The importance of friendships for furthering scholarship (opinion)

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Crossing boundaries is the new mantra of academe. Whether “inter-,” “cross-” or “trans-” disciplinary, such academic traversing is a growing part of our intellectual lives. With issues ranging from climate change to economic inequality to cyberthreats stubbornly resisting traditional scholarly analysis, we increasingly emphasize in our teaching and research the need for the kind of nimble, flexible thinking fostered in collaboration across multiple areas of study.

I’m very much in favor of professors leaving their siloed intellectual environments and have certainly done my share of crossing boundaries during my academic career. But in recently leading a collaborative cross-disciplinary Teagle Foundation initiative, I’m coming to understand an underdeveloped dimension to all this boundary-spanning work -- one that is often overlooked yet essential to its success.

That is the role of academic friendships. The intimacies of personal relationships are the often-untapped creative spaces for boundary-spanning work. The silos we thus most need to overcome might be ourselves.

Academic friendships share many qualities with those of a more general nature, but they are distinctive because of the way academics often blend occupation with identity, seeing their work as an integral part of their life’s calling. Getting to know your fellow academics means getting to know in an especially intimate way what they do, seeing the personal imprint they bring to their professional pursuits.

My friendships range across engineers, cardiologists, CPAs and corporate managers, but seldom do the distinctive intellectual habits and values central to their work become an integral and abiding part of our relationships. But the situation is markedly different with Bob, a mathematician friend of mine who teaches at my college. I laugh when he says he’s “not good at calculating tips” during our lunches together, even though the doctorate he holds ventures into realms my never-took-calculus brain can’t begin to contemplate.

True friendship inevitably entails the ability to empathize with another, seeing the other’s perspective, so a friendship of any depth with an academic involves seeing their discipline from the inside out -- less as an external observer, more as an invited guest. If you’re willing to accept the invitation, you’re likely to see things you didn’t expect.
For example, Bob was the first person I ever heard call a mathematical proof “beautiful.” That there could be an aesthetic quality to quantitative concepts unsettled my perception of beauty, previously so firmly rooted in the literary realm. Yet his reaction to a well-crafted equation mirrors the way a line of poetry might haunt me.

Dip below the surface of a professor’s disciplinary interest and you will discover something more, something of the sensibilities and emotions, the values and aspirations that gave rise to the disciplinary work. Take my friend Tim, a plant ecologist teaching in our biology department. While he can lecture at length on temperate deciduous forests, Tim’s conversations regularly evoke more than the classification of trees. It was from him I came to understand the spiritual depletion that flows from our natural world’s current precarious state. It’s telling that he’s chosen to teach a cross-listed nature writing elective along with his standard introductory biology course. For him, each course completes the other.

The role of academic friendships deserves more attention as we traverse our disciplines. I was not surprised to learn of a recent Massachusetts Institute of Technology study that declared physical proximity, even in our technological age, still matters to collaboration. I think it’s in part because of the ways our social and emotional ties reconfigure our outlooks in ways at least as powerful as our intellectual connections. So much of my own creative work in ethics began with a felt intuition that something was missing or didn’t fit together. My exposure to such felt moments of creative friction expands the more I enter into the lived-through experience of my colleagues in other disciplines, something that both begins and abides in friendship.

It is in the personal imprint of my colleagues’ work, where I experience the recognition and surprise of kindred spirits, that I discover the greatest potential for collaboration. It is because of a common aesthetic experience that a poet might collaborate with a mathematician. It is because of ineffable moments in nature, where the whole escapes the parts, that a biologist might make common cause with a philosopher.

So I, an ethicist who began college studying literature, join Tim, a biologist with a spiritual bent, and our mutual friend Laura, a historian focusing on Latin America, to lead our campus Teagle initiative integrating business and the liberal arts. The initiative has inspired courses crossing entrepreneurship and dance, marketing and gender studies, narrative and sustainable business. It’s a rigorous academic project, to be sure. But the intellectual exchange occurs amid a richer social gathering. Friendships develop and extend, crossing boundaries that are reconfigured in the process. Barriers become invitations that you only realize you’ve crossed once you look back.

As is true of relationships throughout our lives, academic friendships change things. We need to tap not only the content of the disciplines but also the character of their practitioners. We need to know the person behind the project. Unless we mine the points where job blends into vocation, we may miss the best that cross-disciplinary work can be. But even more important, we may miss the best in ourselves.

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