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By

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SOCIAL INTERACTION PHENOMENA IN THE
FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY

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Acknowledgements

As an undergraduate student, I remember changing my major away from pre-medicine due to the lack of desire to be in school for ten years. I could not imagine why anyone would want to go through that. Well, after eleven years, I am still here. The formal journey has come to an end, but the lifelong process of education is now ready for the second gear.

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I believe Annenberg's quote is appropriate for any doctoral student, but I would attach an additional statement of "Upon achievement of this success, celebrate! Forget the calmness, and celebrate some more." So many people have played a multitude of roles in the completion of this dissertation. I look forward to celebrating with you all.

In 1936, a University of Oklahoma faculty member, Jessie Lone Clarkson Gilkey, wrote the words to the O.U. Chant, which offers a last line that is appropriate for a higher education degree. She said, "Live On, University!"

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to college is not an easy process. New freedoms and new independence provide for an exciting first year. There is little debate as to the importance of starting college off well. However, juggling these new freedoms with increased academic rigor is a very difficult task. Several authors have described the importance of peer relationships and participation in social networks as key to reducing some of the stress involved in the transition process, but discussions of social networks compositions were rare.

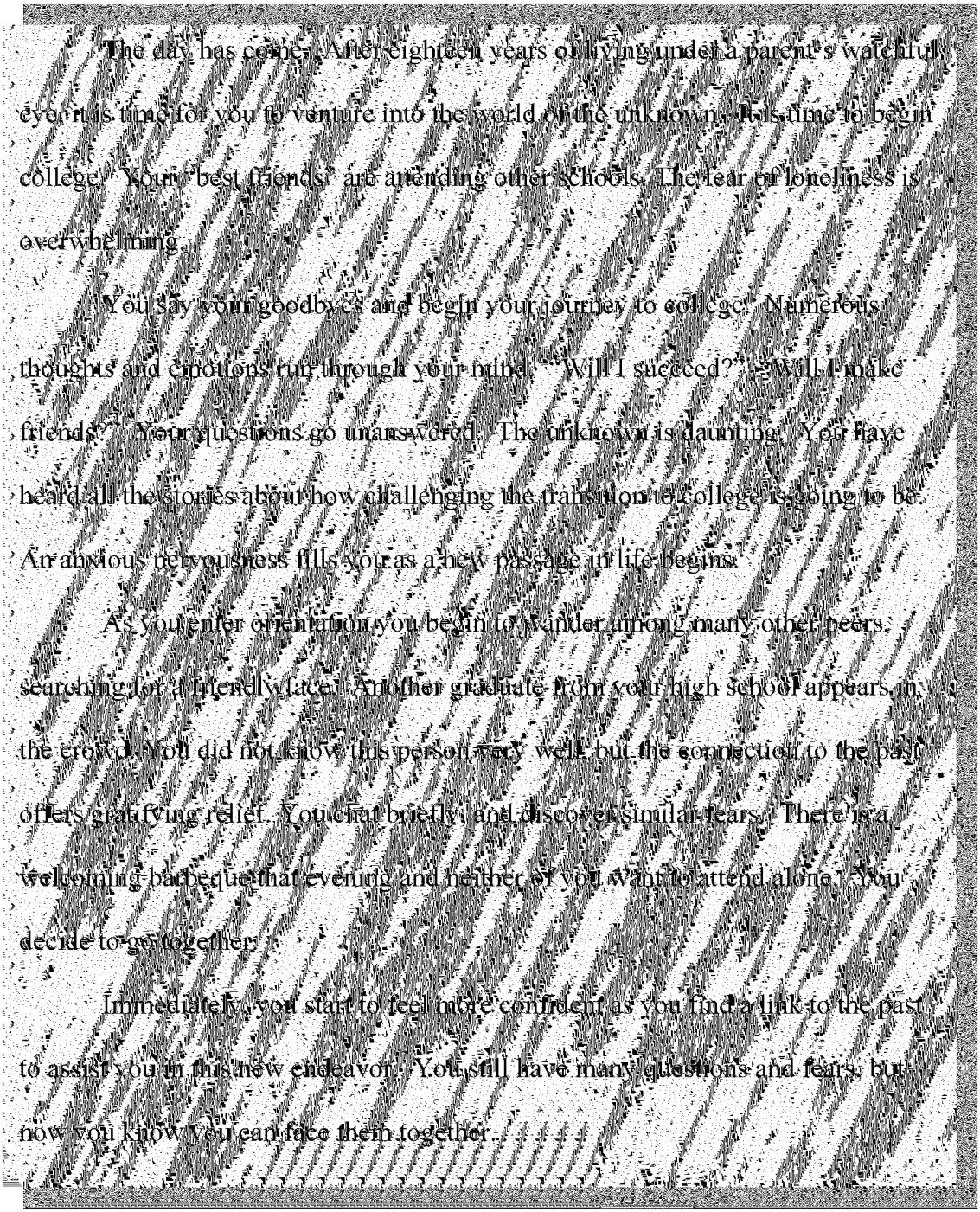
Employing a phenomenological method of analysis, this study investigated the composition of first-year student social networks. Having an increased understanding of who comprises these groups provides higher education administrators with greater opportunities to alleviate transition difficulties.

This study combined interviews and observations, conducted in various campus locations, to identify potential phenomena within these student relationships. Two noteworthy phenomena appeared in the data collection process. First, at University A, social network compositions could be depicted graphically by a set of concentric circles which represented the most common friendship groupings in the center circle out to the least common groupings in the outer circle. Last, the study illustrated Tinto's (1987) separation stage for first-year students may not be occurring as rapidly as was previously assumed.

Recommendations for successful utilization of this study's results are also provided.

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CASE SCENARIO



The day has come. After eighteen years of living under a parent's watchful eye, it is time for you to venture into the world of the unknown. It is time to begin college. Your "best friends" are attending other schools. The fear of loneliness is overwhelming.

You say your goodbyes and begin your journey to college. Numerous thoughts and emotions run through your mind. "Will I succeed?" "Will I make friends?" Your questions go unanswered. The unknown is daunting. You have heard all the stories about how challenging the transition to college is going to be. An anxious nervousness fills you as a new passage in life begins.

As you enter orientation you begin to wander among many other peers, searching for a friendly face. Another graduate from your high school appears in the crowd. You did not know this person very well, but the connection to the past offers gratifying relief. You chat briefly, and discover similar fears. There is a welcoming barbeque that evening and neither of you want to attend alone. You decide to go together.

