

Who Can Sit at the Table?

An investigation into international student friendship networks
at Saint Olaf College

Study conducted by:

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On Monday, April 28th, I arrived at the cafeteria at 4:30 pm and by 4:35 had found a discrete booth location from which to conduct my observation. My hope was to record the interactions between multicultural students, in particular noticing where and with whom they chose to sit for their meals. The evening began slowly, with individuals or pairs of students sitting scattered throughout the dining area, but remaining mainly at the tables closest to the main exit. Forty-five minutes passed in this fashion, with two or three-person groups taking their dinners in Stav Hall's calm, early-evening atmosphere. At 5:15 there is commonly a rush in the cafeteria, and at this time more American and multicultural students began to arrive. I had begun to worry that, for some reason, no large multicultural student dinner groups would form this evening, especially as I noticed American students choosing to sit at the tables commonly preferred by the multicultural students. The multicultural students were choosing to sit elsewhere, either with one other individual in a booth near the exit, or further back towards the large window in the dining area. At 5:17 however, my hopes lifted. A small group of students passed by and sat down together. I recognized that the dinner party consisted of junior female from the Asian subcontinent who had lived in the United States for a number of years, another junior female from India, a male Asian student, and an Asian American student. A few minutes later, a Latin American exchange student entered alone and without hesitation walked to the back of the dining area to join this group. While the group ate their meal, I took note of where other multicultural students had chosen to sit. At 6:15, Jeron4 (an African American student) sat down alone at a large table near the exit. I was intrigued because he had chosen one of the tables most

commonly used by the multicultural community. He sat alone on one end of the nearly empty table facing the cafeteria serving area. Two minutes later, Kim (a female Asian student) came and sat across from Jeron, and a minute later, Awaale (a first year male African student) joined them. Mark (an American student who had attended high school in Japan) also sat down with them, establishing a table of four.

Throughout dinner, American students had been sitting at this table and others around it. I realized that the multicultural students were gradually “reclaiming” their mealtime “territory”. At 6:25 Kristin (an American student) sat down next to Awaale and began to talk with him and Mark. Mark finished his meal and left, and Trevor (a junior international student from Jamaica) quickly filled his place. Awaale’s roommate Geddi (another first year African student) also joined the table.

By this time, Jeron, who appeared to be the most outgoing of the dinner group, was waving to Angelica (an African American student) at a nearby table. She shook her head regrettably and came over to talk with the people at Jeron’s table. At this point I noticed that different conversations seemed to be taking place on each end of the table. A few moments later, Angelica sat down next to Kristin. Seven people now sat together at this table. As individuals left and others sat down, new conversations formed among the group.

Nann (an exchange student from Asia) entered the dining area at 6:40 accompanied by her roommate (a senior Hmong student), an African American male and female, and another Asian female. They chose a table near the front of the dining area, relatively close to the exit. Jan (the African American female) came over and joked around with the people at Jeron’s table, while Jeron went over to talk to Nann. I watched as other students from these two different tables visited with each other, some exchanging a few words and others sitting down for longer talks with friends at the other table.

7:00 is the official closing time for the cafeteria. Jeron and the remaining three others cleared out of the cafeteria, thus “dissolving” that particular table for the night. A number of students remained at Nann’s table, but eventually drifted out of the dining area as well. Luke (an Hispanic American) flashed a peace sign to the table on his way out. Kong (a senior male from Asia), who had straggled in at the last minute, took Luke’s seat. During the last twenty minutes of dinner, activity at this table mainly centered around the little baby boy that one of the students (an African American woman) had brought with her to dinner. She sat and ate while the others played with the child, kissing it and feeding it a popsicle.

Nann and her roommate left around 7:25 and Kong moved to sit next to the three remaining diners-- the mother and child, and another American female student. When the two women left with the baby at 7:30, Kong was left alone

at the table. Since I know Kong through international student activities, I decided to go over and chat with him.

Reflecting on these observations, I concluded that several similarities existed between the three different “multicultural tables” that formed during dinner. All were flexible, meaning that no group at a table formed or left all together. Rather, individuals or small groups of students joined and left these tables freely. It also seemed that Jeron’s table mainly consisted of African or African American students, while more Asians chose to sit at Nann’s table. Despite this apparent segregation, the two tables interacted with each other throughout the night. I also noticed that no European students⁶ had joined any of these tables during the night.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This account of observations in the cafeteria illustrates the types of interactions that happen across Saint Olaf campus on a larger scale. Previous research has investigated adjustment issues and friendship networks among international and host nationals, and research has focused on identifying patterns in these networks. It is hard for an international student to go to another country to study, and adjustment can be traced to several different elements.

Moody (2001) noted that language adjustment and personal issues related to setting change, and cross-cultural issues are main concerns for international students. Previous research has found that adjustment is closely related to how much contact individuals have with host nationals and how familiar they are with the host culture. Those with the most positive adjustment fell into two groups: first, students who participated in a program with peers prior to the beginning of school, and second, those who had lived in the host nation previously and who had knowledge of the host culture (Abe et al. 1988). Fluency in the host language, in this case English, may influence cultural adjustment in the United States. The values that the student held while attempting to adjust to American life also impacted the cultural adjustment process. Cultural values that are closely aligned to each other can facilitate easier adjustment, while international students whose values differ from those of the host culture find it more difficult to integrate themselves.

