

#WorthIt

*Written by Sophia Wilson Pelton, Milton Academy Panel Member
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At Milton, the social code students follow isn't spelled out as explicitly as, say, the student handbook. But it's still very much there—you can see it in the *Stu, in *Forbes, in the language that students use to talk to (or about) each other. I don't consider Milton's student body to be traditionally "cliquey." You aren't judged for having friends outside of your normal group. In fact, most people have close friends that aren't in their tight-knit circle. However, students certainly follow different "rules" when it comes to maintaining the status quo. So, let's talk about what it means to break these rules.

By senior year, the majority of students have a pretty well-defined group of people that they consider their "home-base." These groups tend to take shape freshman year, and while a couple people may leave or join, by the time you're an upperclassman, who is and isn't in the group isn't really up for debate. While it's common to become closer with a few people outside of your group through the years, it's not often that you see a new group form or a whole group split apart. To a certain extent, I understand this. Friend groups grow up together, so it makes sense that over time, the members become *more* similar, not less.

On the other hand, here's what confuses me about groups' tendencies to stay the same: the majority of Milton students attend the school from the ages of fourteen to eighteen. You come into the school as a kid, and leave as a young adult. Personally, I feel that I'm a completely different person now than I was four years ago, and I bet that many of my classmates would say the same. We become more self-aware—the things we value and the ways in which we choose to spend our time become more apparent. We take classes and do extracurriculars that align with the interests we've developed during our time at Milton. So how come as we get older, we almost never make the same types of changes socially?

I think it comes down to comfort. Most students aren't against making new friends, we've just become comfortable (or maybe even complaisant) in our friend groups. You've know these people for your whole time at Milton. Plus, making new friends can be scary. As a freshman, you're encouraged to walk up to people and start a conversation with them. You hear it a million and one times at orientation: "Everyone's in the same boat! Don't be shy!" But as a senior, your "social standing" is already cemented, and going against that can be daunting, especially if you feel as though you're of a "lower" social standing than someone else. If you don't have a class, extracurricular, or sport with someone, building new friendships can seem difficult.

More than just being comfortable with the people you're friends with, it's easy to become comfortable with the people you're *not* friends with. You feel as though you know everyone in your grade. I frequently get the, "You're so different from how I expected you to be." Last year, after having a conversation with one of my closest friends at Milton, a kid in my grade walked up to

him and said, “You’re friends with *her*? Is she even smart?” While people’s perceptions of you are usually more nuanced than how “smart” you are, the group you’re associated with does shape these expectations.

Milton’s social climate frequently leaves me feeling isolated from others. Like I said, I’ve grown up here. As a minority, a lot of the “growing up” I’ve done over the past four years has to do with gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to be black, to be female, or to be both at the same time. I’ve come to realize that some of the people or places in which I spent time don’t actually support all facets of my identity. While this realization has been difficult, it has forced me to find new people and places that support me fully. This experience has led me to question what holds friendships together. Is it actually connection and commonality, or is it obligation and convenience? I am in no way asserting that all friend groups at Milton stay together because of convenience. However, I’m sure there are students who don’t feel 100% fulfilled by their friends but, because of Milton’s unspoken social code, they don’t feel comfortable branching out.

Fortunately, I’ve always been a big fan of breaking the social code. If I want to get to know someone better, I’ll walk up to them and tell them point blank: “I want to be friends with you.” I like this method because it 1) I’ve only ever gotten positive responses, and 2) it saves time. You no longer have to, “play it cool.” Saying it out loud to the person may seem silly, but being straightforward actually sets a precedence. It makes it easier to form genuine connections with the person.

This year, my English teacher asked if, in our past classes, we had tried taking real, genuine risk-taking in our writing. Most students told her that, “Teachers had never told us we should”, to which she replied, “They never told you *to* do it, but they also never told you *not* to do it.” In English, writing creatively—“working outside the box”—has pushed my writing and forced me to become a more thoughtful student. This is a sentiment that feels deeply ingrained in Milton’s social culture. As students, we aren’t overtly encouraged to go outside our comfort zone, though we also aren’t told *not* to. It may feel slightly uncomfortable, but at the end of the day, Milton’s environment does allow students to go walk up to whomever they want and start a conversation with that person. Just like writing, forging authentic connections with people leads to becoming a more thoughtful person.

You hear teachers talk about all the resources we have at our disposal—the Academic Skills Center, clubs, teacher availability. While the social privileges we have at a place like Milton aren’t as obvious as the academic ones, they’re still there. This environment makes it possible to go outside of your comfort zone (something that actually isn’t *that* uncomfortable.) To not take advantage of this privilege is a waste. When it comes to existing in more than one group, branching out, or generally breaking the social “rules”, it may be easier said than done, but it’s worth it. Plus, just when Milton starts to get boring, breaking the social code keeps things interesting.

*Stu: abbreviation for Student Center, the social hub of Milton Academy

*Forbes: Forbes Dining Hall