Immediately you start to feel more confident as you find a link to the past to assist you in this new endeavor. You still have many questions and fears, but now you know you can face them together.

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Chapter One

Social Networking Phenomena

Introduction

The previous story unfolds several times each August or September around the nation. Challenges involved in the uncertainty of the high school to college transition, like this one, have led to this research. Questions are raised: With whom do students spend their time? What activities do they do while they are together? How do they interact? How does that peer (non)acceptance influence collegiate success?

Prior to college, students are often worried about gaining acceptance in the college community. "Freshmen are greatly concerned about who their roommate will be and whether they will be accepted by peers and make friends. If these concerns are not resolved satisfactorily, the possibility of academic success is greatly reduced" (Leafgren, 1989, p.161). The ability to alleviate those concerns would be a major step in easing the transition process.

"When they enter college, freshmen may experience loneliness, anxiety about making new friends and succeeding in college, and stress associated with conflicts about being independent and continuing dependency on family and friends from home" (Leafgren, 1989, p. 158). If that loneliness is not overcome, it can lead to a decrease in retention (Cutrona, 1982). It is that balance between pre-college relationships and new relationships that is an integral part of student development.

Logically, it would be beneficial to have close friends simultaneously experience this transitional period. Friends can offer support in many ways. They are

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the ones to turn to when things go wrong. They are the ones with whom a student can discuss new ideas. They are the ones willing to attend first-meetings of interesting-sounding organizations to combat the awkwardness of going alone. They can convince friends to stay in school when those friends feel like giving up during the first year. As Tinto (1997) found, peer groups help students "balance the many struggles they face in attending college" (p. 610).

Making college friendships is not always easy, and is especially difficult in the first few weeks of college. A newspaper opinion column at Kansas State University describes the experience well:

> *I was scared when I started college. Believe it or not, I'm a little shy around people I don't know. If I say anything, it's usually real dumb and involves many self-deprecating comments. So, I was certainly afraid I would never find a niche. Joining a sorority was completely out of the question-- I think letting me in breaks all sorts of charter rules...When you're little, it's pretty easy to acquire friends. Just give a verbal invitation to a day of "Dukes of Hazzard" play, and you've got a pal for life. College is different. College is big. People are scary. They don't want to play "Dukes of Hazzard"* (Hertig, 2004, p. 1).

The freshman year of college is often deemed one of the greatest transition periods of a student's life, with minimal parental involvement, lack of curfews, and substantial opportunities for gaining independence. Having friends with whom to share these changes and new experiences is very important. It is doubtful they will

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recall yesterday's Physics lecture, but times with friends will be the part of the college journey students will remember (Thielens, 1966; Pascarella, 1980; Weidman, 1989a). It is important to identify the experiences of college students, as well as the meanings students ascribe to those experiences (Creswell, 1998). An explanation of social networks through successful identification of a networking model can assist students in initiating those interactions from the first day they arrive on campus.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) described the importance of these social networks by stating:

> The evidence of the effects of students' involvement in institutional social systems on their social self-evaluations is equally clear and consistent. National studies indicate that interpersonal and social self-concept appear to be most influenced by student's integration in the social systems of the institutions attended, whether studied over a two-year period or a nine-year period. Students' social involvement with their peers and their interaction and familiarity with faculty and staff members were both uniquely and significantly associated with students' interpersonal and social self-concept… with the influence of peers being a third again as powerful as that of faculty (pp. 193-194).

Additionally, close friends can also lead students to better health. They can act as stress relievers and confidants. A website at The Ohio State University explained, "Social interactions with friends help us lead longer and healthier lives. Studies have shown that people who enjoy the fellowship of friends live longer and

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are healthier than their counterparts who are socially isolated. A close network of friends helps us through the challenging times of life" (Smith, n.d.). Friends are relied upon for emotional support, and offer an important resource for discussing and brainstorming through difficult decisions that often face first-year students.

It is not easy to go through the first-year experience alone. It is important to have close friends with whom to share experiences. These friends provide a great outlet for internalized perceptions and offer assistance when tribulations begin to mount. "The person does not function in an individualistic vacuum, but in a social context that influences thought, feeling, and action" (Taylor, 1998, p. 58). College was not an easy process particularly if you try to live in that vacuum. However, it does become more palatable with someone else sharing the same experiences.

Discussion

At the university where this study was conducted, University A, 18% of new students did not stay enrolled for their sophomore year. These amounted to approximately 675 first-year students not reaching their second year. Those students each lost a year of tuition. Taxpayers lost millions of dollars helping pay for incomplete education. Faculty and staff lost hundreds of hours of time and effort unsuccessfully attempting to help them succeed, and society lost around 675 potentially more highly-educated citizens.

Helping students become more successful in the first year is a very complex issue. As students realize their independence, friends become especially important. A student in Martinez Aleman's (1997) study said, "We give each other advice about

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classes or how to deal with the workload…how to go about preparing for class…. We usually do a lot of explaining, a lot of clarifying…things that have to with grammar and things of that nature" (p. 139). Relationships like these can only benefit the academic experience.

Additionally, it helped to have at least one friend from high school (like in the opening scenario) to experience the journey together. As an example, Madison (1969) described a student's (Sidney) first day in one of his ethnographies, "'My first day at college I felt cut off from my past; but a conversation with Jay [not the author, but] (an old high school friend who is attending the same college) and an exchange of similar feelings provided a link to all that had gone before…. In the early part of my first year, Jay formed the only link to a past, which, upon coming to college, had become a hollow void, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach'" (p. 73).

With a thorough understanding of first-year student socialization processes, administrators at University A can directly impact the 18% who are leaving. Without this social network understanding, society will be at a loss; but even worse, this author believes the student would be, too.

Disclosure of Personal Interest

In studies such as this one, it is important to disclose personal interest in the study. This provides the reader not only with a more extensive background of the author, but also establishes some of the researcher's bias towards the data. This researcher's background includes professional development in both Academic Affairs

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and Student Affairs. The combination of these two areas prompted an interest in the effects of social interaction and student satisfaction.

The researcher has also taught several freshmen orientation courses to assist new students in their transitions from high school to college. He observed, firsthand, the importance of peer support and developed programs to enhance these interactions. Thus, the researcher benefited professionally from a better understanding of this area in addition to contributing to the area of student services in higher education. These gains added an enhanced vigor to the researcher's interest in the research questions.

