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Homesickness Goes to College: Virtues, Vocation, and Growth

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Mary Bryant

Abstract

Most if not all of us have experienced homesickness, something that afflicts the majority of first-semester college students and can impact both their academic progress and retention in school. Promoting education and activities that encourage virtue and character development contribute to an antidote to homesickness. For the continued success of students and colleges, institutions of higher education should go beyond academics and seek to educate the whole person with an educational philosophy that emphasizes growth, moral formation, and vocation.

Leah stared at her computer screen, willing the words for her literature paper to come to her mind. Instead, thoughts of home filled her head: her dad's home-cooked meals, cozy game nights with her little brothers, hanging out at the local pizza place with her closest friends, and her loyal tabby cat, Dede, keeping her feet warm at night. She had none of that here at college. What was wrong with her? She had longed for the chance to be independent and pursue her dream to become a journalist. But her heart ached so much she couldn't focus.

Leaving home and embarking on the journey that is college can feel like landing in OZ with a cast of new faces, unfamiliar challenges, and, worst of all, no Auntie Em to make it all better. The first few days and weeks on a college campus may, for many students, mark their first extended experience living away from home. Students find themselves adapting to a new learning environment while they are also challenged to develop new social networks and emotional support systems.



Students often struggle with homesickness their first year of college.

All of this can prove a tall order for students out on their own for the first time. What is it about leaving home that so unsettles some students that, despite their desire to attend college, live on a college campus, and pursue their education, they give up and return home?

Loneliness or feelings of displacement affect our sense of belonging (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 65), and leaving home to establish oneself on a college campus can be an unsettling experience. When homesickness in college students persists, it amplifies other concerns such as anxiety and stress and becomes a problem that the institution must address with education focused on the whole person.

Homesickness Goes to College

At this point, you may be wondering just how necessary it is to get so concerned about homesickness in college students. Everyone can get homesick, and everyone moves on, right? Surprising as it may be, homesickness has been recognized as a powerful force throughout history, influencing people of all ages to make dramatic life decisions or distracting them from living out their full potential.

Historical Concern From the ancient Israelites in exile¹ to *The Odyssey*² and *Beowulf*,³ various documents—historical, religious, literary—record the reality of homesickness faced by humans through the ages. Polynesian folk stories bear witness to the power of homesickness as well, with tales of travelers ship-wrecked or otherwise lost before finally making their way home. One Fijian drama tells of a

spring in the afterlife that provides the “Water of Solace,” which alleviates the homesickness suffered by the dead (Beckwith 177, 199). Historical homesickness has also been uncovered in letters written home by those abroad, including Roman soldiers and medieval Oxford University students (“Soldier Homesick”; Crouch 234).

Even ancient medicine was concerned with homesickness as a legitimate ailment. Hippocrates, the Greek physician widely considered the father of modern medicine, theorized on the cause and treatment of homesickness (Thurber et al.). Two millennia later, while treating homesick soldiers with symptoms such as lethargy and even dementia, Swiss physician Johannes Hofer added a new ailment to the medical lexicon of the 17th Century, which he called “nostalgia” (Thurber et al.; Smith 195–96). This condition of nostalgia, or fatal homesickness, was so greatly feared by military leaders that “Home Sweet Home” was banned from being played among the Union army during the American Civil War (Smith 148).

Today, modern medicine continues to recognize homesickness as a health concern. Christopher A. Thurber, psychologist, and Edward A. Walton, pediatric physician, define homesickness in *The Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* as “distress and functional impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home and attachment objects such as parents” (Thurber et al.). Homesickness, when ignored, can impact mental health and lead to further medical problems, such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and even immune deficiencies (Thurber and Walton 1–2).

Since ancient times, we all, somewhere along life’s way, have longed to be “home,” a place of safety and security. At those times we are not unlike first-year college students. In fact, Thurber and Walton consider homesickness a nearly universal experience, suggesting that most everyone misses some aspect of home during times away (Thurber and Walton 1).