International students must adapt to many new situations in the host nation culture, which can be stressful (Kagen 1990). They must contend with changes in setting and lack of familiar support networks, while keeping up with the academic demands of the educational institution. According to a survey

conducted by Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002), while a significant percentage of international students studying in American felt they had adjusted well (79%), 46% still felt they had problems acculturating because they had “left part of themselves at home”.

In order to be more satisfied with their settings, people tend to create “communities of memory.” This is due to their desire to spend time with others who share a similar history (Bellah et al. 1985). This is something that all people experience, and international students are no exception. In fact, they have a special need for such a community. In general, they use their common experiences to form cohesive communities, and previous studies have shown that because of this people prefer to choose friends from their own race, if possible (Moody 2001). A study focusing on African students at an American university supports this conclusion, as they were found to have formed densely connected relationship networks (Maundeni: 2001). However, interracial friendships are also often due to non-race oriented similarities.

In an international community it may be difficult to find many individuals who share one’s background and nationality, especially at smaller institutions. This leads students to seek out social networks of individuals who share similarities in other ways (hobbies, beliefs, social status etc.). These similarities facilitate social interaction among international students, providing them with common ground. However, language and cultural barriers lead to difficulties in interaction between international students and host nationals. Many American students recognize international students as a “different” group, and believe that members of this out-group have diverse beliefs and perspectives. Because American students may believe that their international counterparts lack understanding about American culture (due to their divergent beliefs), they may form the stereotype that international students are naïve in their understanding of the American culture and way of life (Spencer-Rodgers 2001). For this reason, familiarity of the host culture is of primary importance. This familiarity does not necessarily depend of the length of time one spends in the setting, but rather the values and effort one puts forth to understand the culture in the host nation (Kagen 1990).

Overall, studies that have investigated the nature of friendship networks have revealed that students tend to try and find friends with whom they have similarities. These similarities can be racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or the result of shared experiences. Friendships not only depend on these types of similarities, but also on the amount of contact that individuals have with others. In order to understand the host culture better, it is important for international students to have interaction with host nationals. In general, an individual creates friendships only after having had contact with another individual, in particular when this contact is repeated over a length of time. In the study by

Abe et al. (1998), international students reported feeling that they were unable to meet many American students and build relationships because of the lack of social interaction opportunities. Academic institutions often create a division between these two groups through the way the education system is structured. An example of this is academic tracking, which has the potential to create a structural segregation and inhibit mixing opportunities (Moody 2001). Zimmermann (1995) also found that special classes designed for non-native speakers “rob” those students of opportunities to interact with natives and also take away the opportunity for host students to get to know internationals.

At the same time, however, these types of separate classes can easily lead to bonding between the students who take these classes. This may be particularly true in classes where students may be struggling together to learn a language (Clements 1997). While some institutional structures cause a division between these two groups of students, others may be set in place to increase contact and encourage interaction. Through a variety of extra-curricular functions, international students may become more familiar with Americans and the local community (Tillman 1990). Toyokawa (2002) found that extra-curricular activities designed and offered by an academic institution serve as an opportunity to socialize with host nationals.

Institutions strive to promote this type of interaction because it often leaves international students with a more positive attitude toward the host culture. Activities create a chance to meet and build friendship networks. According to social balance theory, one is likely to meet and become acquainted with other individuals who are friends with already-established friends (Moody 2001). For example, in a study conducted by Maundeni (2001), African students reported that their friendship networks were characterized by frequent contact and close physical proximity. This led to highly interconnected student relationships.

Also, institutions may want to facilitate social network building between sojourners and host nationals. The institution may do this by placing the students in situations or settings where they will be in closer proximity, and naturally have increased contact. Nesdale (2000) found that international students who had contact with American students in residence halls were more likely to have obtained a greater number of cross-cultural friendships across campus in general. This is possibly because of an already-established framework for handling and meeting new people. Satisfaction with social networks, therefore, does not depend solely on close friendships, but is rather determined by the level of social contact (proximity and frequency of contact). Just as contact may influence who one becomes friends with, it may also be a matter of rational choice. Oftentimes, there are underlying reasons and criteria

for friendship formations. This is, to an extent, based on the benefit that is derived from a relationship. Coleman's rational choice orientation states that:

A minimal basis for a social system of action is two actors, each having control over resources of interest to the other. It is each one's interest in resources under the other's control that leads the two, as purposive actors, to engage in actions that involve each other...It is the structure, together with the fact that actors are purposive, each having the goal of maximizing the realization of his interests, that gives the interdependence, or systematic character, to their actions.

Coleman (1990: 29)

Based on Coleman's idea of rational choice, international students may choose to associate with co-nationals or other internationals as a way of coping with stress from adjustment issues. Individuals make conscious and unconscious choices to fulfill their needs for security, identity, and in order to keep ties to their culture.

International students may also choose to be a part of a "community of memory," as mentioned by Bellah (1985), because it promotes a feeling of working towards a common good. Being part of a close community may also have a negative impact on the integration process. By spending time in a group of similar friends from countries other than the host nation, an international student may be less likely to speak and improve their English skills. This was also found to reduce the cultural adjustment abilities (Maundeni 2001). Frequent interaction with Americans was related to higher levels of satisfaction with communication skills and adjustment to American life (Zimmermann 1995). Thus, it may be a rational choice to spend time with native English speakers in order to practice and improve language skills, and gain more satisfaction.

METHOD

The trend at St Olaf campus that international students in general spend a significant amount of time with one another reflects the phenomena cited by past research and studies.