Research Questions

In formulating the topic for this study, the following research questions were developed:

1. Who comprised the social networks of incoming first-year college students?
    a. Is there a particular phenomenon common to social networks in college?
    b. Are there similar stories describing these relationships?
2. How do social networks enhance the collegial experience?

Implications

Answers to the preceding research questions offer new opportunities for college administrators to seek ways to improve student satisfaction. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) emphasize there "may be important determinants of freshman year persistence which are not merely the result of the kinds of students enrolled, but

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rather are subject to the influence of institutional policies and programs which affect the student after he or she arrives on campus" (p. 208). While there were many theories positing what makes a student happier or more likely to stay in college, orientations, organizations, and other team building exercises are often major components. Identification of friendship networks can assist in the implementation of more thoroughly-developed programs.

From a Student Affairs perspective, the ability to identify these social groupings offers a new avenue for intervention, enhanced opportunity for targeted campus event publicity, and an additional resource for locating students when the need arises. Practitioners often learn of student problems from concerned friends. The "I have a friend" discussions usually precede tales of friends who are having problems or camouflaged stories of themselves, and occur quite frequently in conversations between students and staff.

Additionally, students may also be more likely to attend campus activities if they have a friend who is also enticed to attend. Without efficient identification of social networks on campus, student affairs professionals lose time and duplicate effort over-targeting the same populations.

Another benefit involving the present investigation was related to a study at Rutgers University which involved moving the researcher into the residence halls for a period of time. The 1989 study investigated friendships, interactions, and the lives of freshmen in general. The study found a major part of student free time to be "given over to friendly fun with peers, to the endless verbal banter by which maturing

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American youths polish their personalities all through adolescence, trying on new roles, discarding old ones, learning the amiable, flexible social skills that constitute American middle-class manners in the late twentieth century" (Moffatt, 1989, p. 33). With a majority of time in college not being spent in the classroom, it is vital to better understand who is speaking this "banter."

Additionally, a surprisingly difficult process — even in this age of increasing communication technology — was locating students. Many campuses have initiated early warning systems for students who are not attending classes. However, contacting the students to intervene is not easy. Having an additional method of reaching students, through their friends, can potentially offer significant results.

Therefore, if a model was developed to identify who students were most likely to build friendships with, the unsettling time could be greatly reduced. It was always beneficial to have a friend alongside when approaching a new challenge. Increased awareness of student network composition may help students discover their most likely allies from the first day of school.

Significance

From a professional perspective, the proposed social interaction model which describes social networking phenomena offers education administrators a few techniques to better recognize opportunities for assisting students. The Council for the Advancement of Standards was established for Student Affairs professionals in 1979 "to develop and promulgate standards of professional practice to guide practitioners and their institutions, especially their work with college students" (as

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cited in Miller, 1997, p. 1). The first "fundamental principle" on which those standards were based was that the "individual student must be considered a whole person" (p. 7). This "whole person," included the social aspects of students' lives. Therefore, practitioners needed to better understand students' lives in order to more effectively reach the standards of the profession.

Identification of peer group patterns also allows practitioners to better facilitate the networking process. "All freshmen, regardless of background and experience, must develop an interpersonal support system with their fellow students. They must find friends and participate in activities that require cooperation and good interpersonal skills" (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989, p. 2). This support system was vital to student success.

Assumptions

There were two assumptions which underlie this research. First, it was assumed that close friends are not negative influences on the transition process. There was the chance, through peer pressure, that an incorrect path could have been taken due to "friendly" influence. Second, this research assumed all students are interested in having a friend or someone to turn to in the transition process despite the inevitability of a few nonsocial students who chose not to frequent public dining facilities. With these assumptions stated, identification of limitations was the next step.

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Limitations

The primary limitation of this study involved a focus on the traditional, direct from high school, non-commuting student. While this is a neglect of some rapidly growing populations which include commuters, transfers, and adults returning to school, resident students were the most accessible population — especially in a study that took place in a university cafeteria.

A second limitation involved the selection of informants and veracity of observations. In investigating social interactions in social atmospheres, it is expected that extremely introverted students might not frequent these locations. Many chose to utilize other options in their meal plan that allowed them to dine in a quieter, less social environment. The effects of this limitation were mitigated by the utilization of a random selection process of student informants for more in-depth analysis of social networking. This random process was developed by the office of the registrar. This provided for points of view that may have otherwise not been observable in social atmospheres.

Third, at the time of the research, the researcher was employed by the university where the investigation occurred. "Investigating the cultural scene at your place of work has important but not insurmountable, difficulties. First, you may already have learned a considerable amount of the culture and not be aware of it….The second problem arises from working with informants who already know that you are familiar with their particular cultural scene" (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972, pp. 34-35). This can be particularly cumbersome in interviews where informants do not

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tell the researcher certain things under the assumption that he/she is already knowledgeable. Additional questioning was the most effective means to combat this occurrence.

Another potential limitation involved the utilization of multiple research settings. In this study, research took place in the cafeteria, residence halls, and student union. This could have been hazardous due to the ease of mixing the data from the multiple areas. To avoid this, studies in each locale were kept separate until combination was appropriate.

Finally, although this study took place over several semesters, it was not longitudinal. The research was intended to show patterns and relationships during the semesters of data collection. While it was possible that results could be replicated to other institutions, this research reflected the thoughts and actions of students at University A.

Definitions

The **collegial experience** is defined by the overall feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the university during the college career. It can often be measured through discussion of the level of satisfaction a student has with the university.

Freshman success is defined by Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates (1989) as a freshman making "progress toward fulfilling their educational and personal goals" (p. 2) during their first year in college.

Friendship is defined as the relationship bonds formed between two or more students that encourage personal sharing and the desire to spend time together.

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A **phenomenon** is an event or occurrence that may be unexpected or unique to a given situation or set of situations. In some types of qualitative discovery, repeating phenomenon can be identified and categorized as data.

Retention is a word used to describe the process of keeping students throughout several different transition periods. In this study, retention is used to discuss keeping students at the institution throughout their first year and into their second year.

Satisfaction is a word to describe a student's happiness with a university, and is often based upon positive and rewarding encounters (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While satisfaction is defined in this way, it is still determined by what was personally important to the individual student interviewed.

Social Networks are defined as groups of three or more students who regularly spend time with one another outside of the classroom.

