

Peer Connections

Agnes Scott students reflect on the ways supporting each other can lead to long-term friendships.

BY JOANNA NESBIT

When Anna Hillesheim '26 decided to participate in Agnes Scott College's 2024 Spring Annual Research Conference, they knew they wanted to improve their public speaking skills first. The classics major typically felt anxious when speaking before large groups and hoped to feel less nervous and more prepared before presenting their work.

Hillesheim worked with a public speaking tutor, Anjali David '26, to practice and refine their skills through the Center for Writing and Speaking's semester-long Partners Program. David helped Hillesheim stay organized, stick to a timeline and, most importantly, gain confidence.

"The presentation went really well," Hillesheim says. "There was a great turnout, and I felt really confident."

Along the way, Hillesheim and David moved from mentor-mentee to fast friends. These days they hang out together frequently, watching "Dr. Who" or heading into town for dinner. The transition developed naturally, David notes.

"When you see a person outside the writing center in a casual context, you say, 'How's it going?' and that helps you lay the foundation for getting to know them better as a person," she says.

This mentorship-turned-friendship is exactly what Agnes Scott hopes to facilitate. The aim of a liberal arts education is to teach students to think critically, communicate effectively and apply knowledge from across disciplines while developing well-rounded individuals. Agnes Scott takes that aim a step further, guiding students to make connections with others—peers, faculty, staff and alums—and grow personally and professionally along the way.

To support and nurture connections among Scotties, the college intentionally weaves opportunities into its peer programs and resources. Peer mentors at the campus tutoring centers, for example, promote a sense of camaraderie and belonging that usually expands into deeper connections and friendships across disciplines and year levels. Through these peer relationships, students get and give advice for navigating campus life, learn from and encourage each other and collaborate in ways that contribute to personal and professional growth. The bonds benefit students while they are on campus by building companionship and community but also prepare them for the professional world.

Rowan Christopher '25 tutors at both the Center for Writing and Speaking and the Resource Center for Math and Science. Christopher credits mentoring a Post-baccalaureate Pre-medical Program student through a medical school application with helping them develop professional self-assurance of their own.

"It was definitely intimidating to help a grad student, but I thought it would be a good challenge for me," Christopher says.

"I had this fear that I might not know enough to help her. What if she already knows everything I'm going to tell her?"

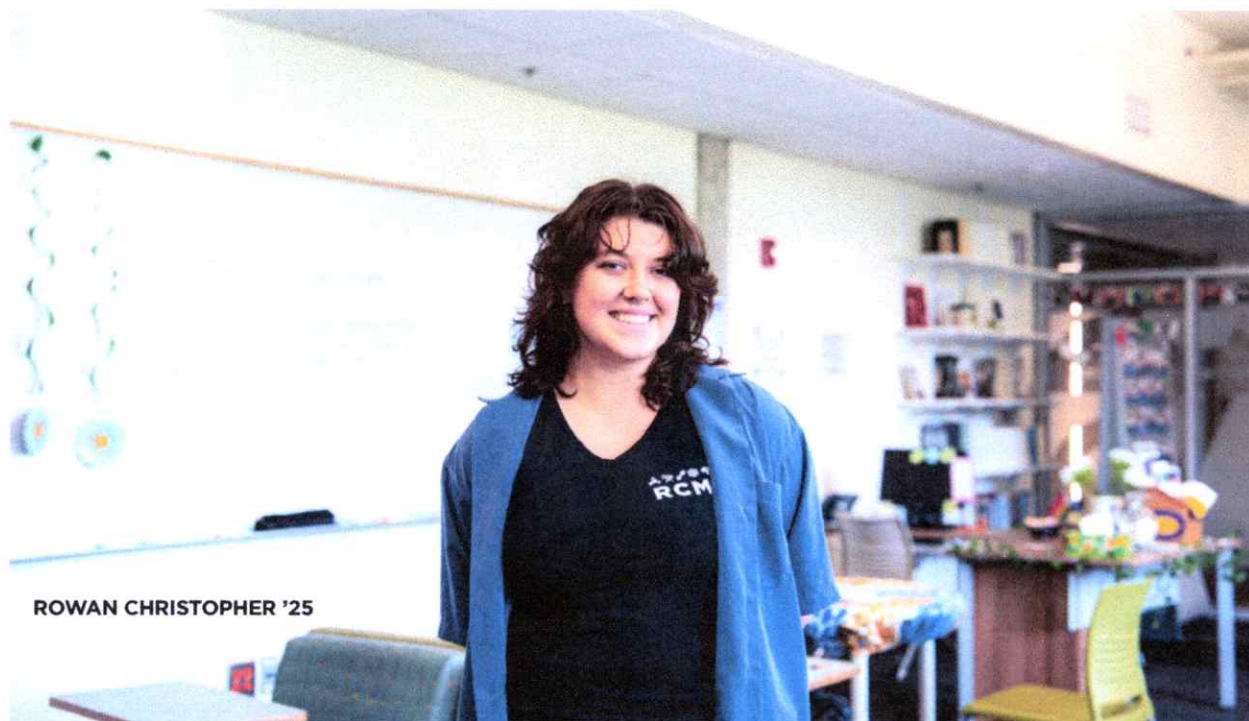
The experience turned out to be collaborative and mutually supportive, boosting Christopher's confidence. Helping the post-bacc student craft her application also helped Christopher later frame their own grad school applications and increased their comfort interacting with graduate students.

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Agnes Scott encourages mentors in peer-to-peer programs to be casual and informal. The friendly tone promotes warmth across ages and classes and encourages younger students to tap older students for reassurance or information.

“I’ve had students come up to me and ask, ‘What’s it like to be a sophomore or junior?’ or ‘Is it hard take these classes together?’” David says. “The mentor-mentee relationship helps create this network from the day you arrive so you always know there’s someone you can ask who’s done this before.”

These connections not only help ease first-year students’ transition to college life, but also cultivate a mentor pipeline that benefits everyone. Those who were mentored as first-years often feel inspired to become mentors themselves, thereby extending to new Scotties the same care and advice they received. Christopher, whose own tutor suggested they consider becoming a tutor, frequently encourages their tutees to apply, especially if they notice someone is deeply engaged in the sessions or knowledgeable about a particular topic.

“I like to hope they love their job as much as I do

and will encourage others to apply,” says Christopher, who remains friends with their former tutor, who has since graduated. After nerding out on chemistry together at the college, the two of them continue to exchange kombucha and other recipes.

Agnes Scott’s small campus size organically contributes to the development of close relationships, but Hillesheim says the college’s conscious efforts to facilitate connections creates a truly special culture.

“I have more friends at all levels of closeness than I ever did in high school,” they say. “It’s really easy to get in contact with just about anyone here because everyone knows everybody.”

Christopher believes the unique campus culture stems from caring deeply for one another, whether a student knows someone else personally or not.

“Agnes cultivates an open and accepting environment for people to be unapologetically themselves,” Christopher says. “The ability to be ourselves also allows us to connect with each other in a special way, and I know the connections that I’ve made will continue.”