This research intends to explore and explain patterns of friendship networks among international students at St. Olaf College. The initial hypothesis in this study was that international students who have spend a greater amount of time at St Olaf, or have intentions to do so would be more likely to create friendships with American students. This might be explained by their desire to become more American-like themselves, and to experience faster acculturation

in order to facilitate living in the host nation. International students coming to St Olaf College to study for an extended period would come to identify themselves more with the American culture. In a sense, the US would become their new home, and they may naturally tend to have more American contacts in their social networks.

The first step in conducting our research was to decide on the target population. While those who sit together in the cafeteria are not all international students, we chose to focus on this group for several reasons: First, international students are a large part of the multicultural student body. In our study, the only significant difference between the international students and all other multicultural students was their participation in Week 0. Week 0 is the orientation most international students have with the International Student Advisor prior to other students coming to St Olaf College. It normally consists of three days of practical information and getting to know one another. The second reason for creating this focus was that both of the researchers were already familiar with this group of students (as an international student and an international student counselor). This would likely make it easier to conduct interviews and have the same access to information that international students have.

Information about this student group was available from the International Student Advisor, from whom we received a list of all the participants of Week 0 who were currently on campus. This list was the foundation for those we defined as international students. We took a stratified random sample based on class (including all four classes and the non-degree seeking students). Using this random sample we chose thirty students from the total population of forty-five, with six students from each class, where four would receive a survey and two would be asked to participate in an interview. We felt that this method was appropriate because it would give us a chance to observe differences in responses depending on how long a student had been on campus.

With both an anonymous survey and confidential interviews, it was possible to get a large number of responses to specific questions. At the same time it allowed for a more in-depth investigation into the motivation and experiences of these students. Conducting interviews allowed for two-way communication where both the interviewer and the interviewee work together to get a more complete picture. Also, it led to new questions and possible answers that may not have been considered before.

An email was sent out prior to distribution of surveys in order to prepare the selected students for the survey that they would each receive in their P.O. boxes. The survey was then put in their P.O. boxes, along with a letter of information (Appendix 1) and details on whom to contact with question and how to return the survey. The letter attached to the survey (Appendix 2) stated

that all information would be kept anonymous but could be used for this study. Surveys consisted primarily of open-ended questions. This was done to obtain more personalized answers and to let the respondent elaborate on their thoughts. Questions dealt specifically with perceived impact of Week 0, importance of having American and international student friends, and satisfaction with opportunities to meet new people on campus. A primary concern was how to operationalize the concept of “friendship”. After considering several definitions we chose to ask the participants to provide their own definition as a basis for our evaluation of the data given.

A separate email was sent out to those who had been randomly selected for an interview. This email asked for their willingness to participate with the understanding that all information given during the interviews would be kept confidential. The interview time and location was scheduled for their convenience, and would not last for more than one hour. Giving the possible interviewees the choice of time and location made the interview process more informal and relaxed. For each interview, one of the researchers would be present. We accommodated the interviewees to the best of our ability, and if either one of the researchers or the participant could not meet at the set time a new time was scheduled via email. At the time of the interview each participant was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 3). It stated the purpose of the research, any potential risks, and the agreement of confidentiality. The participants were also informed that even after they signed the consent form they could withdraw from the study at any time. The interviewees would also get a copy of the consent form for their own records. We faced several challenges while conducting this research. A major difficulty was creating contact with possible interviewees, especially with the students who had been in the United States for a longer time. This might be because those students who feel more integrated into the larger St. Olaf community are less inclined to identify themselves as members of the international students body and therefore less likely to return surveys or agree to be interviewed. On the other hand, since both the researchers had a connection with the international student community it was easier to gather the information. We foresaw difficulties in collecting responses and found that it was oftentimes necessary to contact certain individuals multiple times, or discuss the importance of this study with them in person.

Another difficulty in this study was preserving individuals’ confidentiality without compromising their identities. By specifying the region of the world rather than which country each of the interviewees is from we risk stereotyping these individuals, in a sense. However, we felt that due to the small international student population on campus this type of grouping is necessary in order to maintain confidentiality. Thus, while our research may not take into

account individuals' countries of origin, it does tend to focus more effectively on common cultures throughout regions of the world, seeking to find trends within that larger context. By conducting surveys and interviews we were hoping to gain insights into the patterns and possible explanations for phenomena like the separate multicultural tables at the Stav Hall (the cafeteria).

RESULTS

The “tables” do not refer to specific tables in the cafeteria, but to the phenomenon where multicultural students tend to eat together at a familiar table in a common area of the dining hall. All of our interviewees could point out to us where the “table” is, and all referred to the same general area and trend. Some did so without needing any prompting, while others were asked, “Do you notice any trends in where people sit in the cafeteria?”

We also received a variety of other insights into the formation and maintenance of friendship networks. As individuals shared their experiences during each of the eight interviews, several themes arose consistently. Other experiences were more unique to certain individuals. For example, the two non-degree seeking students that we interviewed, Nann and Dea, both recognized that the tables exist in the cafeteria. However, they chose to sit at the table for different reasons. Nann does not often sit at the table or go to the cafeteria alone because she prefers to share her meals with one or few other individuals who she can have a deeper discussion with. For this reason, the multicultural table is not conducive to this type of one-on-one interaction. Dea, on the other hand, often sits at the table because she feels comfortable there and because “hey, you always have to sit at the table with some other people.”

INTERVIEWS

“Friendship is when you ‘put another person’s heart into your own’”.

