



Graduate School

Building Your Social Community at Cornell University

JANNA LAMEY: This is the title of the talk. And basically, our goals in the next 45 minutes, maybe 50 minutes, is to talk about why social connection is so important, to talk about social connections as a graduate student, and then I'm going to end on some practical information about, really, how to make a friend. My goal is that everybody will leave today's session with at least a connection with one other person. And so, hopefully, that's something for you to look forward to, as far as that you're all incoming students, and this would be a nice opportunity for you to connect with one another. So this is about why social connectedness and support is so important. And so there's a couple theories out there. And some folks think that we are genetically wired to connect with others, that this is the survival of the species, that we need to connect. Some believe that it's altruism, as far as that we're motivated by other people, and that we're motivated through our own empathy. And that could be part of our evolutionary development. But we care. We want to give something and be able to receive something. And that also talks about the social desirability of helping others, as far as that, we're going to exchange something. I do something for you. You do something with me. and that's how social connections work. I want to show you this. This is part of a story, this figure up here. And these were-- about some twins. They were born 12 weeks ahead of time. They needed intensive care, and they were separated at birth. The nurse was checking in on them, and decided that Brielle, which was the one that was less able to thrive-- she was only 2 pounds when she was born-- that there wasn't much that they could do for her. And so what they ended up doing was taking these two babies, and they put them in the same incubator together. They weren't really sure if Brielle was going to be able to live. And what the nurse found was that in an overnight period, she woke up the next day, and she saw this image, which is the baby that was thriving, had their arm over the baby that wasn't. And the idea being, wow, they noticed that Brielle was actually starting to make a comeback. And so this idea of social connectedness and support, as evidenced through, perhaps, what we're born with, Brielle and Kyrie could teach us a little bit about. So that's why I wanted to share that with you to start this talk about. So there's some social connected-- how does this benefit us? Give me a couple of answers as far as what do you think what is the benefit to social connectedness in your life. So put that in the chat for me. Reduce stress-- absolutely. What else? How does it benefit us when we're connected with other people? Potential help in the future-- yep. Find meaning. [INAUDIBLE] support systems. There's some motivation and confidence-- absolutely. Have fun-- absolutely. So here's the ones that I came up with, as far as ways that social connectedness helps us. That includes support for one own's identity, promotes physical and emotional health, creates feelings of trust, provides safety, gives validation, guidance, encouragement, serves as a sounding board. I have lots in my world that I like to have them listen to me, just to give me some ideas back. Delivers

constructive feedback, and it fosters a sense of belonging. So those are things to be thinking about. We also know that resilience-- you'll hear a lot about that here at Cornell-- resilience, the idea that-- our ability to bounce back when we're-- and to recover when we've experienced some challenging situations, disappointments, or losses. And so what we know, to be able to bounce back from these disappointments or losses is that we need to maintain a social relationship that's grounded in trust, respect, acceptance. And so we want to be resilient. We know that we're going to have some disappointments, or challenging situations, or losses as a graduate student. And therefore, what we need is we need to have social connections. And so that helps to build a resilience. And so we need-- everybody needs a variety of folks on their support network to broaden their perspective, offering guidance, and encouragement. So here's another way that to think about it as far as why this matters. And so just listen to my thoughts here. One is that graduate school is full of challenges. I hope that everybody will agree that that's what you're walking into. You should be challenged. This is an exciting time. So hopefully, you are challenged, as far as to be able to grow academically. And with that, to overcome some of the challenges that may happen, we need to be resilient. And so we know that the best way to increase resilience is that we need connections to others. And in order to do that, we need to create a social community. So social communities are essential to supporting you in overcoming challenges. And social communities are key during graduate school. So another thing to think about-- and I'll just leave you to think about this to yourself, which is, who's in your social community? Like, who's there? And so here's some questions that I would like you just to reflect on. Who's got your back no matter what? So when you think about your people and your world, your tribe that you exist in, your communities that you're part of, like, who's got your back no matter what? Who makes you laugh? I'm hoping that everybody has a little joy in their life. Who's somebody that you can sit with, and have a good laugh with? When you're upset, who do you turn to for comfort and support? Where do you go? Reminds you of your strengths and talents. Who encourages you to try some new things? Those friends make me smile. But anyways, who inspires you to pursue your purpose? Maybe somebody that you left behind, and you're starting graduate school, and they've been an inspiration to you. Who is someone that you can confide in? Who can you share your secrets with? And who teaches you new things? Or who teaches you things that you need to know? And so be thinking about that for a couple of minutes. What I want to do, and as I've done in a couple of other talks, I want to remind you that you really do have this. You've got this. You've got into graduate school for a reason. And so you know this. So what I'd like you to do is go to the Padlet. Here's the QR code. And then here's the link as well. And in that, I want you to spend probably like 3 minutes. I want you to tell us an experience when you were looking to make a friend. You were building your social community. What worked well for you? And what didn't? And what did you learn? We're going to share this with each other because I want you to really see that, hey, look, everybody's trying as far as how to make a friend. What were you looking to do to make a friend? And what did you-- what worked well for you? And what didn't? And then what did you learn? I'm going to stop sharing this. And if you could go to Padlet, that would be good. Padlet, excuse me. I'm hoping you had just a minute to be able to think this through, as far as what your experience has been like. So listening to a person, don't