Socialization is a process where students learn their roles in the university environment in addition to the college's expectations of them (Ross-Lazarov, 2002, p.1).

Summary

Entering college was a major transition period in students' lives. For most, this was a time of great adjustment, new experiences, new faces, and new responsibility. But as the hustle and confusion of the day came to a close and students looked towards others to synthesize the day and share endeavors, with whom

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did they confide? Who were their friends? How long had they known those friends? These types of questions led the researcher into a study of college social interactions.

This research can assist several audiences. First, identifying the social interaction networks among first-year students provides Student Affairs practitioners with information regarding which students are most likely to succeed and which students will have the greatest opportunities for future successes. Additionally, the knowledge gained from this model allows newly-targeted campaigns to proactively assist students who are not socially-integrated.

The researcher identified two main research questions. The first asked, who comprised the social networks of incoming first-year college students? The second questioned, how did social networks enhance satisfaction with the academic experience? An accurate reflection and interpretation of the qualitative data provides an understanding of the effects of social interactions in college.

Chapter two presents a detailed review of previous works underpinning this research. It includes a background for the selection of the research questions, and identifies many of the authors expert in the areas of social interaction and the transition from high school to college.

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Chapter Two

Review of Previous Work

Introduction

A study by Astin (1984) discussed the benefits of student involvement on campus. He suggested that the student who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 297) was the most likely to succeed. Simply, student-to-student interaction leads to student success.

Identifying methods to facilitate social interactions would be helpful for assisting in the transition process. Antonio (2004), Astin (1977, 1993), Feldman and Newcomb (1969), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) all agreed in stating one of the principal developmental influences on students and student success was the peer group. Despite the agreement, however, there have been only a few studies on peer network composition. One of those, proposed by Weidman (1989b), identified his student network compositions often focused around the academic major. This issue is addressed in this discussion.

Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model utilized pre-college characteristics as indicators of student success. Later, Tinto (1987) then elaborated on his Student Integration Model of why students depart from a university:

> College students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities… to another, that of the college….In seeking to make such transitions, (the college students) are likely to encounter problems of

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> adjustment whose resolution may well spell the difference between continued persistence and early departure…. The "first stage" of the college career, separation, requires individuals to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence….As a result, the process leading to the adoption of behaviors and norms appropriate to the life of the college necessarily requires some degree of transformation and perhaps rejection of the norms of past communities. For virtually all students, separation from the past is at least somewhat isolating and stressful, the pains of parting at least temporarily disorienting. For some it may be so difficult as to significantly interfere with persistence to college (pp. 94- 95).

Unfortunately, in identifying the stages of transition, Tinto did not illustrate a timeline for when students began that disassociation, although the "first stage" terminology implies immediacy. It was an area that clearly required additional investigation. Astin (1993) agreed when he said, "The major impediment to extending our knowledge of peer group effects has been the lack of measures of the characteristics of the peer group" (p. 53). With this citation, he opened a door for further investigation into peer group characteristics.

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Basis for Research Questions

Terenzini, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo, Millar, and Rendon (1993) agree that "We know little about which student experiences and relationships are most conducive to learning, especially in the first crucial year of college" (p. 1). This qualitative analysis illustrated social network compositions providing for an increased knowledge-base in this arena. Successful understanding of social network or peer group composition provides practitioners with more focused marketing methods for programs and intervention strategies to integrate students into the mainstream of campus life.

In order to enhance this understanding, the peer groups needed further investigation. "Every aspect of the student's development—cognitive and affective, psychological and behavioral—is affected in some way by peer group characteristics, and usually by several peer characteristics. Generally, students tend to change their values, behavior, and academic plans in the direction of the dominant orientation of their peer group" (Astin, 1993, p. 363). Peer group influence clearly has a dramatic impact on a student's activities and attitudes.

Included in the values influenced by peer groups was overall student satisfaction. These included "hours per week socializing with friends, spent partying, and socializing with persons from different racial or ethnic backgrounds" (Astin, 1993, p. 279).

In Aitken's (1982) Structural Equation Model on College Student Performance, Satisfaction, and Retention, eleven variables were deemed significant to

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enhancing the collegial experience. Of these, peer relationships clearly dominated in terms of importance. These influences were the people with whom students spent the most time.

Social acceptance affected other factors that influence satisfaction, as well. Myers (2000) stated that those with many close friends are less likely to suffer from poor health (p. 62). The transition process from high school to college was not easy; having declining health compounds the difficulty.

However, this developmental process was not new to students upon reaching college. Students were always evolving and absolutely dependent upon others (Dewey, 1930). This evolution was a part of the social development process that has been associated with students for quite some time. It can be traced throughout an individual's growth and maturation process early in life.

"In the preschool years there is an overriding concern with social participation and with challenging and gaining control over adult authority. Once children move into elementary school such challenging of adult authority persists, but there is also a gradual movement toward social differentiation within the peer group" (Corsaro, 1990, p. 202). This was the initial time that group composition became more defined. As students entered high school, the group make-up began to extend beyond the school. "Eighty-five percent of all friendship choices were directed toward school members. The other 15 percent of the choices for preferred best friends were directed to persons outside the school," extending the boundaries of the informal organization

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(Gordon, 1957, p. 79). This identification described high school friends as an integral part of student life as he/she began college.

As college began, the developmental process continued. Students were introduced to a vast pool of potential friends. Eventually, new relationships developed, groups expanded, and social groups were remodeled. Until that change occured, though, pre-college characteristics including backgrounds and demographics were very influential. Weidman (1989b) showed these pre-college or student background characteristics as the major influence on social change.

The transition process was easier when you have peers to assist you. Derryberry and Thoma (2000) have indicated, "Close friendships do seem to be a developmental advantage for students in college" (p. 16), particularly during the first year. Students often turned to friends to assist in this process. Conversations among friends served as a source of "different and diverse perspectives and sources of information and advice" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 136).

Until this point, one discussion not mentioned in the literature review is the possibility of loneliness and perhaps even depression affecting students without social networks. This can lead to desperate situations for the student and satisfaction problems for the university (Booth, 1985). Kurt Vonnegut's quote on loneliness provided the best summation. "What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured (Vonnegut, n.d.)."

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Vonnegut made an interesting statement when he discussed the creation of stable communities and the "disease of loneliness." If stable communities can be established through not-so-daring endeavors, will nonsocial behaviors be decreased? Can that increase happiness? Students do better when surrounded by friends. They become more secure. This makes them emotionally healthier, better adjusted, and more apt to succeed.