- Naan (Asia)

Naan is a female exchange student from Asia who is twenty-two years old. She came to St. Olaf because she had a dream of studying abroad, and she also received a scholarship that allowed her to do so. At her university, she had met some St. Olaf students who were studying on “Term in Asia”. In this way, she heard about St. Olaf and was encouraged to attend the school through some of her friends who had previously studied there. Now at St. Olaf she spends time with former “Term in Asia” students who live in her pod (a living area in Ytterboe Hall).

She spends most of her time with these pod mates and another female exchange student who lives in the same hall. She met this student during Week 0 when they were the only ones living in the dorm. Throughout the year they became closer, initially because that student had shown interest in her Asian culture, particularly the food. Naan often likes to prepare traditional foods to share with her friends, partly because she “needs” people to know about her culture. She explained that those who took time and initiative to understand her are those who become her friends.

This said, she was disappointed that during Week 0 she did not form any close friendships. Despite the many activities and time spent together with other international students, her expectations for real friendships were not met. Instead, she found herself spending time with others for the necessary support. In particular, she began spending time with two other Asian exchange students because she felt they would understand her better. She perceived Asian women to be in general less confident, feeling lost, and struggling with English more than others.

Naan wanted to show her commitment to the international community by participating in a performance during International Night 2003. She is willing to help out when asked because she feels it is her duty. She received a scholarship and feels she has to give back to the school and community. However, she does not feel that she has the right to take on a leadership position, since she will only be here for one year. Naan identifies strongly with the international student body, and she is also a part of the Asian Awareness Association (AAA).

Naan explained that it was important in the beginning of the year to have international student friends because they shared the same feeling and depended on each other. Now, she does not really think about where people come from because friendships grow out of other factors than nationality. For Naan, close friendship forms through time spent together and deeper discussions about family, backgrounds, and feelings. This is one of the main reasons why she prefers to sit with fewer people during meals.

“A friend is someone you can talk to and feel comfortable with”

- Dae (Asia)

Dae is also a female exchange student from Asia. She is twenty-two years old and chose to spend a year at St Olaf as part of her undergraduate studies at her home university. She expected that while studying at St Olaf she would have time to hang out with many friends and find entertainment. Instead, she spends much of her time in the library where she studies for her classes. She was

surprised at the workload that followed each class and found out she had to prioritize differently.

She did not participate in many activities, mainly because she could not handle the combination of friends and study. Last October she spent much of her time with her roommate's friends, but felt they were superficial and that the interaction was somewhat forced. She could tell that, "They didn't have fun!" and it seemed like there was an expectation to spend time together. She did not understand why they felt obligated to spend time together if it was not genuinely interesting. She also felt uncomfortable with this façade. Dae suggested that this might be because Americans' way of communicating is different. They like to contradict your ideas, which makes it hard to have a conversation. She finds that Americans who have studied abroad are much easier to talk to. They have been in another culture and are not as narrow-minded.

Dae has met most of her friends in class, especially in her English class, where most people are trying to improve their English language skills. This gives them something in common. She also finds a common connection with people through AAA and has made friendships that she cherishes. She has made friends from South America, and also with Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. She feels that there is a boundary in coming to know Americans, and that they lack the understanding of her culture. For this reason Dae can more easily identify with the international student body on campus. She finds it much easier to get to know Asian Americans, and she is active in the AAA on campus. She feels much closer to the other Asian Americans at St. Olaf and would rather participate in those events than the events planned by ISO or by international student counselors. However, for International Night she did prepare traditional Asian food, something she really wanted to do.

Reflecting back on Week 0, Dae admitted that she struggled with English and felt that it was harder for her than for other international students to understand and participate in the planned games and activities. She said she felt excluded since most of the international students had stronger English skills than she did. However, she got to know the other international students because they hung out a lot during that time and participated in many activities together. They did not know anyone else on campus and everyone was new to each other. She made some friendships during Week 0, but when she thinks back on why, Dae concludes that it was so she would have something to fall back on. She wanted a "safety net." She made two good friends during this time, but now considers only one of them a friend because she has little in common with and rarely talks to the other person.

Dae did not think of common interests in the beginning because she wanted a net, but as friendship evolves, she feels it is important to share interests. Her

definition of a friend is someone that you can talk to and feel comfortable with. When talking to a friend, the topic can be serious or superficial as long as they find pleasure in it. She distinguished between friendship and having an acquaintance and feels that she has more acquaintances than friends at St. Olaf. Overall, Dae feels very comfortable at St. Olaf. It is a small community and everyone knows each other. At the university where she studied before it was very hard to get to know people, but that was partly because she did not participate in activities (which were arranged for first year students). Dae's focus right now is on trying to adapt and follow the culture and she said that she is getting used to the American way of life.

“Friendship is a relationship of love, where one has love for the other person, even beyond themselves”
- Maria (South America)

Maria is a twenty year old female from South America. She is currently a first year, degree-seeking student and plans to graduate from St. Olaf College in 2006. Maria shared her thoughts with one of the researchers one evening in a residence hall lounge.

Week 0 had a significant impact on Maria. She met other international students, and felt that in coming to a new country there is a significant amount of new knowledge that is important to obtain. Since she did not really know what Week 0 was when she first came to St. Olaf, she did not have any expectations. Even with no expectations for Week 0, she thought it was very important that international students came early to campus in order to get to know the new country better and retain more information. Due to this, she feels that she relates better to international students than to American students.