overwhelm the individual, but similarities, and working through those. I like this one. As someone who is generally more shy, I've been trying to make it a point to take initiative and reach out to someone I meet, even if I'm nervous. Absolutely. I like the person who wrote that they had some questions and discussion topics prepared ahead of time. I still do that with my father whenever I have to call him. Be able to find some common ground. Yeah, I like this one. What I realized in making friends, it doesn't need to be an immediate process. You need time. So stressing about being alone is a certain part of life. And rather than stressing about it, it can be just better to just create some normalcy and routine. Absolutely. I'm going to add to that experience, which is the idea that one person is going to be everything to you as far as a friend is concerned. And so we talk a little bit about that with mentors, like one mentor can't serve all your mentoring needs. Well, the same is true about friendships. And so one friend isn't going to be the one to listen, laugh, go out to all places, and be that forever person, or that's rare to come across. And so you may have friends that you like to go out to a movie with. You may have friends that we want to have deep conversation with. You may have friends that you can cry with. And so it's really understanding some of that differences. Being yourself-- it's important to connect with the right people and is better in the long term than trying to fit in by being someone who you're not. Absolutely. I like this one. Somebody situates themselves, as far as that they do homework in the lobby, where they take classes, so they can get to see people and talk to people sharing similar interests. Absolutely. Well, I just, again, wanted to remind everybody that you do know what to do as far as that this has been something that you've worked with and on in getting to graduate school. So some of this stuff doesn't really change. And so how can you build your community now being in a new place? Let me go back to the talk here. And so I just want to talk a little bit about community during graduate school. And so there's a lot of research out there that talks about academic outcomes as it relates to building a community. So our perceived support-- social support has been linked to a wide range of positive outcomes for American college students, which includes adjustment, motivation, and academic achievement. And with respect to sources of social support within the university context, researchers have traditionally focused on, two, faculty and peers, finding that both are important factors for students' academic, social, and emotional adjustment. And so if this gives you some idea as far as that this is important from an academic perspective, it most certainly is. And faculty members are in that equation. But your peers-- and that's what you all are to one another today. And so building support within this group is really essential to making academic success. One of the things that we do at the graduate school is we help to survey them. And you'll see the doctoral experience survey every other year comes out. And what we're trying to do is measure, really, what's going on for our graduate student community. And so one of the indicators that we look at we call obstacles. And so we have students identify, is this a major or minor obstacle to academic success? So in 2021, so this is a couple years old. But I'll tell you, we've done this survey since 2013, and it's pretty consistent. Feeling overwhelmed is 81% of our students often feel overwhelmed by all that one needs to do. But number two-- sometimes it comes in three or four-- but is loneliness or social isolation. And I share this with you to say that 75% of our doctoral students in 2021 have experienced that as a major or minor obstacle to academic success. And so this is