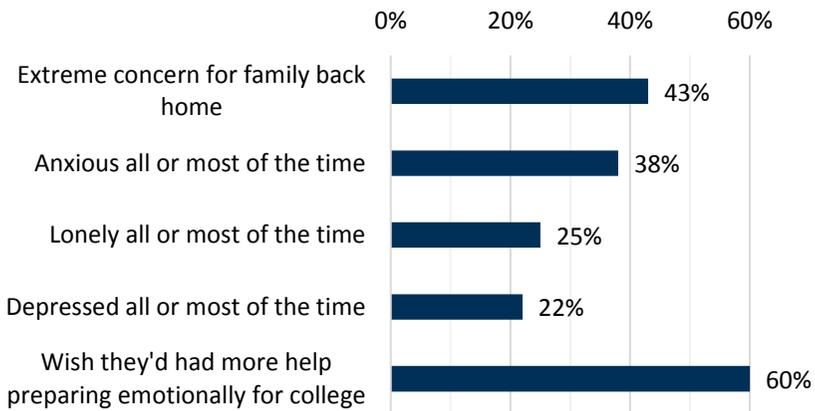
University Woes It makes sense, then, that students experience an array of emotions as they move from “home” home to their new “college” home. Elation at the idea of attending college may be accompanied by worry about the experience, fear of the unknown, and

unhappiness at leaving the familiar. The intensity of this emotional response may come as a surprise to both students and their families. In fact, experiencing an array of emotions during this transition is normal. But normal as it may be, not all students are able to get over feelings of homesickness on their own.

Homesickness takes its toll on students' physical and emotional well-being and impacts both academic performance and persistence through the first semester and first year. Feeling emotionally unprepared to deal with college stressors will only make things worse. A look at statistics on homesickness indicates just how widespread the problem is for first-year students.



Student Feelings: First Term at College

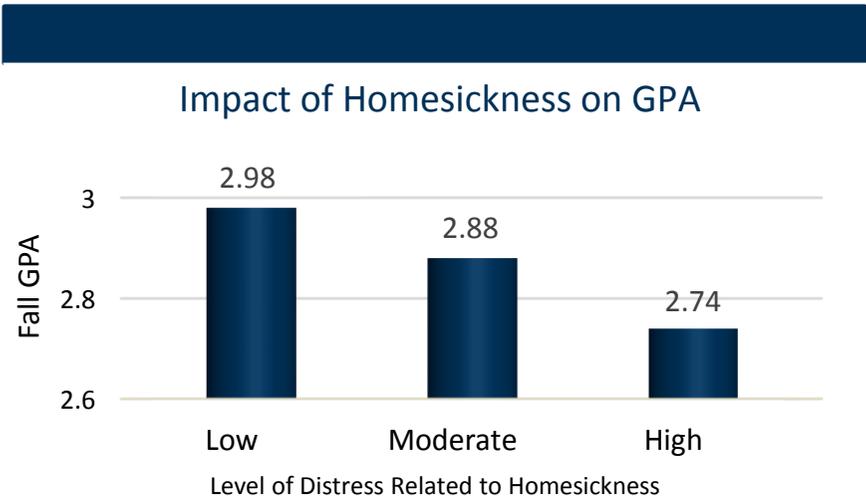


In a 2015 Harris Poll survey, anxiety, loneliness, depression, and extreme concern for family back home all emerged as student concerns during the first term at college. Sixty percent of first-year students reported wishing they had been given more help in preparing emotionally for college (*The First-Year College Experience* 31, 4, 16).

Perhaps even more concerning is the effect that homesickness may have on first-year students' academic performance and persistence into the second year. A 2014-2015 Mapworks Fall Transition Survey measuring the behaviors and expectations of students entering a

college or university included alarming information collected from 120,967 first-year college students from 127 two- and four-year institutions in the United States (*College Student Homesickness 2*).

The survey found that students suffering from distress related to homesickness (negative feelings or regret associated with leaving home) had lower GPAs than those suffering less distress (*College Student Homesickness 2, 8*). Further, fewer homesick students returned to college for the second semester, a trend that continued into the second year (*College Student Homesickness 9–11*). It is apparent that homesickness does factor into a student’s academic success and affects his or her decision to return to college.



Homesick students who do not persist with their education or experience less than hoped-for academic success often abandon school with a sour taste in their mouths. Students who leave college early are laden with extra debt, without the degree they had hoped would lead to a good job; their plans fall into disarray as they look for a new path forward and rethink their plans for the future. In addition, these young people may be less likely to try to leave home again for fear that they won’t be able to cope with the stressors they encounter.

Colleges strive to retain the students they’ve worked hard to recruit. Persistence or lack thereof affects not only the student but also the

educational institution. Although it has not always been so, in the current economic and political climate, poor retention and persistence rates affect schools' reputations as well as their finances (Field A10). On a more personal level, colleges invest in their students as people. Losing students hurts.

Homesickness has an impact on both students and institutions and is not something that we should ignore. It seems sensible that we seek solutions not just to help young people experience a more satisfactory adjustment to college, but to offer tools for managing these feelings whenever they may arise throughout life's course.