In a first-year experience college success textbook, the following advice was given:

> Life is too short to hang out with people who bring you down, encourage you to participate in activities you don't approve of, or behave in ways that upset you. Develop relationships with people whom you respect, whose choices you admire, and who inspire you to be all that you can be…. These influential relationships can affect other areas of your life. You have probably experienced conflict that caused you to be unable to sleep, eat, or get any work done. On the other hand, a successful relationship can have positive effects on your life, increasing your success at work or at school (Carter, Bishop, & Kravitz, 1999, p. 212).

These relationships were an integral part of social networking. "Membership in such a group serves to cushion the traumatic experience of the first prolonged separation from parents. Later on, group membership protects those who 'belong' from the shocks and rebuffs of the impersonal, crowd-like aspects of the larger college community" (Hartshorne, 1943, p. 326). Additionally, intellectual development

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among college and university students relied on supportive relationships (Perry, 1978; Astin, 1993, Derryberry & Thoma, 2000).

Social networks were also vital to encouraging a positive collegial experience, particularly among women. Aries and Johnson (1983) found friendships among females positively affected each other's self-worth and were necessary for self-discovery and growth (p. 357-358). "These college women saw their friendships as a relationship from which they could learn to navigate college terrain, and from which they could extract the information necessary to improve the chances for academic success. Their female friendships are practical and functional in that they serve as resources for effective skills: anticipating what the professor wants, setting workload priorities, and proofreading" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 139). While this study did not focus specifically on gender, these comments provide additional emphases on impact of social networks on a major composition of college demographics.

In Moffatt's (1989) ethnography about Rutgers University students, a senior female wrote, "Above all else, college is a breeding ground for interrelationships between students. If nothing else, a college student learns how to interact with his or her peers. The ability to form lasting relationships is of great value to the graduating adult" (p. 61).

As an example of this "breeding ground," Chickering's third vector, entitled Developing Autonomy, emphasized a time of student development where students have an increased need for approval from others while simultaneously recognizing

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the importance of others. This would be a logical explanation for the enhanced friendships and bonds that are developed while in college (Chickering, McDowell, & Campagna, 1969).

This type of academic support between friends identified one example of how social networks can enhance the collegial experience. Several authors explain why students leave college, as well as what kept them there. In these reports, influences on students' social and academic well-being were defined. They demonstrated that student-to-student interactions were positively associated with a "number of academic outcomes: degree aspirations, college GPA, and graduating with honors" (Astin, 1993, p. 385). Additionally, Wallace (1966) clearly identified the peer groups as being influential in members' attitudes towards high grades and academic achievement.

Included in these peer group relationships were opportunities for group work and studying together. "Students point out that those who always study alone are isolating themselves from a key benefit of college—the opportunity to learn from fellow students" (Light, 2001, p. 40). These academic benefits provided additional information on how peer groups influenced academic success and retention.

Many researchers were quite adamant about peer group influences on success. "Encouragement from friends and family can exert significant effects upon academic integration, commitments to the institution, as well as on persistence decisions" (Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993, p. 128). "Students who find others who care about them will succeed. Those who are isolated from peers… will get much less out

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of their college experience—or fail. They want and need that one person who can make the difference between success and failure" (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989, p. 4). Derryberry and Thoma (2000) were the most direct, "College friends simply keep students on campus" (p. 16).

Important Literary Contributions

There were three studies that provided the framework for this research. Later on, data will be interpreted with in the boundaries of these frameworks. The first was C. Cutrona's (1982) study on the loneliness often involved with the transition to college. She provided several testimonials of students who were struggling to meet new friends upon arriving at college. This caused sadness and loneliness that students found difficult to balance with academic rigor. The need for friendship was viewed as a coping mechanism. Cutrona comments, "while first-year college students valued their relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners, friends were particularly important for avoiding loneliness" (p. 298).

The second study which significantly contributed to this research was the work of J.C. Weidman. His conceptual model of undergraduate socialization illustrates the importance of pre-college characteristics in defining social groups. His focus was on how peer groups can help socialize a student into the college environment (1989a). He stated, "Interpersonal relationships contributing to the social integration of students into the academic system are related not only to the attainment of institutional goals but also to the personal goals of individual students"

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(1989b, p. 96). In effect, he stated students tended to network around their academic major or career direction.

The final study which provided a significant basis for this research involved political science theory. Fenno (1978) drew a model made of concentric circles to describe how politicians view their constituents. This model from his classic text, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* was the basis for the model developed for this research.

Summary

Despite several researchers listing the importance of peer-to-peer interaction on college student success, few have done studies on the composition of social networks. Successful identification of who comprises these networks can advance the knowledge base in the study of higher education.

In the next chapter, the methodology of this study is addressed. It includes description of the various data collection techniques, and offers the processes required for future studies of comparable topics.

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Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

Creswell (1998) lists several reasons for selecting the most appropriate inquiry method. Of these reasons, the choice of method was primarily based on the nature of the research questions. Thus, to begin the methodology section, it was important to review the following research questions:

1. Who comprised the social networks of incoming first-year college students?
    a. Was there a particular phenomenon common to social networks in college?
    b. Were there similar stories describing these relationships?
2. How do social networks enhance the collegial experience?

These questions allowed for identification of those who made up the social networks and how they developed over time. Researching in the social sciences was very difficult as causality was essentially impossible to prove. Social investigations, like this one, intended to bring the reader an enhanced understanding of routine social interactions. To properly explore these inquiries, an in-depth investigation into the individual circumstances that created the relationships was necessary.

"Much of the research on adult friendship as a primary relationship has emerged only in the past twenty-five years" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 124). Research during this time period has been quantitative and limited for the most part. If this study were to be investigated quantitatively, one of the first steps following the

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development of the hypothesis would involve identification of the possible independent variables. By doing this, research becomes focused but also limited. A study that is too focused creates a vast ignorance of individuality.

As an additional weakness of quantitative research, Kuh (1991) indicated that the unpredictability of human behavior was detrimental to the usefulness of the positivistic paradigm. Close-ended survey questions which were common in the paradigm do not provide the "thick, rich description of many qualitative methods" (Malaney, 2002, p. 139). "The concept of 'variable,' as another example, makes good sense in physical science but connotes inappropriate imagery when it comes to social research because the freedom of people to act otherwise in any situation is lost with such a term" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 40).