serious as far as this idea, that social isolation. So building a community can help to combat that. And so we're talking just about the reverse of it, but it's important to know that, yeah, we know our students struggle with this. And so I'm glad that we're talking about it today. I also want to bring up some concepts by Janis Whitlock. And for those of you who don't know, she's one of our Cornell faculty members. So I think it's really good that we look at her. And she does a lot about social belonging. Connectedness in young adults and teenagers is really what she focuses on. But anyways, she says the state of belonging in which individuals perceive that they are valued, cared for, trusted, and respected by individuals and communities who they are in regular contact. And so that is what connectedness is defined as by Janis-- or Dr. Whitlock. She talks about it being a perceived state of being. And I think this is really important as far as that when we think about our communities, if we think that we're of them, then we may be in a better place than if we're not. And so this is a, do I believe-- do I perceive that I'm being valued, or trusted, or cared for? And that is an important piece of this connection to, do we feel connected? It's fundamentally dynamic. Excuse me. This means that it's an active and reciprocal exchange. So if I'm going to feel connected, I need to give some connection, and I may get some connection. So this idea that I'm an active person in this environment. So I'm both the actor and acted upon in the environment. These experiences can be cumulative. So the idea that, hey, look, you lay down some foundation now, so that they can build up is a really good concept. I'll also say that as you are an incoming student, this month of August, September, and even October, this is the time to build those networks. And so what you'll find-- and I think some of it's weather change, but come November, everybody's in their routine, and everybody's got the stressors of being an academic scholar on their mind. And the weather gets cold. And so everybody tends to be inside. So you've got some experiences in the next couple of months. Take advantage of them to be able to build up this reserve of connections with others. Janis also talks about that the personal, it can be intrapersonal, and also interpersonal experiences, as far as for connectedness, and related, it talks about-- she talks a lot about three points. So we can connect with others, which tends to be what people think about when you talk about connectedness. But we also can be connected to ourselves. And so as we think about starting something new, it may be worthwhile to try to figure out what's important to yourself. There's some great resources to be able to explore that. But that may be where you are in the meaning of this world, where you want to go next in your future career, but how do you connect with yourself? And then, finally, Dr. Whitlock has done a lot of work on service, this idea that we increase our connectedness when we're able to give to other people, or be part of community, and that be an important component of connectedness. So something to think about. So I'm going to try something here. I'm not sure if this is going to work. So forgive me, but I'm going to try something here. I want to do a case study where we all participate. And I want to point this out, because this is something that Olivia and I tend to talk to students about, especially first year, first semester students. And I'd like to put this a little bit more on you all because you're all here today. And so I want to say that this is November of 2024. And Sam, who's a first year student, tells you that they're having a difficult time making friends and feeling a sense of belonging here in Ithaca. And so I'm curious, what would you say, or what would you do? And so if you want to-- I'd love to hear some