Higher Education as Homemaker

If the source of homesickness is separation from familiar people and places one feels attached to, then it makes sense that getting involved, building connections, and cultivating new relationships are key to feeling more at home and less homesick. For many students, that can be easier said than done; and for institutions, generally impossible to impose on students. What institutions can do is intervene with education that nurtures the whole person, providing students with tools to make these new connections on their own.

Let us be clear. Intervention by academic institutions is not the entire (nor only) solution to the problems that can arise from homesickness. But because homesickness can so negatively impact both students and their institutions, it is a responsibility of institutions to acknowledge the problem and take steps to respond. We suggest that the best response is to provide comprehensive education, including formational and vocational, within an educational philosophy that nurtures growth to help students find their way through what can be distressing times.

Education as Formation In light of the statistics cited earlier on students' feelings of emotional unpreparedness and likelihood of homesickness, it seems clear that many students are still in formational stages when they come to college. In order to help them succeed in their endeavors at college and beyond, institutions of higher education must be involved with formative as well as academic education. Moral education is concerned with the moral formation of the whole person,

with specific attention to shaping character and nurturing virtues (Beaty and Henry 3; Nord 32).

Traditionally, higher education had understood its work to be framed as moral education. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, has argued that moral development of students should still be a goal of higher education, contending that service to society is among one of higher education's most important functions (11). In fact, for many private and Christian colleges, moral concerns still hold a place in their educational model.⁴

Unfortunately, today many educational institutions shy away from claiming moral authority or adhering to a specific ideology. Citing the inability of the University of Virginia to explicitly condemn the white supremacist marchers on campus who threw Charlottesville into chaos in 2017, UVa German professor Chad Wellmon laments "the contemporary university . . . seems institutionally incapable of moral clarity." Yet, Wellmon does not see this as something to rectify; it is merely what he sees as the reality of educational institutions today.

Virtue ethicist Paul J. Wadell and moral philosopher Darin H. Davis, however, insist that the mission of a Christian liberal arts education must include moral education, i.e., not only career preparation but also the formation of people who are "good, truthful and wise" (149). By providing moral education, colleges can better equip students to recognize problems and seek help early as well as help their peers through difficult experiences. The emphasis on developing character virtues such as perseverance, ambition, courage, hope, and self-discipline contributes to a student's resilience, the ability to keep going through hardship and enhance his or her ability to cope with the feelings that comprise homesickness.⁵

In addition to being strengthened by these virtues, resilience is also buoyed by a nurturing environment. In their book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and psychologist Adam Grant outline the four beliefs that help children build resilience: "(1) they have some control over their lives; (2) they can learn from failure; (3) they matter as human beings; and (4) they have real strengths to rely on and share" (11). If these beliefs

aren't in place yet for students attending college for the first time, then it is more important than ever to start cultivating them.

Angela Duckworth, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, has examined the characteristics of people who display resilience, what she calls "grit," with an eye toward understanding what makes some people more able than others to rebound from life's challenges. Grit keeps resilient people going and is supported by passion and perseverance (56). Passion is sparked by interest and enjoyment, and nurtured when there is purpose fueling that passion (Duckworth



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91). Together with perseverance, i.e., enduring something essentially good despite difficulties or failure (Wadell and Davis 148), these two virtues make for more resilient people, who can see the pain of homesickness as one segment of a longer journey toward fulfillment of their potential.

For perseverance to be meaningful, it must be accompanied by courage and hope. Courage is needed to face daunting challenges within and without. Hope keeps one going in spite of disappointment or undesirable circumstances. According to Wadell and Davis, "if human life is a pilgrimage toward the good . . . hope sustains us on that journey by keeping us focused on what is best and most perfecting" (146). Hope is the most essential part of what makes one resilient. Without hope, there is no reason to make that effort to keep going (Duckworth 91–92).

Vocation Most students who set out to attend college really want to be there. That's why the pain of homesickness in those early days can be so discouraging. And why staying on campus and weathering the storm of homesickness can, ultimately, be a transformative experience for students. But how can anyone persevere through personal misery without a sense of the world beyond themselves? As discussed above, perseverance may be an essential part of managing homesickness, but a sense of purpose in the world and a

vocation that brings meaning to that sense, must come first. After all, why persevere if there is no greater call, nothing beyond to hope for?

