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BFF and the residential experience

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Quad 136

BFF and the Residential Experience

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BFF and the Residential Experience



At homecoming recently, an alum recounted the story of telling work acquaintances that he was coming back to Saint John's to see friends that he had first met over 50 years ago. A listener's response was incredulous, "You have friends you have known for over fifty years?! I don't even remember anyone from that long ago."

I was reminded of this story when I read an [Atlantic article](#) on friendship. The article examines the [importance of friendships](#) and how they change over time. One of the interesting observations made by Professor William Rawlins, the Stocker Professor of Interpersonal Communications at Ohio University, involves the timing of friendship. "I think young adulthood is the golden age for forming friendships," Rawlins says. "Especially for people who have the privilege and the

blessing of being able to go to college."

It is obvious why the college experience can be helpful for friendship formation: many people the same age with a lot in common; most seeking to explore new relationships; free time with relative freedom from other responsibilities; and an environment that provides structured social activities.

What is even more interesting is to consider whether the specific nature of the college experience matters. Do friendships form more readily and last longer in certain contexts? Is a residential liberal arts environment more conducive to friendships than an undergraduate experience at a big research university?

For all the research colleges and universities do regarding their students and alums, I don't know of any that explores this question, but I'd hypothesize that small liberal arts environments do generate and nurture friendships better than large institutions. During the undergraduate years a smaller, more tight-knit community will lead to more, repeated interactions among members of the community. You are certainly more likely to run into that nice guy you happened to meet by chance on a second occasion, whether at a party or in a class or in the dorm, at a school of 2000 than at a university of 30,000. Those repeated interactions are the foundations that friendships are built upon. And once those friendship groups form, they will likely include more overlapping relationships at a smaller place. This overlap will likely allow relationships to be sustained more readily once graduation leads to the inevitable geographic dispersion. And, finally, as the homecoming story suggests, smaller schools may well be better at providing the kinds of alumni events and interactions that keep friendships alive.

Does this matter? Yes, if friendships matter. The article notes that friendships are associated with **good mental health** and **physical health**. It does not seem like a stretch to argue that friendships, along with families, are the relational foundation for personal and societal well-being.

So, is there a further argument for choosing a residential, liberal arts environment, beyond the academic and professional benefits? I would not push logic too hard, but I know that Admissions professionals tell me that the single most important question a prospective student asks him or herself when they look at college fit is, “Will I find friends here?” Academic, professional, spiritual, financial and extra-curricular considerations are secondary if a student does not believe they will be able to make friends on campus. So, if (and I know this is speculative and not definitive) a small liberal arts environment facilitates those friendships, that environment can be a decided competitive advantage in a highly competitive higher education market—to say nothing about being good for our students.

A personal anecdote: many of my closest friends lived on the 3rd floor of Mary Hall my freshman year. A couple friends that went to state universities have become part of this friendship group, while I have not become friends with any of their college friends. (Admittedly, a single data point!)

And a final note for Johnnie spouses and children: the *Atlantic* author, Julie Back, made an observation that rang true to me, especially as I thought of all those Johnnie spouses: “Hanging out with a set of lifelong best friends can be annoying, because the years of inside jokes and references often make their communication unintelligible to outsiders. But this sort of shared language is part of what makes friendships last.” So true. Johnnie stories, anyone?!

By **Michael Hemesath** | October 29th, 2015 | Categories: **Alumni**, **Higher Education** | **0 Comments**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] **PrezHemesath**.