In order to reach the aforementioned individuality, it was often best to allow the subjects to provide their own explanations. For this reason, qualitative research was selected. The purpose for qualitative study was the exploration of a phenomenon or program holistically and inclusion of environmental factors for an enhanced understanding (Shimahara, 1988; Patton, 1990; Sherman & Webb, 1988). "The aim of qualitative research is not verification of a predetermined idea, but discovery that leads to new insights" (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 5). In this situation, the researcher explored a topic which had little previous research already provided. Due to this lack of prior knowledge in the area, qualitative methodology was used to guide the research.

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The present investigation intended to record and to articulate the social relationship patterns in the first year. Thus, there needed to be more than a positivistic method of prediction. Therefore, a naturalistic explanation of social networks through qualitative inquiry was clearly the most effective method for this study.

McEwan and McEwan (2003) enhanced the decision to use qualitative methodology by stating, "There are many researchers, both in and out of the field of education, who are currently calling for more applied research in education—the generation of more useable and practical knowledge to solve specific problems" (p. 21).

Acknowledging these recommendations, the present study employed a phenomenological approach to highlight individualistic ideas, and offer new target areas for Student Affairs intervention. The phenomenological approach illuminated the specific and identified phenomena through the subjects' perspectives (Lester, 2002). Thus, there must be an examination of individual differences versus a complete focus on the group (Stage, 1991; Terenzini, 1994).

The choice of the phenomenological method was based on an investigation of Creswell's (1998) traditions of qualitative study. Of these, the most relevant methods for this research were either phenomenology or ethnography. An ethnographic approach was a possibility since the research included participant observation which included: watching the students, interacting with the students, talking to the students, and outlining an explanation based on a combination of various perspectives. Van

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Maanen (1988) stated, "While an ethnography may be crammed with details and facts, it also conveys an argument and an informing context as to how these details and facts interweave…. Ethnographic materials can exhort, entertain, instruct, or madden a general readership looking for a message in the written word" (pp. 30-31). However, as explained in Chapter One, the intent of this study was development of a model that described the essence of the composition of these social networks. The goal was to identify any potential social networking phenomena that occurred. Therefore, a phenomenological method of analysis was employed.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology was first used by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. He employed this method to explain how people described and experienced what they were sensing (Patton, 1990; Carspecken 1996). Husserl's phenomenology was explained as the analysis process utilized to correlate the actual lived, ongoing experiences in daily life in contrast to self-reported perceptions (Macann, 1993, p. 19). "Phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question: 'What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?'" The phenomenon being experienced can be an emotion, relationship, organization, or culture (Patton, 1990, p. 69). The key to phenomenology was not to look at four unique views, but to look at the commonalities that bring them together. "The aim is to view events holistically. Some events may be anticipated, but others may be totally unexpected" (Shimahara, 1988, p. 80). In this case, the phenomenon of relationships within a student culture was investigated.

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While phenomenological studies often focus on numerous long interviews, this research additionally employed several other data collection techniques. McCall and Simmons (1969) found it misleading to only consider one type of data collection (i.e. interviews) without using other techniques (p. 1). Patton (1990) identified three methods of qualitative data collection: interviews, observations, and investigation of written documents. This study combined two methods: interviews and observations. After securing approval from various administrators and the Institutional Review Board at University A, the researcher began the qualitative study.

This research engaged multiple methods of qualitative discovery and focused on information relating to the composition of the social networks. Moffatt (1989) offered the following account in his similar investigation into the private lives of college students:

> Conventional accounts of American college students rely on the anecdotal knowledge their professors have of them--a dubious source--or on questionnaires or structured or unstructured interviews. Questionnaires usually require their subjects to respond to predetermined topics, however; with students, they are about what adult investigators have decided should be relevant to youths in advance. Interviews give subjects a better chance to talk and think in their own terms. But interviews with adolescents, especially with glib college adolescents, also encourage subjects to talk in their most formal, adult-sounding ways. Participant observation with the undergraduates, on the other hand, amounts to hanging around with one's subjects for a long enough

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> time to start hearing them in their more natural adolescent tones-very different ones-and to start sensing their own priorities as they understand them…. They are frequently impolite and vigorously vulgar, but they introduce us to realities that other, loftier points of view about college and modern adolescence often miss or obscure (p. xv).

Clearly, an understanding of social networking required a series of student observations in addition to interviewing. It was necessary to see and speak to students in their environment and gain their trust to ensure truthful openness. Only then, would various phenomena of social networking become apparent to the researcher.

Research Locations

After the phenomenological method was selected, deciding on the campus locales for the study was the next major decision. There were several locations for observations of this type of social interaction on a major university campus: the library, recreation center, cafeteria, student union, sidewalks, classrooms, and the residence halls. This study primarily focused on two settings: the student union and the cafeteria — both places of major first-year student action and interaction.

In these often chaotic and highly social environments it was relatively easy to blend in as a participant-observer, and stay close enough to accurately document the interactions. "Several (students) remarked that talking over lunch or dinner is good use of time and are hence less likely to feel as if they were taking time away from school work" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 147). These environments provided a

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special selectivity with the freedom of people dining to converse with whomever they wish (Haine, 1996, p. 150). These cafeteria discussions were likened to the family dinner table conversation during the high school years where families gather together for eating and chatting.

These dining times offered very social opportunities to reflect on the day's occurrences, and provided a gathering time for flirtation. Young women would often yell across the room in the cafeteria to gain the attention of another girl or guy. Young men would reply with the ever-popular nod of the head that without saying a word implied, *hey what's up, how's it goin', good to see you*. It was a common scene that would play itself out over and over again. Groups of women would stop to meet groups of men and vice versa. They eyed one another from across the room and often pointed and giggled with one another from across the room.

Curious about this later topic, the researcher approached three female students obviously interested in a guy who had just arrived in the cafeteria. They claimed to watch the same guy each night, as one girl thought he was *really hot!* She knew his name, Adam, but they called him *A.B.—Adam Boy*. They say they sat in that spot each time knowing he would only sit a few tables away.

Another student replied in a similar way. *I always sit facing the door so I can see the cute guys walk in.* Comments like these made it apparent the cafeteria and food court were appropriate locations for observation of University A's collegiate social world. It was easy to become "fully engrossed in the daily affairs," a necessity for thorough qualitative research (Van Maanen, 1988, p.80).

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Data Collection

For this study, the researcher spent approximately fifty hours over two semesters in observation of students followed by both long and short student interviews. This combination of techniques provided the data necessary for a thorough analysis of student social networks.