voices. So if you can unmute yourself and tell me, like, what would you do if this was a friend of yours, or acquaintance of yours, or somebody in a classroom of yours that they're just having a hard time making friends, and feeling a sense of belonging? I want to echo that Olivia and I, we meet with students that say this quite often, as far as that it can be hard here. It can be difficult for somebody to feel like they fit in. So if we all take the temperature of each other, we may be able to help one another. And so that's the spirit of what this is. So tell me, what do you all think? Please, just raise your hand, or don't even raise your hand. Just unmute yourself. What would you say or do if Sam came to you and said that they were having a difficult time making friends and feeling a sense of belonging here in Ithaca? Yep. When students find their sense of belonging within their academic unit, it tends to work well for them. But when they're not feeling a groove there or not feeling like they're connecting, to rely on some outside connections with other resources is key. And I think it's helpful for anybody, especially when you're talking about joining, say, an interest or clubs. And Cornell has 1,000 different clubs and organizations-- 1,000. I mean, I can't even wrap my head around that. And so if you're interested in something, it's likely here. And if not, the structure is that you can start your own club. And so that's fine, too. My point is that if you know what you're interested in, there's likely a club, and that would be a great way to be able to expand your sense of connections with others around a shared interest. I think that's the easiest way to get connected. So Reddick, I thank you very much. I think that's great. And some others-- what do others have to say about this? You would do an inventory of, hey, this is what I'm doing. Does anything sound of interest to you that we can go to together? Fantastic. I did see something about just invite Sam out for a cup of coffee-- absolutely. Probably just offer to chat-- fantastic. And so I guess I wanted to try this case study because I think it's real, as far as that this is what we often hear or often talk to students about. And so I don't want to make this a prophecy of what your experience is going to be, but I do want to encourage you to be able to notice your others that are around you. And it may be that, hey, look, coming to a new place can be hard. And so making friends and feeling a sense of belonging can be a real challenge for some. And that's fine. So be part of the solution is really what I'm suggesting that we all do together. So thank you. So I want to go into this a little bit more practical, as far as how to make friends. And so I know that sounds a little crazy, but there's this gentleman. His name is Mark-- Matthew Hussey. And he's on-- he's got some YouTube tips out. And anyways, he talks a lot about this idea that when we're kids, or when we're really little, a parent will put us in a sandbox, or take us to a playground. And you just would go, and you'd be with other kids. And you'd make new friends, and whatever that may mean. And the idea that it gets harder as we become adults, as far as, how do you make friends as an adult? And I'm going to add on, it gets harder when you're starting a new place, too, as far as that this isn't any area that you've known before-- some of you may not have known before. So how do you make friends? And so here are some tips that he has said, and other people have said as well, the first one didn't show up here, so I apologize, but about being vulnerable. And somebody mentioned it at the beginning as far as knowing that, yeah, you're going to have to show a little bit of yourself, or share something about your private self that maybe received well or may not. And so there's a need to be vulnerable in these kinds of situations to be able to make friends, just to be able to share. A tip would be to take the initiative. Tell

people that you're new here. And so it's an easy opening. You guys are here. Like I said, this month of August, September, October is so critical. And so, hey, look, I'm a first-year student. What do you think? What do you do for fun? People want others to take initiative. So how to do that, and how to use the fact that you're new is what I would tell you to do the most, to be honest with you. Do a new experience. And so this is a great opportunity. We have PE classes. We have these clubs. Maybe there's something you always wanted to do. And so try it and see. The landscape here is very different. We have five different national or state parks here-- excuse me-- state parks that are in New York State within Tompkins County. So go check them out. I mean, there's new experiences all around you. So try that in an effort to make friends. Be excited. Just this idea that, hey, look, everybody-- most people want to hang out with folks that are excited to be there. And so to be aware what you put out there, the positivity, will be something that hopefully will be reciprocated by others. This idea about making a contribution, I think, is sort of interesting. But this idea that, what are you going to bring to the friendship? And so what is it that you're going to-- are you going to be the listener? Are you going to be the person that's going to be fun, or maybe create laughter, or maybe you're going to be a safe person to have somebody cry their shoulder on. But what kind of contribution can you make to that friendship? And think that through. I already talked about being positive, which I think is fine. And I mentioned this a little earlier about realizing that different friends have different roles. And that's absolutely fine. And I'd encourage you as an adult to talk about the struggle of making friends. And so maybe with somebody that you're interested in making friends with, or in the event that you need some help to be able to talk this through. Come and see Olivia and I as far as that this can be a really hard challenge to be able to make friends as an adult. So I want to point out there was a New York Times article. This was in December 2022. And basically, it was talking about developing strong relationships is the single most important thing that you can do to have a fulfilling life. And it put together what was called the 7-Day Happiness Challenge. It's still there. And I apologize that it's really small in the bottom. But it's still online. But you can do this. This was based off of Harvard Medical School. And it was a book called The Good Life. And so it talked about the secret power of an 8-minute phone call. This idea that you can call somebody, and keep it to 8 minutes. You don't have to plan on an hour-long conversation to keep connection. You can do it in 8 minutes, and that's fine. It talked a lot about how to make small talk, the importance of writing a living eulogy, the importance of not canceling plans. And that was perhaps for my introverted colleagues, myself included. Don't cancel. Push yourself through it, and go, and do, and do, and do. And then the last one that they talked a lot about was the importance of making work friends. And just the idea that you're in the setting for a very long time. Who are these people that you're working with? Your happiness is going to be determined by other people around you. And if you work a lot, you probably want to have some work friends. And so it's interesting, but you can go on, and you can sign up, and they still will send you an email about the Happiness Challenge. And what I wanted to do is I wanted to show you one example, because I thought it was sort of interesting as far as that. One of the seven impactful actions is about small talk has big benefits. And I think this is an area that most people, and graduate students, and everybody struggles with is about small talk. And so the advice that they had from this one challenge was to talk to someone

