

**Social Relationships, Academic Engagement, and Well-Being in College:
Executive Summary of Findings from the Duke Social Relationships Project**

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* We are grateful to David Jamieson-Drake, Director of Institutional Research at Duke University, for the assistance and very helpful advice that he provided at various stages of the Duke Social Relationships Project.

The Duke Social Relationships Project (DSRP) study is a collaborative effort between members of the Department of Psychology & Neuroscience and the Division of Student Affairs. Planned in 2006 and initiated in spring 2007, the DSRP is a four-year study designed to learn about various aspects of the social lives of college students (including friendships, committed romantic relationships, dating and hook-up relationships, and contact with faculty), and about the association between social relationships and feelings of loneliness and belonging in college.

The DSRP also examines many other aspects of college life, including: a) students' level of academic engagement (i.e., excitement and passion for academic work); b) students' perceptions of the degree to which they matter at the university, and their identification with the values of the university and of other students; c) students' level of participation in activities, organizations, and clubs (including information about their participation in leadership); d) whether students are big fans of Duke University varsity sports; e) students' use of alcohol in social situations including the amount of time spent drinking with friends; f) students' levels of alcohol misuse, assessed with the World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT); and g) various measures about the self including self-esteem, social anxiety, feelings of self-efficacy about social situations, and concerns about self-presentation (i.e., feeling that one must always appear happy and successful to friends at Duke, even when one does not feel that way on the inside). For further information on each aspect of college life that we measured and how each aspect was measured, please see the appendix to the full DSRP report.

Figure 1 shows the sampling plan for the study, how students were recruited to participate, and the number of students who participated each year. A total of 4225 different students participated in the study over the four years of data collection, with 1804 of those students participating more than once.

Figure 1
Overview of Data Collection Strategy

	2007 Data Collection	2008 Data Collection	2009 Data Collection	2010 Data Collection
	(1007 Participants)	(1762 Participants)	(1872 Participants)	(2275 Participants)
First-Year Students	Class of 2010	Class of 2011	Class of 2012	Class of 2013
Sophomores	Class of 2009	Class of 2010	Class of 2011	Class of 2012
Juniors		Class of 2009	Class of 2010	Class of 2011
Seniors			Class of 2009	Class of 2010

Note. Participants were recruited via e-mail; for each class, all students were invited to participate. All participants received a coupon for a free cup of coffee for their participation in the study and were also entered into a lottery drawing for a number of prizes (e.g., t-shirts, gift cards, tickets to sporting events) that were awarded each year. In addition, in 2009 and 2010, the Duke Social Relationships Project team donated \$1.00 to the United Way for each student who participated in the study during the last few weeks of data collection.

Major findings from the Duke Social Relationship Project include the following:

Challenges to Common Perceptions of Duke Culture. Certain findings from the Duke Social Relationships Project present a picture of social life at Duke that is discrepant from common perceptions. Specifically, a substantial proportion of students (36.4% of women and 34.5% of men) reported participating in committed, long-term, romantic relationships (the average length of committed romantic relationships reported by students was 16.05 months for women and 14.58 months for men); many students did not engage in hook-ups (44.5% of “single” women and 46.6% of “single” men had not had any hook-ups over the past six months); and a substantial proportion of students did not engage in high levels of alcohol use (51.1% of women and 44.8% of men described themselves as “non-users” or “very light users” of alcohol). With regard to dating, however, the data do support the perception that many Duke students are not dating very much (55.6% of “single” women and 51.6% of “single” men reported having had no dates over the past 6 months). It is noteworthy, however, that the majority of single students (74.6% of women and 72.4% of men) would like to be dating more.

Friendship and Well-Being. DSRP findings point to the pervasive importance of friendship for well-being in college. Having friends at Duke and having made “life-long” friends at Duke were each predictive of lower levels of loneliness and higher levels of belongingness for students. The characteristics of students’ best friendships at Duke were also predictive of well-being—students whose best friendship at Duke was characterized by lower levels of conflict and higher levels of positive friendship quality (i.e., companionship and recreation, help and guidance, validation and caring, self-disclosure, and ease of conflict resolution) were less lonely and experienced a greater sense of belonging at Duke.

Multiple Predictors of Belongingness. DSRP data suggest that there are multiple pathways to belonging, and that no one club, activity, organization, or leadership role appeared to be most important. However, friendships, academic engagement, and being a fan of varsity sports were important predictors of feelings of belonging at college. So, too, were the following dimensions of psychological experience: thinking that one matters at Duke, identifying with the values of the other students at the university, identifying with the values of the university itself, and thinking that there are other people one can count on within the university.

Loneliness and Belongingness as Distinct Dimensions. Our findings suggest that loneliness and belongingness are to some extent distinct dimensions of students’ social-emotional lives in college. Although having friends and having close friendships predicted to less loneliness and greater feelings of belonging, DSRP findings indicated that academic engagement, being a fan of varsity sports, and perceptions of mattering and identification with the values of the university and the other students were each important predictors of feelings of belonging, but were not predictive of feelings of loneliness. These results suggest that although students’ relationships are important contributors to feelings of loneliness and feelings of belonging, there are distinct facets of the college experience that influence feelings of belonging.

The Complex Role of Alcohol Use and Misuse. Although as described above, a substantial proportion of students (51.1% of women and 44.8% of men) were non-users or light users of alcohol, a small but nonetheless concerning proportion of students reported being “heavy” or “very heavy” users of alcohol (5.4% of women and 10.6% of men). DSRP analyses comparing students who engaged in high levels of alcohol misuse with other students indicated that students who reported higher levels of misuse (according to the AUDIT measure) displayed higher levels of “sociality”, including higher numbers of friends and higher levels of positive friendship quality coupled with higher levels of conflict in their friendships. They also reported having more dates with more different dating partners, and more hook-ups with more different hook-up partners. Students who engaged in higher levels of alcohol misuse reported higher levels of concern with self-presentation and engaging in more drinking to ease feelings of social anxiety, but they also reported lower levels of social anxiety overall. Taken together, these findings suggest that alcohol misuse seems to be “working” for some students in that it was associated with highly active social lives and lower levels of social anxiety. On the other hand, students who engaged in higher levels of alcohol misuse also reported spending more of their time with friends drinking and lower levels of academic engagement—not to mention engaging in levels of drinking that could be considered unhealthy and dangerous.

Academic Engagement and Well-Being. One of our most striking DSRP findings is the degree to which academic engagement (i.e., excitement and passion about one’s academic work) was related to positive well-being across multiple domains. Students who were more academically engaged not only reported knowing more faculty and being more involved in activities and leadership, but they also reported having higher levels of positive friendship quality, as well as lower levels of conflict in their best friendships at Duke. Academic engagement was also associated with lower levels of alcohol misuse and less drinking to ease social anxiety (as well as less social anxiety in general), in addition to higher levels of self-esteem and social self-efficacy. Students who were highly academically engaged reported dating just as much as did other students, but they also reported engaging in less hooking-up. As noted above, academic engagement was one of the strongest predictors of feelings of belonging at Duke.

Taken together, findings from the DSRP provide important information about the social and academic lives of students at Duke. It was never our intention in doing this study to use the data to tell students what is right about Duke or what is problematic. Our hope is that these findings will be used as a basis for conversations about life at Duke and ideas for improvement.