“I love talking and laughing,” she said. Because of this Maria feels that she can meet new people almost everywhere, especially in discussion-based classes. In particular, she mentioned that people in her philosophy class are more open-minded and therefore easier to meet. She not only meets people in classes and organized activities, but just walking around campus gives her the opportunity to meet new people. She has friends from many different countries, including students who are Nepalese, South Korean, Chinese, German, Rwandan, Somali, Mexican, Hmong, and American. While talking about this topic Maria suggested that there should be recruiting from St. Olaf to get more international students on campus and increase diversity in the student body.

Maria does not identify herself as much with the international student body at St Olaf as she does with PEP (Professional Exploration Program). Students in PEP come one month early to campus to prepare academically for the college

year. She feels more connected with PEP students and has worked with PEP selling apples. She recounted a story about working at this sale. A faculty member who previously knew Maria walked by and recognized her. The faculty member stopped and asked why she was working at the PEP table, since she was not in PEP. Members of PEP tend to be labeled into this group for the duration of their studies at St. Olaf. Even so, Maria confided that she would prefer to be a member PEP if she had the choice. She is not used to different kinds of labels like PEP, or even terms like Hispanic, Asian Americans, etc. Here in the US people seem to use them very frequently and Americans expect others to change and be more like themselves. She chooses to counteract this pressure by intentionally dressing and acting differently.

Maria is considering transferring from St Olaf, mainly because it is not what she expected. She expected more intellectual challenge and more diversity. One thing that very much surprised her was that in classes she often did not see one single person of color. She is used to seeing people of different ethnicity and she did not expect such ethnically homogenous classes. She may continue staying at St. Olaf though, because it is one of the few schools she can afford to attend.

Asked if she had seen any patterns in where multicultural people sit and eat in the cafeteria, she responded immediately, “of course there are!” She identified the two tables closest to the exit of the cafeteria as the multicultural tables. They are very noticeable. Maria herself started to sit there early in the year and she most often sits there because she feels comfortable at those tables.

“A friend is a person I feel comfortable with and share an understanding with”
- Shinya (Asia)

Shinya is a nineteen year old male from Asia who is also a first-year student intending to graduate from St. Olaf in 2006. Like Maria, Shinya was able to identify the multicultural table in the cafeteria without being asked about it. He located the tables in the same place as the other interviewees.

Shinya feels tightly connected to the other international student on campus. However, it was not always this way. He was satisfied with Week 0 but felt isolated due to his lack of English oral communication skills. During structured games, for example, he admitted that he did not understand what was going on due to the fast pace. Language was the major adjustment for Shinya, who tended to speak more with students who knew his first language and was closer with Asian students in general because he felt more comfortable around them. Also, he grew closer to international students because they shared similar struggles with the language.

Now, Shinya has met friends in his introductory courses, in his first-year dorm, during work in the cafeteria, and through other people. It is pretty easy to meet people because he is the only Asian in his corridor and everyone recognizes and remembers him. In the early part of the academic year, a student who was studying an Asian language approached him in his dorm and wanted to meet him. In this way, Shinya met many friends from his dorm and now he mostly spends time with them. He spends time with a number of different friends, but does not feel a connection with people who do not have an interest in Asia. He perceives Asians to be quieter than Americans, who tend to spend time drinking and watching movies. It is extremely important for Shinya to keep his cultural ties and have international student friends. This is why he chose to participate in International Night 2003, and occasionally attend other international student events.

At the same time, he believes that it is important to have American friends in order to learn colloquial language, slang, and new phrases. He feels that “hanging out with other international students all the time is a problem” because one will not learn the language as well. For this reason, Shinya chooses to not make plans to eat with international students. He usually goes to the cafeteria alone or finds someone from his dorm to eat with.

“Friendships is a respectful and genuinely caring relationship between two people”

- Maud (Europe)

Maud is a nineteen year old European student in her second year at St. Olaf. She is planning to graduate in 2005. She has lived in several Asian countries, including Mongolia, Pakistan, and Nepal. She came to St. Olaf as a music major, but changed to a Asian Studies major in the beginning of her sophomore year. She has also spent an interim in Asia, through a St. Olaf academic program.

In her first year Maud met many friends through the activities in Week 0. She considers the orientation period a positive experience through which she gained many close friends. She admits that during her first year she knew mostly international students and had few American friends. Maud was highly involved in the international student community as an ISO senator, and she contributed in many ways to International Night 2002. She met new international students at these organized events, through chance encounters, and through other friends. As an international student she feels that she has an excuse to approach other internationals because they share a type of bond. In her second year Maud is experiencing dramatic changes in her circle of

friends. Only two international students remain at St. Olaf from her initial Week 0 group. She concluded that although she considers a smaller number of people as friends, she now knows more Americans. Another change in her second year was her decision to focus more on academics and participate less in extra-curricular activities. This past year she has attended some counselor sponsored events, and was involved in International Night 2003, although she had a smaller role.

Reflecting on this year's group of new international student, she commented that they appeared to be more diffused into the St. Olaf community, probably because more intend to stay for longer than one year. For this reason Maud believes it will be easier for them to adjust than it was for her.

Maud has friends from many different parts of the world, but she feels most comfortable spending time with Asians, mainly due to her background in these cultures and because she feels that she "connects better with them." Often, her Japanese friends have said "God, [Maud], you are so Asian!" She appreciates the liberal views the international students have, compared to most Americans. Also, she says that the international students are more straightforward.