that you don't know well, a stranger, or both. And so to make it an effort that, hey, every day, you're going to go up to somebody that you don't know well, or a stranger, and just talk to them. Talk about the weather. Talk about what's going on in the world around you. Talk about that Cornell is doing this and this sport, or whatever it is. But talk to somebody you don't know well. It also talked about opportunities for friendly moments of uplift, and just this idea that, hey, look, when you go up to somebody, and, hey, look, I like your shirt, or wow, that umbrella is really neat. How did it get to do that? Those are friendly moments of uplift, where you are creating a scenario where that person will be uplifted, and you will be as well. And so, again, the impact of small talk can have some big benefits to that. It talks a lot about weak ties have an impact on our connectedness, mood, and energy. So just this idea that we don't, again, need to have great conversations with only those people that are in our friend group. But these weak ties can have an impact on our connectedness. And so it may be worthwhile for that stranger that serves me coffee to say, hey, are you having a great day? So that person may feel uplifted, and I may be as well. And so this idea that weak ties, people that we don't really know, can really impact our ability to-- how we feel and navigate in the world. And then, finally, it talked about studies that have actually shown that, we're rarely rejected, and we're actually perceived as more likable than what we think we are. And so a lot of times when we think about small talk, we're worried about the rejection that other people will have on us. But in fact, that's not true. We're rarely rejected. And the other person thinks that we're more likable than perhaps we thought we were. And so it's just something to consider. So like I said, we're going to do a breakout room right now. And I want to make sure-- one of the goals was that you each will meet one person, and be able to, hopefully, leave with a connection with one. So we're going to do a breakout room. And the only thing that I'm going to tell you to do is to do some small talk. And so there's not really a script here. I just want you to spend a couple minutes. I'll give you 6 minutes. And we're going to put you in rooms of three. And I just want you to experiment with what small talk may feel like. I should tell you that I can see if you're talking or not in the system that I have. And so I'm looking for some activity in the talk thing go on so that we can say that we're practicing our small talk, and what that looks like. And so you can small talk anything. You've now all shared this experience of being together for the last 45 minutes. So you can talk about what that's been like for you as well, whatever it is. But try some small talk so we can try this out. So I'm going to break you out. I think we got everybody back. I'm curious. How did that feel? I've never done a really not structured breakout room. How was it? Got heart, a thumbs up, fantastic, a thumbs up.

AUDIENCE: It was great.

