

• How do perceived social norms and pressures affect student friendships?
Motivations

• Initially motivated by research that showed the positive effect of common green spaces in urban inner cities and elderly homes (Maas).
  > Interested in if this known benefit of common space would extend to the College

• Later shifted to also incorporate consideration on the nature of friendships at the College, how they form, and what functions they serve.
  > Relates to study measuring friendship quality that mapped characteristics of adolescent & young adult friendship to satisfaction (Mendelsohn).
Methods

• Observation, Interviews, Focus Group, Survey (30 responses)

• Demographics: students of the College who live on-campus, all informants were juniors or seniors, since they have more experience with living on-campus.

• Focus group skewed male, survey skewed female

Stigma against not having friends motivates me to make friends

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Social Pressure

• “There is a sense that you should have friends” – during focus group, informants agreed that they felt that there was pressure to have friends at College, and that this extended particularly to common spaces that are really not open to free interaction

• Survey complicated this—bimodal distribution on q5 and q6:
  • Q5. There is pressure at the College to not be seen alone, and to have friends 6.35 (avg agreement score out of 10)
  • Q6. Stigma against not having friends motivates me to make friends 4.5

• Additionally many subscribe to the biological, evolutionary basis for our desire for friendship
  • Q7. The desire to have friends is a primal one, motivated by our instinct for survival. 7.21
Q5. There is pressure at the College to not be seen alone, and to have friends 6.35

Q6. Stigma against not having friends motivates me to make friends 4.5
Inferences

• Appearances matter, but they are not the total motivation behind having friends; rather they are an effect, since Q5 had greater positive response than Q6.

Interestingly, majority of survey informants agreed with notion that survival instinct affects drive for friends.

• People to either perceive these social pressures or they don’t > possibly because of how sensitive they are or how much they simply care. Not many responses fall in the middle.

• Emphasis on perceived: informants in focus group noted they do not judge people who are alone, yet feel self-conscious when they eat alone
**Partial Friendship:** broadly defined, friendly but not close or will make deliberate effort to associate with

Most defined groups include people students are friends with through class, clubs, sports teams, and music groups, often will have mutual friends with.

34 = average estimated number of partial friends
Partial Friendship

Q13. Having partial friendships makes me happier on a daily basis \textbf{6.62}

Q16. Having partial friendships makes me feel more secure \textbf{5.07}
Partial Friendships continued

Survey *contradicted* focus group on a few key points

- According survey results, partial friendships moderately increases happiness for most people – versus opinions expressed in focus groups & interviews > viewed as a “burden”

- Happiness and security are two distinct states of being; Q13 illustrates this

- “Backlog” of friends – focus group agreed with this notion, survey did not

- Partial friends boost happiness and can increase a sense of security—impart a sense of “togetherness” and short-term companionship – “*It is a nice way to not feel alone on campus when not around your closest friend.*”

- However, most do not view them with strong emotions.

*This may be because partial friends are not seen as allowing one to express vulnerabilities and be one’s true self.*
Q21. I feel constricted from being my true self in public social settings 5.89

Q32. I can and expect to be my true self around my true friends 8.79
On True Friendship

- In the College context, “Mutual Support” is the most important role delineated by students, above “Time Spent Together” and “Shared Beliefs”

- The ability to show one’s vulnerability and connect with someone on a deeper level is critical
  - A common sentiment encapsulated by a sample response:
    
    *You should feel good around them and they should help you get through life’s struggles*

- Many also expected their friends to support their beliefs, have shared interests, and critically, be accessible and able to spend time with them

- True friendship requires greater synergy; a certain alignment of traits and characteristics must occur — there is the sentiment that not all partial friends are suitable for true friendship.

- In essence, compared to partial friendship, there must be more constancy, trust, alignment of beliefs/interests, quantity of time spent together—and most of all ability to be seen as multifaceted person.
Q26. It is easy for me to make true friendships at the College 4.714

Q35. Many of my partial friends could easily become true friends 5.214
True Friendship continued

- Seems to be relative dichotomy between true friends and partial ones
- Also interesting: idea that people have friends for different reasons was strongly agreed with:
  - *Q28. I am friends with different people for different reasons.* 6.97
- Suggests that within the spectrum of true friendship there are many different sub-needs that are not totally satisfied by one individual person; but as long as sufficient overlap one’s social needs can be fulfilled
- However, this seems to be separate from the fundamental principle behind true friendship, of mutual support
Common Spaces & Friendship Barriers

**Finding:** common spaces reduce barriers to friendship. This was echoed during:
- Observation
- Interviews
- Focus Group

Friendships are not effortless; they take interaction and effort.

Q29. Living in a dormitory that is far from where my friends (probably true friends) live on campus makes it hard to maintain the friendship.

6.57 average agreement score out of 10

Q30. It is hard to seek out friends (including true friends) on campus if they are not readily accessible

7.28 average agreement score out of 10
Q36. Dormitory common rooms help deepen my relationship with friends in positive ways 7.42
Space & Friends continued

• It seems that this desired characteristic of mutual support is, in part, influenced by a friend’s accessibility.

• While there is the sense that certain partial friends are unsuitable for true friendship...

• ...there seems to be the potential for some to make true friends by deepening relationships with partial friends—and existing friends that have drifted

• However, they are ostensibly hindered by spatial or temporal disparities
Conclusions

• Perceived social pressures certainly affect how some students perceive themselves, and they may be cognizant who they are with. However, the primary motivation behind making friends is not image.

• Students seek support and understanding, a “sense of home” when they are with true friends—something they cannot necessarily obtain even with partial friends. Not mere companionship, which partial friends can provide, but something beyond.

• True friends serve to provide mutual support above anything else, allowing students to demonstrate their vulnerability

• Students do not find it easy to make true friends

• The College could, in the design for future dorms and in remodeling old dormitories, enhance the level of more personal, intimate common spaces such as dormitory common rooms.

* To note, these tentative inferences are based off of a relatively small sample size, and they all could use further research
Sources