Maud believes that Americans might feel intimidated by the closeness of the international student community. This might prevent them from trying to initiate friendships with international students. However, those who are sincerely interested and make an effort will form friendships. To illustrate the closeness, Maud described her experiences at the multicultural table in the cafeteria. She first sat down at this table because she saw her international student counselor there and joined him. Others followed and it became a dinner custom to have a constant stream of international students sitting there between 6:30 and 8:00 PM, when they were kicked out of the cafeteria. One night during her first year, approximately thirty-five students were sitting together at these tables. Even this year, Maud rarely makes plans for dinner. Instead, she will go and find friends to eat with at that table and introduce herself to people she does not know yet. "It reminds me of last year", she said, "when all my friends were here".

"Friendship is one of the most important aspects of a human life"

- Dasha (Eastern Europe)

Dasha, a nineteen year old female from Eastern Europe, met with one of the researchers on a Sunday morning. She is currently a sophomore at St. Olaf and intends to graduate in the class of 2005. Over a cup of coffee in the student center she spoke about her experiences as an international student. Prior to

attending St. Olaf College, Dasha spent her senior year in high school in Minnesota. This was a reason she did not participate in Week 0. The researchers were surprised to learn that she did not participate in the orientation week. However, the information she shared was very valuable. Compared to other interviewees, Dasha is glad that she decided not to participate in Week 0. She believes that would have given her less opportunity to meet American students, due to the close networks international students are known to form. Nonetheless, she thinks it is important for international students to attend such an orientation because it introduces them to the American lifestyle. During her first year at St. Olaf Dasha did not participate much in organized activities for international students. Even so, she finds it very easy to make friends. She considers herself as a loving, outgoing person who can relate to and understand different people. She feels that people can trust her, something she feels is important in a friendship. For Dasha, friendship is a “relationship in which you have a complete and innocent trust in another person, and vice-versa.” It is a mutual relationship that requires effort from both sides. She makes a distinction between friendships and acquaintances. One of the biggest differences is mutual trust, which she did not find necessary with acquaintances. Dasha said that she has noticed that Americans tend to consider all acquaintances as friends, while Europeans in general make a distinction between these two terms. As long as mutual trust exists, nationality is not considered important to her.

Most of Dasha’s current friends at St. Olaf are those she met during her first year, especially people from her corridor and those she met through inter-corridor activities. She also thought back and concluded that she should have tried harder to meet international students during her first year. She feels she can learn more from international students, who have a variety of experiences from all parts of the world, than from American students, who in general have had less experiences of this kind.

This year Dasha is more involved with the international student body on campus. She is the Public Relations Officer in ISO and she had a major part in the public relations part of International Night 2003. She became more involved with the intention of being able to spend more time with international students. Still, Dasha does not identify strongly with the international student body and usually does not plan to sit with other international students. Nevertheless, she, like the other interviewees, has noticed a pattern of students with multicultural backgrounds preferring to sit together in the cafeteria. She identified the tables on the right hand side, closest to the exit.

“Friends are friends”.

- Tajim (Asian)

Tajim is a twenty-one year old male from the Asian subcontinent. He is in his third year at St. Olaf and intends to graduate in 2004. Like Dasha, Tajim did not participate in Week 0. He arrived late during his first year and missed Week 0 (which he intended to take part in). He also missed the first three weeks of classes, which meant that he did not have the initial contact with the other new international students. Instead, Tajim met people in his residence hall (which had both first-years and upper-class students). Mainly his contact with other international students took place by chance encounters in his residence hall and in the Lion's Pause where other international students would approach him. In this way he met a few good friends during his first year in college. During his second year he became more active in organized activities, including joining the rugby team, and planning International Night 2002. His third year has brought a change in his friendship network. Some of his good friends graduated the previous year and he has not had time to build friendships with the new international students. He thinks that friendships with these individuals might develop over time.

Now Tajim spends most of his time with friends who are predominately from the Asian subcontinent. He feels that this group of people is "more laid back in general." He went on to compare them to African American students and Hmong students on campus. African American students "need to be loud about something" and "they want to fit the stereotype." He feels that they make everything into a racial issue. The Hmong, according to Tajim, focus only on Asians being oppressed on campus. He thinks this is because there is so little to do on campus and students become frustrated with their workload. Tajim himself tries to leave campus as often as possible.

Referring to American students in general, Tajim stated, "some guys are not right for college." He then recounted an incident when an American peer said it was cool to see buildings being hit by bombs. Tajim attempted to explain to the American that for each bomb that hits a building, ten people die. When the American student did not see this point, Tajim became frustrated by the American's narrow mindedness.

It is understandable that Tajim prefers to make friends with people whom he is comfortable with and trusts. Tajim has never distinguished between American and international students. Therefore he does not usually sit at the multicultural student table, although he was able to identify where these students normally sit.

"A friendship is a relationship where you give more than you expect to receive"

- Kong (Asia)

Kong is twenty-one years old. He transferred to St. Olaf during his junior year from the university back in his home country and is now a senior. During the Week 0 orientation he expected to participate in a variety of games and activities that promote social interaction. He sees it as a positive experience because it was helpful to get to know other people. In fact, he claimed to know approximately one-third of the new international students. Knowing international students, even just as acquaintances, is important to Kong. During his first year, Kong was motivated to introduce himself to a variety of students. He met international students during Week 0 and during meals in the cafeteria. During these meals he also met American students. These connections can lead to new friendships because one can meet others through already formed relationships.

