
UCF Forum

8-2-2017

I Hope This Week's Graduates Acquired What I Did at College: Lifelong Friendships

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STARS Citation

Scharf, Meg K., "I Hope This Week's Graduates Acquired What I Did at College: Lifelong Friendships" (2017). *UCF Forum*. 264.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/264>

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I Hope This Week's Graduates Acquired What I Did at College: Lifelong Friendships

By Meg Scharf
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, August 2, 2017

What will this week's UCF graduates take with them when they leave campus?

Many will leave with a sense of accomplishment and a road map to success in the "real world." Perhaps they leave with an appreciation for learning, knowing that commencement starts the next step in continuous lifelong learning.

And perhaps they leave with a group of extraordinary friends.

Apart from the curricular and extracurricular activities that comprise an academic career, perhaps some of the greatest educational experiences we receive during our college years are through our fellow students. We are drawn together, naturally, by a whole host of shared experiences. Surviving a difficult course or challenging assignment, accidentally setting off the residence hall's fire alarm by burning popcorn, and adapting to a new life away from home, parents and family can nurture lasting bonds of friendship.

Students learn and grow with the help of their friends. We learn from the example of a friend who can stay calm in a crisis, or a friend who can easily express new ideas, or a new friend who demonstrates an openness to and even an enthusiasm for new ideas.

I observed how differently some of my friends learned, and how a reading of the same work could elicit different ideas from them. Discussions of classwork with friends always led to a better understanding of the material, whether we were passing around a dissected fetal pig and discussing its heart and liver, or listening to a description of a psychology project in which two students collected tubes of toothpaste from other friends and tried to decide what the various styles of squeezing the tubes meant about their owners' personalities.

An experience that I shared with a particular group of friends changed my life: 11 months of study in Europe as a sophomore. Traveling, communicating in other languages, and being exposed to art, wonderful music, new food, and interesting people was a situation that brought us together in a unique way. Many of us became steadfast friends.

I hope that this week's graduates will experience what I gained while in college: about a dozen of us are still very "together." Most of us studied in Europe together. I hope for 2017 graduates that friends will be a lifelong takeaway from your years at college.

After graduation, life intervened. Geographic separation, new careers, graduate schools, families, marriages, partnerships and parenthood all seemed to conspire against us routinely reuniting.

But we kept in touch. We saw each other intermittently at weddings, other social events, at football weekends. We exchanged Christmas cards (even though I am very bad at that), birth announcements, and the occasional sad call to share news of the passing of a parent or family member. But there was always contact, and those of us better at keeping up kept the others informed.

Suddenly we were older. Children left home and lives seemed more stable. And one of our friends came up with the brilliant idea of gathering us at her family's vacation home. Her family generously concurred. So for the past decade about a dozen of us have gathered on the shores of Lake Michigan for a few days of fun each year. We talk, take walks, meander into town, cook "chick food" (grilled fish, roasted vegetables, salad), drink wine, and take in the beauty of the lake. It is life-affirming and soul-renewing.

Why is this beneficial?

Although we, as a group, are somewhat homogenous, we have learned from the different paths that our lives have taken. No two lives are alike. I have admired the courage and resourcefulness of friends who have faced chronic illness, divorce, the illness of parents, and the long struggle to bring a book to publication. I have rejoiced in the stories of children and grandchildren, athletic achievements, and career successes.

Our homogeneity allows us to try on these experiences as we listen. We all started in the same place, and I can't help but feel that perhaps I could gather the strength to do what they have done. And if not, I could certainly call my friends for advice and encouragement.

We are a mutual admiration society. Acceptance is not even a question: We have all been seen by the others in some ridiculous situations. For example, I think every one of us used to roll a knee sock in our long hair at night as a sort of giant, soft curler. Some of us used an office window in the residence hall as a means to escape the bounds of curfew. And there are plenty of situations that cannot be discussed here. So when we are together, our shared past creates an environment of warmth and acceptance.

Every year, we leave feeling closer than ever, remembering the past but creating new memories.

I hope all our graduates maintain contact with their friends so they can continue to learn from them – and those friendships can continue to grow. They are like no others.

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