Interactions noted by the researcher utilized portions of Mehrabian's (1972) factors of social behavior. These included observations of speech volume, "pleasantness" of facial expressions, shoulder orientations, and head-nodding. From these notations, the researcher was able to tell who were dining together, and who were simply sitting next to each other. These factors were "of major importance and serve to characterize not only actual social behavior, but also the perceptions and judgments of social events, persons, and objects" (Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1972, p. 589).

Selection of seating was also important to observe. "Table sharing further produces a feeling of informality as unacquainted customers are put into a situation where there are plenty of opportunities to initiate conversation" (Buckner, Laurier, & Whyte, 2001, p. 10).

Following these observations, a more in-depth investigation into social networking among first-year students took place through the interviews and observations of six first-semester, randomly-selected freshmen informants (described

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in detail under Procedures: Student Informants, page 40). These discussions offered several specific accounts of the networking processes and are acknowledged in this study.

Instrumentation

As the instrument of this study, the researcher purposely allowed a maximum of two hours of consecutive observation on any given day. Guba and Lincoln (1981) gave reasoning for this limited data collection. "Changes resulting from fatigue, shifts in knowledge, and cooption" can easily occur. However, "this loss in rigor is more than offset by the flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument" (p. 113). The time constraints were added to enhance awareness and accuracy.

Data Source

The data for this study were gathered at a public Midwestern research university, University A, with an enrollment of over 20,000 students. The incoming freshmen classes each year during the study ranged between 3,600 and 3,800 students from across the region and nation. It was a primarily residential campus for freshmen as they were required to live in the residence halls for their first year unless they were commuting from within a 50-mile radius. All freshmen were members of one academic college, which exempted them from the need to declare a major. However, this also meant they might not take major-related coursework until their second year.

The initial data collection method was through observation — a very important component of qualitative research. Noting the environment, observing

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interaction, and documenting situational response offered a wealth of additional information. As Aristotle (as cited in Taylor, 1998) reasoned, "To understand human behavior, one must be fundamentally attuned to the social environment and its impact on people" (p. 59). This allowed the researcher to differentiate between close friends and acquaintances.

Creswell (1998) recommended using qualitative inquiry to allow for study of individuals in their natural settings, which is integral in research focusing on students' lives (pp. 17-18). "The only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience it for ourselves. This leads to the importance of participant observation" (Patton, 1990, p. 70). The researcher believed he would best understand the students' comments if he participated in the experience, himself. "The most complete form of the sociological datum, after all, is the form in which the participant observer gathers it: an observation of some social event, the events which precede and follow it and explanations of its meaning by participants and spectators, before, during, and after its occurrence. Such a datum gives us more information about the event under study than data gathered by any other sociological method" (Becker & Geer, 1970, p. 133). The goal was to not ask what students believed they routinely did, but watch for it first-hand; then, later, the researcher verified the observations. The procedural methods of these verifications are explained by research location.

Procedures: Cafeteria

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The initial data collection took place in the campus cafeteria. The cafeteria customers were primarily freshmen, and provided an interesting atmosphere for noting the often-discussed transition of the freshman year. All new freshmen who lived in the residence halls also had meal plans that allowed them access to the cafeteria. This increased the likelihood of students to utilize the cafeteria services.

The research in the cafeteria took place on several different nights of the week throughout the spring semester. By that time of the year, freshmen had their routines down and had ample opportunity to meet others. The cafeteria was a large building in the middle of the residence halls with two major entrances. Inside, there were about a dozen lines to choose from offering everything from stir-fry to hamburgers to gyros to fresh yogurt.

There were three main dining areas focused each on a different theme: sports grill and leisure dining, international flavors, and a more generalized middle area. Inside the sports grill were several rows of long tables connected end-to-end. Located around the outer walls were booths that held about four or five students. Surrounding these tables were televisions mounted on the walls.

The middle seating area is termed the "General Area" (GA) in this study. Here, a majority of the students congregated since it was in the middle of the food choices. In the other end of the cafeteria, a more international flavor was portrayed through decorations of international flags and is termed the "World's Fair" (WF) in this study. Both areas had similar seating setups: long end-to-end tables, individual tables for up to eight, and booths along the wall. A drawing of the cafeteria floor plan

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may be found in Appendix B. There were many students and numerous conversations which provided for a fascinating dynamic for exploration.

There was little difficulty blending-in due to the researcher's familiarity due to his campus employment. It was fairly common for him to be in the cafeteria on occasions, so his presence was nothing extraordinary. The cafeteria administrators allowed the researcher to come in at any time for observations. They seemed very interested in learning more about their students, and expressed interest in reviewing the study's results. The Director of Food Services considered it an opportunity to better understand his customers and their social networking dynamics in his building.

The time for observations was selected with the expectation of finding the largest number of students in attendance in the cafeteria. With dinner being the busiest time in the cafeteria, most of the research was conducted between 5:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Serving time began at 4:00 p.m.; before 5:00 p.m., there were very few people in the cafeteria.

The routine was quite simple: the researcher checked in and selected a meal. Occasionally, the researcher would join students at their tables, but often ate alone at a booth facing the large, populated area. While eating (an additional measure to blend in), the researcher took note of the surroundings, interactions, discussions, body language, and seating locations of the students he was observing.

After three weeks of observations, the researcher approached many of the subjects and asked them to validate or discount the researcher's notations. Even with thorough observation, there was a need to verify what was being observed. As Schutz

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(1970) explains, "How do I know what is going on in (the subject's) mind? Well, even if I am merely observing him, his body is still a field of expression for his inner life" (p. 195). Brief interviews were vital to this understanding. The students interviewed were interested in the study, and were amused and impressed with the observations. On most accounts, the researcher was accurate. The interview protocol for these interviews is attached in Appendix C.

Procedures: Food Court

The next step in this investigation included a process of observing the freshmen in a setting of mixed academic level classifications. This expanded the study to a new physical locale for data collection. The data collection location needed to be a place where the researcher could fit in as a participant-observer, and where simple interviews could be readily conducted. A setting where people spent time eating also helped in maintaining similar characteristics with the cafeteria.

One of the main meeting points at University A was the food court in the student union. The student union was the hub of student life. It was a place to eat, study, and relax. Students of all ages mingled in the halls, and ate in the food court. The food court was divided into four areas separated by large aisles. The research was focused more on the middle two, as the other two were not as conducive to observations (high seat backs and long lines impended sight). There were approximately 150 tables of varying sizes surrounded by chairs.