Kong still feels that he has a strong connection to the international student body. He is currently an international student counselor. He chose to take this position because he understands what it is like for an international student to come to a new country and live far away from home. He wanted to make this transition into American college life easier for the new international students, and see them come to love St. Olaf as he has. He wishes he could participate in all the organized activities for international students, but due to academic demands he is not able to spend as much with international students as he would like. Nevertheless, he makes an effort to find time for the friends he met during his first year on campus. Due to his upcoming graduation, though, he now feels less motivated to meet new people and prefers to spend time with his closer friends.

According to Kong, international students oftentimes have similar feelings towards Americans and their way of life. He feels that he learned significantly more during his first year at St. Olaf due to events in the United States, specifically his experiences after Sept. 11, 2001. He reflected that being an international student in the United States during times of conflict gives him a unique perspective on American life. Kong's friendships with American students are important because they help him learn about the American way of life, but he finds many of them to be superficial. Compared to their American counterparts, international students are more open and understanding.

Because he has strong connections with the international student community, Kong also identified a pattern in where multicultural students tend to sit in the cafeteria. He himself often chooses to sit there with his friends.

SURVEYS

Our analysis of the surveys revealed consistency with data from the interviews. All international students reported having American friends and international friends from a variety of different countries. Patterns emerged that suggested that Asian students tended to have friends from a greater number of Asian countries while Europeans had friends from the fewest number of different countries. International students typically meet other international student friends in a variety of settings, but most often during international activities and during meals in the cafeteria. They meet American students most often in their classes and through organized activities such as choir and other extracurricular functions.

To international students, having American friends and international friends is important for different reasons. In general, international student friends are important for their shared experiences and because they can relate to and understand each other better. The data overwhelmingly indicated that American students are important as friends because they facilitate learning about the American culture and way of life.

DISCUSSION

Looking at the results from this research in order to form a broader picture, we noticed that our data agreed with previous studies in that responses typically fell into three different categories. Moody (2001) and Kagen (1990) suggested that similarity between individuals is a determining variable for friendship formation. Abe et al. (1998), Moody (2001), Tillman (1990), and Toyokawa (2002) emphasized the role that contact between individuals plays in facilitating friendships. These two factors, combined with Coleman's ideas on rational choice (1990:29) create a multidimensional framework that can be used to explain why certain friendships form.

The first theory explains friendships based on similarities among individuals. Those who share common characteristics tend to have an easier time forming friendships than those who have less in common. One example of this among international students is that most of them do not speak English as their first language. Their struggle to learn the language brought them closer together, especially during the first months at St. Olaf. Naan and Dae both testified to this common struggle, and due to this they initially spent time with each other.

Those who share a similar first language also tend to form friendships. In the beginning of the school year, Shinya tended to spend the majority of his time with others who spoke his language. In the same way, Maria would rather be a member of PEP because many of those individuals speak Spanish, and therefore she has more in common with them.

AAA is an organization that brings together Asian students and provides an opportunity for them to maintain and share their cultural ties with each other. Maud, Dae, and Naan are all members of this organization because they find comfort and support in spending time with other students with similar backgrounds. In general, most international students are in a country far away from home, and as Kong pointed out, this will naturally lead to closeness among these students with similar languages and cultures.

Another theory to explain why certain people become friends relates more towards the contact between individuals. Greater frequency and closer physical proximity will lead to a greater chance that a friendship will form. Living in a residence hall on campus provides an ideal setting for this type of frequent and close contact between individuals. Shinya, Naan, Dasha, and Tajim all formed friendships with other students from their residence halls.

Classes also give one the opportunity for closeness through regular contact. An example of this are the English courses that many international students attend in order to improve their language skills. Shinya and Dae both met peers in this manner who are now a part of their social networks. Also, social balance theory suggests that networks form when one individual introduces one friend to another. Shinya, Kong, and Tajim had this experience in places like the Lion's Pause and at the multicultural table in the cafeteria.

Almost all the international students have participated in Week 0 activities, and this initial contact naturally led to friendships among those who participated. Maud and Kong are two strong examples on this. They formed many meaningful friendships during this week. It is natural that international students appear to be a cohesive group because they have had this unique bonding experience before other students arrived on campus.

The final theory uses rational choice to explain why certain individuals choose to be friends with others. Looking back on Week 0, several international students (Dae and Naan, for example) cited a need for support. This led them to create "safety nets" to have something to fall back on. These types of friendship networks provided security for the international students involved. Another reason that international students look to form friendships with other internationals is because they take comfort in these types of networks and feel that they can trust and understand each other. The surveys provided strong support for this conclusion, as did the interviews with Naan, Dae, Dasha, and Tajim.

In the same way, rational choice suggests that international students may choose to form friendships with American students in order to improve their English skills. Shinya made a point that he needed to spend more time with American students to learn the language and increase his understanding of the culture. The survey responses support the conclusion that international

students value friendships with their American peers because it is a way for them to learn about the American culture.

CONCLUSION

From this study we learned that friendship networks are not necessarily determined by the length of time an international student intends to stay at St. Olaf. Instead, three major theories helped to explain the patterns in friendship network formation: similar friends theory, contact theory, and rational choice theory. It is important to implement multiple frameworks when seeking an explanation for how and why people form friendships. If multiple theories are not used in the explanation, one may only get a portion of the larger picture and overlook other significant variables.

