

Three Fast Facts:

Who Are Mon Ami Companions – And What Motivates College Students To Become Companions to Older People?

By Cal J. Halvorsen, PhD, MSW

Center for Social Innovation at the Boston College School of Social Work
Center on Aging & Work at Boston College

Mon Ami is a Bay Area social enterprise that matches older adults and their families with college students for companionship and intergenerational connection. The students visit over coffee, help with memoir projects, troubleshoot technology problems, even organize photos and memorabilia. They often develop meaningful connections with the older adults, changing their outlook on friendship, community, aging, even their careers.

So, who are the college students who decide to become *Mon Ami* companions?

1 Mon Ami companions are college students who have a diverse range of skills, interests, and experiences

- The vast majority of *Mon Ami* companions are students from more than 40 colleges and universities in the Bay Area and elsewhere in the U.S, including community colleges and public and private universities. The top source of companions is currently Stanford University, followed by San Jose State University, the University of San Francisco, UC Berkeley, and the West Valley-Mission Community College District.
- Among students, one quarter (25.6%) of companions are majoring in the humanities, including communications and English. Nearly one in five (18.2%) are majoring in pre-med fields, including biology and human biology. An additional one in six (15.9%) are in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, with slightly fewer (13.5%) in psychology. Still more are majoring in business, fine arts, nursing, and other fields.
- Among students, about two thirds (67.5%) of companions are full-time students, with the remaining (32.5%) attending school part-time.
- Companions speak a variety of languages. In addition to English, more than one quarter (26%) of *Mon Ami* companions report speaking Spanish, followed by Mandarin (7.0%), French (5.9%), and Hindi (5.4%). Additional languages include Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Japanese, Portuguese, German, and Cantonese — among many more.
- More than four in five (81%) companions identify as female, with about one in six (17%) identifying as male and additional companions not identifying with either option.

2 By and large, college students who decide to become companions have a great deal of experience with older people

Nearly two thirds (64.9%) of companions report personal experience with their own grandparents or other older family members. This experience was often extensive: Many received care from grandparents as children — sometimes returning the favor years later.

“ I spent all my life living with my grandparents. When my parents were at work, my grandmother cared for me and as she grew older, I cared for her, too. I taught her how to use social media, she taught me how to knit and cook. Our relationship is beyond description. ”

More than one in five (22.1%) previously volunteered with older adults, including in continuum of care communities, the veteran’s system, and music and arts programming.

“ I was a volunteer musician at multiple retirement communities in high school. I loved playing music and doing art projects with the residents and benefited from being surrounded by people at such a different life stage. ”

More than one in eight (13.2%) reported other experience with older people, such as serving them as customers, interacting with neighbors, or working as a caregiver. An additional one in 10 (10.6%) reported limited or no experience with older people, seeking to gain it as a companion.

3 College students want to become companions because of a desire to give back and help others, learn from older adults, and build intergenerational connections

Give Back and Help Others

When asked why they were interested in becoming a companion, the most common motivation, reported by more than two in five (42.4%) respondents, was that they wanted to find a way to give back and help others. Respondents often noted that a primary motivator was to increase joy in others’ lives. Others noted that the happiness they bring to others would circle back to them.

“ I believe my purpose in life is to make others around me happy, and seeing how I can make others smile makes me feel complete as a person. ”

Learn from Older Adults

An additional one in three (32.4%) noted that they wanted to learn from older adults themselves.

“ Older adults have so much wisdom and life experience. Most of my friends are in their 20s — I’m missing out on some amazing intergenerational friendships! ”

Build Community and Reduce Isolation

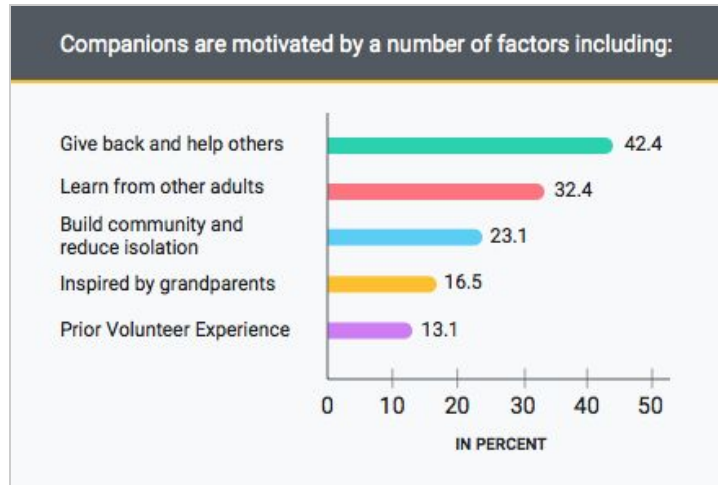
Nearly one in four (23.1%) expressed the importance of seeking and building a sense of community, including reducing social isolation among older adults.

“ When I was younger, I received in-home care for more than a year. I spent my days alone in my bedroom and never had visitors. Now, I would love the opportunity to bring levity into the life of someone who might feel isolated, too. ”

Inspired by Grandparents

About one in six (16.5%) noted that their own experience with grandparents or older family members inspired them to sign up, with about one in eight (13.1%) noting that prior volunteer experience inspired them to join, too.

“ I could tell how much spending time with my grandpa made his day, and I learned so much from him, including the importance of kindness and helping others. ”



Results are based on 479 online applications to be a Mon Ami companion from January 2018 to May 2019. Dr. Cal J. Halvorsen trained and advised the Mon Ami research team, including Joy Zhang, Aidan Campbell and Elana Rich, on content analysis and coding techniques for all open-ended questions and wrote this report. Quotes were edited for context and brevity. For more information on the Center on Aging & Work at Boston College, go to <https://www.bc.edu/research/agingandwork/>. For more information on Mon Ami, go to www.monami.io.