Finding Our Common Spiderhood

Molly Rossi
Sally Hu
Ben Panko

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/forum

Part of the Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Community-Based Learning Commons, Journalism Studies Commons, Nonfiction Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, Photography Commons, and the Publishing Commons

Recommended Citation


This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Forum Magazine by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.
How many times have you been asked, “What brought you to the University of Richmond?”

If you are a freshman, by now you have probably developed a perfectly rehearsed script to rattle off every time. If you are a senior, you might be so tired of answering this question that you just scream, “I DON’T KNOW!!!” in the face of the unlucky person who asks.

In honor of Homecoming, a time for celebrating our common Spiderhood, Forum interviewed students, professors, and staff members to find out what it means to be a Spider. We decided not to ask the typical question, the one you are all tired of answering. There are a million different reasons why each of us ended up on this campus, in this city, with these people. When we made the choice to join this community, and take on one of the least cute critters known to man as our mascot, did any of us know exactly what that would mean? We chose the path leading down Boatwright Drive, but did any of us know exactly what that would look like? Of course not. That’s the part you figure out along the way. So for this article, we were less interested in finding out why people come here, and far more interesting in piecing together why they stay.

**What keeps people at the University of Richmond?**

The answer to that question is the key to defining the UR experience, and to figuring out what sets this place apart.

After compiling the answers we were given by a diverse array of community members,
including an anthropology professor, a dining services employee at Dhall, and a freshman from Pakistan, we created the above word cloud. As you can see, our respondents mentioned many different aspects of our school in explaining why they choose to be here, but there was one common thread that wove itself through nearly every response to our question: people.

Yes, we know that the University of Richmond offers small class sizes, a pretty lake, beautifully matched brick buildings, need-blind admissions, excellent scholarships and financial aid, and just about any resource you could ask for in both academic and extracurricular pursuits. In fact, one of the above is probably the reason that you came here. However, there seems to be something much deeper that's keeping you here.

According to our findings, nothing ties our campus together more strongly than personal relationships. Whether the connection is between peers, between students and professors, between colleagues, or between staff members and students, these relationships are at the core of what makes this place our own. In sophomore Lexi Caldwell’s words, “It's a beautiful campus, but that’s not what makes you stay. It’s the people that make you stay.”

The overwhelming number of responses that we got just like Lexi’s led us to another question:

What is it that makes a Richmond Spider the kind of person that others like to be around?

There is a pretty popular stereotype about what type of person attends UR; supposedly we are wealthy, snobby, preppy, entitled, etc. However, of everyone we interviewed, not a single staff member chose to characterize students with any one of those attributes. In fact, it seems that the strong staff-student connection on campus has a lot to do with how positively our professors and staff members view us as a student body.

Latoya Macklin, a dining services employee that has undoubtedly swiped you into Dhall during your college career, answered my questions with her trademark smile. When I asked why she chose to stay here, she answered, “Well of course, for the students!” Perhaps noticing how surprised I was by her enthusiasm, she further explained, “they are so sweet and appreciative for what we do here. I have connections with them, and there is even one I call my little sister. It’s special to work here.” Whoa. Sweet and appreciative? It is safe to say that this woman has spent more time in Dhall, the scene of the largest daily congregation of students, than many other people on campus ever have or will. To hear the honesty in her voice, and the sincerity in her almost instant reaction to the question, was a pretty uplifting reflection on the student body.

So what did our professors have to say? While their tone was similar to Latoya’s, many professors highlighted the fact that they view their students as not only bright, but relatable, and consistently striving to learn, grow, and improve. For them, these qualities were a key factor in their decision to continue working here.

Professors and staff value the intellectual curiosity of students here, as well as their willingness to build relationships. But how do students view other students here, and how does this contribute to their decision to continue calling UR home?

This year, freshman Faizan Chaudhry took a leap of faith in leaving his native Pakistan to embark on a new chapter of life at the University of Richmond. When I asked him what stood out to him about the students he had met on campus, he replied, “I think people here are accepting. I’m from Pakistan and am Muslim. To survive in a country like the U.S. is a challenge, and I was nervous when school started. But that went away when I saw that people here like me for who I am. Everyone here is reaching out to everyone else.” Julia Rivara, a fellow freshman, has also been impressed by the “openness of the campus community.” Julia frequents the deck outside of Boatwright, and she has found that sitting there and enjoying the lake view from day to day has allowed her to meet “many different people, people who are friendly and just want to talk and get to know you,” without even leaving her favorite perch. These comments were a crucial clue to our investigation of what makes a Spider, because it shows what traits allow our students
to build the relationships everyone seemed to be talking about. Spiders are the type of people who choose to be open and receptive to others.

Many students also feel that the faculty here sets their college experience apart. Why? Because professors don’t spare any effort in getting to know the people behind the 12-28 faces they meet twice a week in class-especially when it comes to remembering names. As Julia Rivara puts it, “My ‘ah ha’ moment was when professors knew my name by the second day of class.” For freshmans Jackie Sirc, this moment came after calling the Student Health Center for help: “The next day, they called me back personally, and knew my name. That small thing changed what this school meant to me. I just knew I couldn’t get that anywhere else. I love being a person and not a number.” Though Jackie came to UR for the International Studies program, it is the little things, the small efforts from staff that go a long way that have kept her here. As Sophomore Taylor Maiorana puts it, “At our school, they don’t over-pack classes- they focus on students.” This focus seems to be making all the difference.

Before the warm fuzzy feeling overwhelms you, it is worth remembering the people we couldn’t talk to: the ones who already left. It is hard to get a sense of the downsides of Spiderhood by talking to people who are happy here at Richmond. So we sat in on a group of students who discussed why they thought people left the university, and this is the one thing they all agreed on: Richmond can be stifling. As a very image-conscious school, people feel claustrophobic within our bubble, and locked into a way of acting and looking that seems hard to break. Amid dozens of niches around campus, some get the distinctive feeling that you just can’t be weird.

After sifting through the good and the bad, we came to our own conclusions about what it means to be a Spider. If you are reading this, it might be because you wanted to go to a school with a pretty lake, or because you won a scholarship, or because you visited in the fall and the Spider Cider had you hooked. Whatever your reason for becoming a student, it isn’t what makes you a Spider. Becoming a Spider is something entirely different.

To be a Spider is to be the kind of person who values people, the kind of person who might recognize the fact that building relationships is the most important thing a human can do with his or her life.

Each of us is responsible for coloring this community, for transforming it a little more each year, into a more accurate reflection of who we are. We make it our own by reaching out, becoming friends, and creating something worth sticking around for.