We began this study with the hope of gaining insight into the friendship networks that international students form. We focused on the multicultural student table in the cafeteria as an illustration of how these relationships and social networks are structured. In understanding why these tables form we can increase our understanding of the larger phenomenon on campus. This insight could help St. Olaf College in understanding the relationships between multicultural students and with Americans. This understanding may then lead to more effective solutions and structures for promoting adjustments and integration of the multicultural student body on campus.

St. Olaf College is a small, liberal arts college that shares many characteristics with other colleges throughout the United States. This findings from this study at St. Olaf can be extended to other colleges as well. This process of friendship network formation is not exclusive to the international students on St. Olaf campus. Previous studies have found that students in general, at St. Olaf and throughout the United States, use the same factors in creating networks with their peers. Therefore, results from this study focusing on international students may be useful when examining a variety of other networking phenomena.

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Appendix 1

International Student Survey

We are two Sociology/ Anthropology majors who are doing a research project

for our class. We are interested in looking at your experience as an international student at Saint Olaf College. In order to complete our sociological research we would very much appreciate your input and help.

Week 0 is often referred to in the survey. For those of you who have not heard this term before, Week 0 is the orientation most International students have with the International Student Advisor prior to other students coming to St Olaf College. It normally consists of three days with practical information and getting to know one another.

Attached is a survey that we ask you to fill out and return to PO Box #1151 (Name: Thomas Halvorsen) in Buntrock Commons by April 11th, 2003.

Please do not put your name on the survey; information collected will be kept anonymous.

We are very grateful for your help, and we hope that you have fun filling out the survey.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Researchers:

Co-author Thomas Halvorsen

Appendix 2

International Student Survey

Sex: Female Male
(circle one)

Age: _____

Class: '06 '05 '04 '03 non-degree seeking student
(circle one)

What country are you from? _____

When did you arrive at St Olaf College?

(check one)

2 weeks before Week 0 _____

1 week before Week 0 _____

at the beginning of Week 0 _____

during Week 0 _____

Did you form any close friendships during Week 0? Yes No

(circle one)

Are any of those friendships still maintained? Yes No

(circle one)

If not, why not?

Among your friends who are at St Olaf, are any from:

(check next to country)

Albania Guam Scotland
Australia Guyana Rwanda
Bangladesh India South Korea
Belarus Jamaica Sri Lanka
Bosnia Japan Tanzania
Costa Rica Morocco Thailand
France Nepal Zambia
Germany Norway US
Great Britain Peru Other:

When you first arrived, how long did you expect to attend St Olaf College?

(circle one)

1 semester 1 year 2 years 3 years 4 years Other

Have you changed your mind in how long you plan to attend St Olaf College?

(circle one) Yes No

Why/ Why not?

Is your roommate an International student? Yes No
(circle one)

If yes, did they participate in Week 0 activities? Yes No

How easy has it been for you to meet other International students?
Why/ why not?

How easy has it been for you to meet American students?
Why/ why not?

How/ where do you typically meet other International students?

How/ where do you typically meet other American students?

How important is it for you to have International students as friends?
Why/ why not?

How important is it for you to have American students as friends?
Why/ why not?

Please define friendship:

Appendix 3

WHO CAN SIT AT THE TABLE?

**A INVESTIGATION INTO INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FRIENDSHIP
NETWORKS AT SAINT OLAF COLLEGE**

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the friendship networks among international students at St. Olaf College. This study is being conducted by Thomas Halvorsen and a co-author, undergraduate students at St. Olaf College under the supervision of Carolyn Anderson, a faculty member from the Department of Sociology/Anthropology. You were selected as a possible participant in this research through a random selection process through which two international students from each class year were selected. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore the different social networks that international students form throughout their year(s) at St. Olaf College. Approximately 30 people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview with one of the researchers that will last no longer than one hour. This will provide the researchers with a more in-depth view of personal experiences with friendships on campus.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study:

The study has minimal risk. Due to the nature of the questions, participants may feel uncomfortable answering questions relating to their friendships.

The benefit to participation is the satisfaction of helping St. Olaf learn more about its international student community.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

The research results will be kept in a location that only we (Thomas Halvorsen and co-author) and our advisor have access to while working on this project. We will finish analyzing the data by May 1, 2003. We will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Olaf College in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

Contacts and questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us, _____ or Thomas Halvorsen (x2295). You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, our faculty advisor (Carolyn Anderson x3133) will be happy to answer them.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of participant/ Date

Appendix 4

Interview Questions

This research intends to explore the experiences of international students here at St. Olaf college. More specifically, this project focuses on understanding the friendship networks that international students form on campus. In order to complete this research, I would like to talk with you about your experiences, and I hope that you will feel free to respond as openly and fully as you wish. Everything that you tell me will remain confidential.

Do you have any questions about the research? Would you please sign this informed consent form which indicates that you understand the project and have agreed to be interviewed?

1) Sex

2) Age

3) Class

4) What country are you from?

5) What impact, if any, did Week 0 have on your experiences here at St. Olaf? (Week 0 refers to the orientation most International students have with the International Student Advisor prior to other students arriving on St. Olaf campus) Did it meet expectations? Did you make any friends?

6) How would you define “friendship”?

7) How strongly do you identify with the international student body on St. Olaf campus? (Participate in ISO? activities organized by counselors? International Night?)

8) How easy is it to make friends at St. Olaf?

9) Where have you/do you meet your friends?

10) Where are your friends from? (from what countries?)

11) How satisfied are you with the atmosphere of the campus? (With respect to meeting different people and having sufficient opportunities to get involved in campus activities that interest you?)