JANNA LAMEY: It worked great. That's fantastic! And the skill being that we were practicing small talk, right? Good. And did anybody exchange emails or something to get-- to start building your social community? Give me a thumbs up if you did. [LAUGHTER] We'll go with a few of you. That's fantastic. Well, I'm glad-- I hope that started to break down that wall of trying to do small talk, because I'm going to guarantee you you're going to be doing a lot of small talk while you're here as a graduate student, for sure. And so I've just got a couple more things to share, and I also recognize that it's almost noon here. So I won't keep you

too much longer. But let me-- sorry. There we go. So here's some resources I just wanted to make sure to mention as we think about social community and social connectedness. We do have a barn. And so you'll hear more about this later. But this is our Big Red Barn, Graduate Professional Student Center. It's beautiful and fantastic. And this is where all the graduate and professional students hang out. So you'll be put on an email list. And so you'll start hearing from them the week that you're here. And so there's a special-- there's a couple special events as well. But just know the barn is yours. Campus groups, we talked a little bit about over 1,000 different clubs and organizations. This is where you go to find out about those clubs and organizations. There's called the GPSA. It's the Graduate Professional Student Assembly, and so an opportunity to get involved in our student governance structure, and allows you to be part of the campus-wide conversations about important issues for our graduate and professional students. The graduate school, we also have what's called our diversity-- our Office of Inclusion and Student Engagement. And they work with 14 different clubs and organizations that sit around affinity groups. And so they may be somebody that you want to check out to see what's available. They have a great relationship with the graduate school here. So we're able to do more for our students that identify or want to be included in different community groups. Our health center, we do have some discussion. Why I bring this up here is that sometimes building connections is a really challenging thing for students. And so I don't want to minimize anxiety being a part of your experience. And so there may be some ways and some things that you can do to help support yourself as you are able to navigate some of the social contexts of being a graduate student here. And if you have questions about that, I'm happy to chat some more. Visit Ithaca. It's a great community. So get out there and learn about our community, and Tompkins County. And so this is a great website. It has the restaurants, and the different bars, the different locations, the national parks, everything that Ithaca has available. Please check that out. There's Facebook and Instagram about the Big Red Barn. I should put that at the top. But anyways, you can check us out there. And I want to know about taking classes. Whenever we talk to students about this session, they talk about the PE courses. There's golf. There's juggling. And then there's a wines course that everybody takes, or wants to take. So my point is check out the courses. Of course, you need to do your academic, but there may be some opportunities to build connections off of a shared interest. And just, again, I want to note that social connectedness or opportunities are all around us. And so again, the Big Red Barn, we do have fitness centers and PE courses, student organizations, and clubs. There's community organizations. I should mention a lot of our churches and schools will actually interact with a lot of our graduate students. We do a grasshopper program that allows us to have our STEM students get out into the schools, which is pretty cool. And our churches actually do a lot as far as sponsoring our graduate students to give them a home during the time that a lot of our graduate students have done. The Public Service Center, if you're interested in volunteering, that is where you need to go. These are Cornell vetted kind of opportunities. And so it gives you a little bit more support and structure to be able to do that. Of course, there's some departmental club organizations, some affinity groups, the Office of Global Learning for International Students, or those that are interested in international experience. It has a lot of programming. We have an Office of Spirituality and

Meaning-Making. A lot of our students want to understand the meaning of life kind of things as they start off in graduate school. I only smile because I think it's absolutely valid and warranted. And they have different-- they have over 30 different chaplains that are connected to this office, which is a really good support structure. And then we also have Student Disability Services, again, a connection to be made in that community as well. You're going to get our grad newsletter that's sent weekly to your email. And so look out for that. The first one you'll get is likely on August 19. And so you'll start hearing about some of the things that are available for community for our graduate students in particular. So again, for those of you that have been here, please make sure that you give us some feedback. We always want to make sure that our information is good, and valid, and supportive. So please, take the time to send us some feedback here. And thank you so much. I'll stay on for a couple of minutes. If you'd like to chat some more, please, feel free to do that. But thank you all for taking the time. And I apologize again for the late start. And if you have any questions, we're happy to answer them. So again, thank you so much for being here today.