Vocation is one of those slippery terms that can have different meanings for different people. Though it was originally borrowed from the Latin stem “*vocation*,” meaning a “call” or “summons,” today its usages range from “a particular occupation” to “a strong impulse or inclination to follow a particular activity or career” to “a function or station in life to which one is called by God (“Vocation”). In moral education, the term “vocation” lands squarely in the realm of “calling.”

Three factors define a calling, according to Bryan J. Dik and Ryan D. Duffy, professors of psychology and leading researchers in the area of vocation. First, there must be some external “summons,” some recognized need outside oneself calling for service; second, it must be a source of purpose and meaning in one’s life; third, it must be beneficial to others and the common good (11–13).

People who have found their calling, their vocation, are happier and find their lives more satisfying. They are better able to cope with difficulties such as homesickness and less likely to be overwhelmed by stress or suffer from depression. Such people tend to say they have a strong sense of meaning and purpose, as well (Dik and Duffy 17).

Service, one of Dik and Duffy’s necessary conditions of vocation, also can initiate a change in how people think about themselves—as more compassionate, giving people, for example. It can impact one’s emotional state and encourage a more hopeful view of the world, possibly because people who serve may start to perceive themselves as helping to resolve many of the disheartening problems of the world (94).

Colleges engaged in formative, moral education aim to help students recognize the needs of the world and respond by answering the call to serve others. A student’s vocation, more likely than not, will evolve over time, having less to do with personal choice or passion and more to do with finding a place of meaningful engagement with the world and the commitment to good (Dik and Duffy 14; Wadell and Davis 141, 150). It is an approach to life and work that emphasizes the impact one’s efforts

has on others (Dik and Duffy 15). It may not be home, but finding one's place and purpose—one's vocation—is grounding nonetheless.

Educational Context Liberal Arts and Christian colleges that are committed to moral formation as part of their educational philosophy consider it their moral obligation to care for their students and practice moral virtues. These institutions are well-positioned to help their students discover vocations and develop virtues within the context of an educational philosophy that focuses on growth.

Crucial to character development and self-improvement in general is deliberate practice and a "growth mindset," the belief that one can cultivate abilities, including intellectual skills, through effort. What's more, having a growth mindset (versus a "fixed mindset") significantly impacts one's tendency to thrive during challenging times and develop in perseverance and resilience (Dweck 7, 12). Having a growth mindset and the motivation to practice and develop new skills helps students recognize that they can improve their situation and see their homesickness as a temporary condition that can get better with effort.

Perhaps the most helpful action that adults who interact with students who are homesick can take is to set high academic expectations and provide students with the tools that, given effort, allows them to achieve these goals. Then teach students to set their own realistic, achievable goals, and also how to reach out for help when needed. That may be easier said than done, but attaining meaningful goals through one's own efforts results in a sense of accomplishment and control over one's destiny, which further improves self-esteem, changes one's views of one's own capabilities, and spurs on the desire to experience those feelings again.

The educational environment should also be one that nurtures people and allows students to learn and make mistakes without fear of humiliation—an environment that cultivates the courage needed to face the prospect of such uncomfortable possibilities later (Forbes Coaches Council). Based on Sandberg and Grant's findings, it's clear that colleges should create an environment that encourages the growth of resilience—where students feel safe enough to ask questions, to get

things wrong at first, to learn from failure, and where they feel cared for.

There is no one right way for a college to respond. What is essential, however, is that institutions not ignore the problem but instead engage in conversations about how to deal with homesickness in the context of addressing the whole person.

Educating the Whole Person at the University of Dubuque Let's take a look at one example of an institution that emphasizes the whole person in education—the University of Dubuque, where this journal is housed. At the University of Dubuque, we seek to support our students and guide them in the development of their character. Our mission states the University practices its Christian commitments by educating students, pursuing excellence in scholarship, challenging students to live lives of worth and purpose, and preparing students for service to the church and the world (“Mission, Vision and Values”). Therefore, the University of Dubuque is committed to:

- A hospitable Christian environment which respects other faith traditions;
- Relationships which encourage intellectual, spiritual, and moral development;
- Excellence in academic inquiry and professional preparation;
- A diverse and equitable community where Christian love is practiced;
- Stewardship of all God's human and natural resources;
- Zeal for life-long learning and service.

From the University's mission emerge specific programs for supporting our students. The Wendt Center for Character Education has the mandate to promote a campus culture of excellent moral character and purposeful lives through various initiatives, including campus character lectures and a program that cultivates character leaders within the student body.

First-year students begin their education at the University of Dubuque by identifying their strengths as a way toward empowering them to

respond to the world's needs—in other words, helping them hear a vocational call.

