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Connecting with those Professors

Halie Olson

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They say that one of the greatest perks to being a student at Harvard is having access to world-class professors and faculty members—which is totally true. What’s also true is that it can sometimes be a bit intimidating to initiate those relationships. Luckily, Harvard tries pretty hard to make it as easy as possible for even those less-extroverted of us to make connections with faculty members—and one of my favorite ways that they do this is with faculty dinners!

Two weeks ago we had the first Faculty Dinner of the semester in my House, Currier, and I invited my professor from a class called “Reading Difficulties” that I’m taking at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It’s a super cool class that covers reading difficulties and dyslexia from a variety of neurobiological, diagnostic, theoretical, and educational perspectives. I’m really interested in the intersection between developmental cognitive neuroscience and education, particularly when it comes to reading, so it’s one of my favorite classes I’ve taken here. As a side note, it’s really easy to cross-register for classes at any of Harvard’s graduate schools! Just talk to the professor from the class you want to take, and if they’re okay with it then you just fill out an online request and it will show up on your transcript.

Anyway, back to faculty dinner. After meeting up with my professor in Currier’s lobby, we went to the Housemaster’s residence for a pre-dinner reception. Currier’s Housemasters, Richard and Elizabeth, are like the “parents” of the House—they are very involved in the House community, including organizing these faculty dinners every semester. Currier students are invited to their residence a couple times a month for Open Houses, and you can also find them in the dining hall chatting with students over dinner.

The actual dinner took place in Currier’s dining hall, which was spruced up for the event with white tablecloths, flowers, and cloth napkins. Looking fancy! The three-course meal was delicious—the dining staff really outdid themselves, and I somehow made room to stuff my face with chocolate for dessert. The best part wasn’t even the food though—it was the chance to have a one-on-one conversation with my professor about her work, her life path and experiences, and our shared love of running and The Princess Bride (both the book and the movie). I realized that we actually have a lot in common, barring the fact that she totally has her life together and I totally don’t yet, and I’m really glad that I had the chance to share a meal with her.

Faculty dinners aren’t the only chance to get to know your professors though! All professors hold weekly office hours, which is time that they set aside specifically to meet with undergraduates. Whether you want to go over material from class or chat about something else, they’re usually really excited to talk to the students in their class. Another new initiative this year is the Classroom to Table program, where a group of 3-5 undergraduate students can invite a professor out to a meal in Harvard Square, paid for by the college. Professors and free food in Harvard Square? You can’t go wrong!

My initially shy, awkward self has come to realize that the professors here really do care about their students and want to get to know them—so if you put in the first step to reach out, you’ll have the opportunity to get to know some really amazing people.