



## SCOPE Tip of the Week Member Newsletter

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### Will you be my friend?

Colleges and universities offer courses in math, science, ethics and history. They offer guidance on how to study, how to balance a checkbook and the importance of developing critical thinking skills. However, there isn't a guidebook on how to develop friendships on campus.

Students are expected to "learn the ropes" in terms of making friends primarily on their own. While the college provides some structured friend-making opportunities during orientation and in the residence halls, for the most part, building and nurturing friendships is left to the student. Yet social isolation is one of the biggest stressors faced by college students and impacts academic performance, mental health and well-being as well as retention. Helping students to connect and develop friendships can have positive, lasting and dramatic effects.

For some, friends come easily and new friendships develop quickly. Others struggle to connect, experiencing a loss of confidence and self-assurance. Some students have experience with making many friends in large high schools and in big cities, while others may have come from small high schools in more rural settings and have maintained the same close group of people since the first grade.

Dating adds an additional layer of complexity to the friend-making scenario as friendships can be difficult to start if there is the added tension and pressure of turning the relationship into a romance.

Teaching students how to make friends:

- 1) **Find ways to help students connect with other people in a safe setting.** One of the best ways to make friends and practice social skills is to find opportunities to spend more time around other students. Getting involved can be accomplished by joining a club or campus organization or connecting to an intramural athletic team.
- 2) **We like those who are like us.** One place to start developing new friendships is by helping students look for those who share the same beliefs, ideas and interests. While a positive future goal should be the development of friendships with people with whom you don't always agree, this is hard to do. Start where there are already some common connections.
- 3) **Build from small successes.** Help students set realistic expectations; they shouldn't expect to develop a deep, lifelong friendship within a few days of meeting a new person. It is more realistic to develop multiple acquaintances over time without the pressure of creating more intense friendships or dating relationships. One way to accomplish this is to encourage students to make a list of the things that stress them out when trying to make new friends (1=not so stressful, 10=the most stressful situation you can imagine). Once the student has the list, start with the least stressful situations first.
- 4) **Think about counseling.** If students have not had success with the techniques above, it may be time to encourage a visit to the counseling center on campus to talk to a therapist about some ways they can work on developing more friendships. Most of us understand that physical exercise

helps students get into better shape and lose weight. Emotional and social connections can be strengthened by working with a therapist to develop strategies and practice the skills needed to form friendships.

- 5) **Know thyself.** There are several popular personality measures that can help students understand how they approach others socially. The Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory (MBTI) is often used to help students identify traits such as extraversion and introversion, or how they make decisions or organize information when planning activities. Knowing their MBTI type can be helpful in better understanding how they approach social situations. There are several online sites that offer versions of the MBTI and many college counseling services offer the MBTI free of charge.
- 6) **I have 1000 Facebook friends!** Encourage students to build connections with social media, but advise them not to depend exclusively on this interaction. Facebook and similar websites sometimes get a bad reputation from adults and professors unfamiliar with the medium. Social media can be an excellent tool for students who are shy, cautious or too worried about friendships to “stick their foot in the water”. That being said, developing all of one’s friendships exclusively in an online format is not ideal. They need to find a healthy balance between online friends and those with whom they spend time in person.

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