We offer a course in personal empowerment, which encourages growth mindsets and teaches coping skills such as resilience and stress tolerance, and a Bridge Program aimed at supporting a successful transition for underprepared first-year students. Community service is required in some courses and encouraged across campus.



What is essential is that institutions not ignore the problem but instead deal with homesickness in the context of addressing the whole person.

Our “caringly intrusive” philosophy permeates our work with students and guides us in our interactions. Structurally, we take attendance, employ an alert system that identifies at-risk students, and follow up on concerns with a care team trained to respond to a variety of student matters.

Aware of homesickness and adjustment issues among students, and in support of our goal to support the growth of each student intellectually, socially, and spiritually, the University of Dubuque is also graced with the services of a very special individual. We have a Campus Mom who serves as a “mom away from home” for those times when students need comfort and support similar to what they get from parents at home.

Our Campus Mom knows firsthand both the telltale signs that a student is feeling homesick as well as the impact homesickness has on students. She is always ready with “Kleenex and chocolate” and an open ear to listen to whatever students might need to share with her about their distress and anxiety. In “Mom’s” experience, the first few days that a student is on campus are often tough for first-year students to navigate without feeling the pangs of missing home. *I miss my friends, I don’t have any friends here, or I need my family* are only some of the laments that students share with her during the first few days. “Mom” addresses

virtue and vocation, but does so in a way that encourages active participation, helping students make new connections—talking with each other, joining one another at meals, hanging out together and generally becoming involved in campus life (Smelzer).

Other colleges and universities are also beefing up their student support, taking on more programs that nurture the whole person. Southern Utah University has recently redesigned its academic advisers into “student success coaches” who check in on students’ social and emotional health as well as their academics. SUU also implemented personality assessment in first-year student orientation and followed up with those identified as introverts to help them get involved, while Indiana University at Kokomo has begun offering a student-success seminar for first-years that emphasizes growth mind-set (Field A12-13). Phi Beta College has put in place a “Meaningful Work Initiative,” which included a new course elective on work and meaning, a fellowship program, and a variety of service learning opportunities to guide students through their search for vocation. Similarly, Richboro University emphasizes the importance of a purposeful life with a themed sophomore residence hall, involving its residents in small group discussions, dinners, trips, and retreats, all focused on purpose exploration (Clydesdale 60–64, 75–76). It is our hope that such trailblazing programs will pave the way for further comprehensive whole-person education across the higher education spectrum.

Conclusion

Homesickness is a real malady that should be taken seriously. Remember Leah? The first-year student who couldn’t focus because she was so miserable being away from home? How might her experience change if her school is focused on formation as well as academics, with programs and initiatives that encourage her to grow, build virtues, and make connections with other students? Perhaps within the first week, one of Leah’s professors assigns community service, and another professor has her take an aptitude test.

Getting out into the community to serve others who need her may be eye-opening. The aptitude test could reveal new areas of potential she hasn’t considered before. Her goal to become a journalist may become

stronger and better defined, or she may discover some new passion and vocation she is well suited to. She may still be homesick, but she is no longer solely focused on her unhappiness; she believes she can learn and feels called to serve in the world. She is developing virtues such as passion and perseverance, which assist her in recognizing that she can overcome short-term adversity and weather the throes of homesickness.

Colleges must be engaged in formative, moral education that emphasizes virtues, vocation, and growth. Whole person education empowers students to overcome homesickness, grow, and thrive.

Pamela Crawford is the Director of the Bridge Program at the University of Dubuque. Pam came to UD from a long career as a public school teacher and administrator. Pam holds a B.A. from Loras College, M.A. from Clarke University, and Ed.D from Drake University.

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Photo credit p. 46: Mary Bryant

Notes

¹ See Num. 14.3, Ps. 139, e.g.

² See Book 1 of Homer, e.g.

³ See Heaney 79; lines 1128-1130, e.g.

⁴ The debate over whether moral education has a place in formal education is not new. In ancient Greece, Aristotle grappled with the question of how moral virtue can and should be taught. His opinion was that education was essential for developing good and virtuous people. Where nature is not enough, “we learn some things by habit, and some by instruction” (1331b-1332b). For two millennia, moral education was the norm in Western education. College “was

supposed to offer moral guidance, to inculcate wisdom, and to teach students to value truth, beauty, and goodness” (Holmes 1).

⁵ Other responses can also contribute to helping students overcome homesickness, but too often moral formation is ignored as a solution. Other practices such as mindfulness, gratitude, meditation, and therapy can also serve well in responding to the problem of homesickness and its accompanying symptoms.

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