Once again, the desire to observe during times of the greatest concentration of students led to the researcher's selection of observation times. In the food court,

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lunch was chosen as the best and most populous time. After observing the students in this section of the food court for several days, the researcher began brief, informal interviews. Individuals or groups were chosen for their interviews by their proximate locations to the researcher on a particular day. The researcher collected data from different areas of the food court to ensure diversified subjects. Responses were not audio-taped, but were recorded into hand-written notes. Most interviews lasted less than three minutes. There was no intention to interrupt meals or ask more questions than necessary; the purpose was to more thoroughly identify the composition of their groups. The number of students at the table was recorded prior to the researcher initiating conversation. The researcher introduced himself, explained what he was doing, and asked for permission to continue. He then asked four basic questions. First, each group member was asked how he/she knew the other group members. This was a question similar to that utilized by Culbert, Lachenmeyer, and Good (1988) and Antrobus, Dobbelaer, and Salzinger (1988) in the Friendly Network Questionnaire. The remaining three questions – did you come here together or meet here, what is your classification (so freshman standing can be noted), and what were your intentions when arriving here (eat, study, etc.) – were designed to provide a brief background of the respondents.

Upon completion of the observations and informal interviews, the researcher conducted two formal interviews. These were designed to provide additional sources and also offer another method of triangulation. Each extensive interview lasted 30-45 minutes. Both subjects were chosen due to their familiarity with the food court

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dynamics. These were tape-recorded and a transcript for each was made. Interviewees were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity throughout this study. Both signed informed consent forms as required by the Institutional Review Board.

Finally, an outside observer, a coworker of the researcher, was selected to assist with the observations. Her comments and observations were recorded and contrasted with the researcher's notations. This additional step assisted the researcher in observations by viewing the social scene from a new perspective, strengthened the information through triangulation, and provided an additional means of building trustworthiness of the researcher's observations.

Extensive Interview Introductions

Two individuals were selected for extensive interviews. The researcher believed they were experts on the social interactions in the food court due to the extensive time spent in that location over the past few years.

The first interviewee was named "Jimmy." At the time of the interview, he was a recent graduate of University A and current master's level student. He was an active member of the student body, specifically through the association of black students at the university.

The second interviewee was named "Kate." She was a recent graduate and a current staff member. She was very active as a student and at the time of the interview worked on campus in the student union. She was an excellent resource on the food court environment and offered valued expertise.

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Procedures: Student Informants

One of the most important steps in the data collection of this phenomenological study involved interviews and observations of six randomly-selected informants throughout the first semester of their college career at University A. The college registrar provided the students' names through a randomization program developed by his staff. The registrar provided the names of five males and five females, in the event participants could not be reached. The researcher contacted these students by phone, at phone numbers listed in the campus student directory, and was able to contact three males and three females. Five of the six students resided in the residence halls, which made the initial contacts very easy. The sixth student was a commuter with a valid telephone listing in the campus directory. Upon each call, the researcher introduced himself, and explained the nature of the research. He explained the time commitment that was to be needed, including meeting at various times throughout the semester for interviews. Particularly with the female students, the researcher was very sensitive to potential weariness of meeting a male who randomly called her. The researcher always called from a University A telephone, in the event the student had caller identification. The interviews were always held in public places such as residence hall lounges or common social areas. Each of the six students agreed to participate in the study. A time was then immediately scheduled for the first interview.

During the initial interview, students were questioned about their backgrounds, general transition processes, and routine social patterns. Demographics

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reported by the informants such as hometown, high school, class size, and estimated number of other attendees at University A from their high school were compared to university publications for an additional method of verification. This helped to strengthen the study and trustworthiness of the informant, as the information was not drawn from a single source or process of data collection (Merriam, 1998). The interview protocol for the initial interview can be found in Appendix D.

Each student was interviewed during the crucial first few weeks of the semester (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). The protocol developed to interview these students followed the lead of Terenzini et al. (1993) in remaining "open-ended, encouraging students to talk freely about the transition from high school to college and about the events and people that helped or hindered that passage" (p. 2). Interviews were tape-recorded, and a transcription was made of each one.

The six student informants were a key component to this study. Their comments were kept confidential. However, their experiences were very important to share. "Each person has a unique set of experiences which are treated as truth and which determine that individual's behavior. In this sense, truth is totally unique to each individual" (Eichelberger, 1989, p. 6).

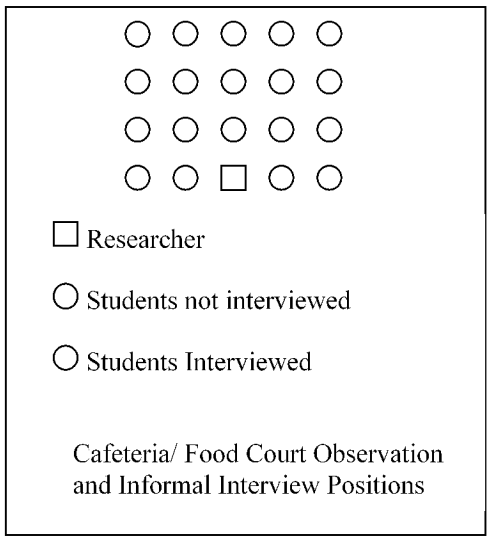
Synopsis of Interviewees

Since there were several different phases of this research, a brief text and graphic review of the various interviews offer assistance in differentiating between the groups. Observations took place in the food court and cafeteria. After observations, the researcher gave brief interviews to several of the students seated in

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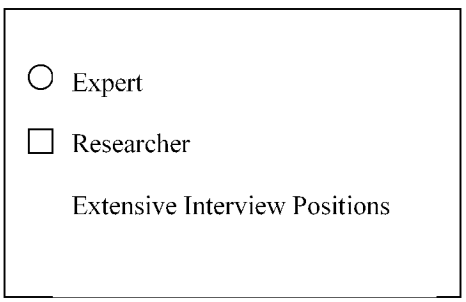
the surrounding area. An example of this can interview selection process can be illustrated, as follows:

Illustration 1:



Following the completion of the observations in the food court, two individuals were selected for extensive interviews about the food court. The research considered both interviewees as experts in the food court due to the abundance of time they spent there. The interviews were both one-on-one and can be illustrated, as follows:

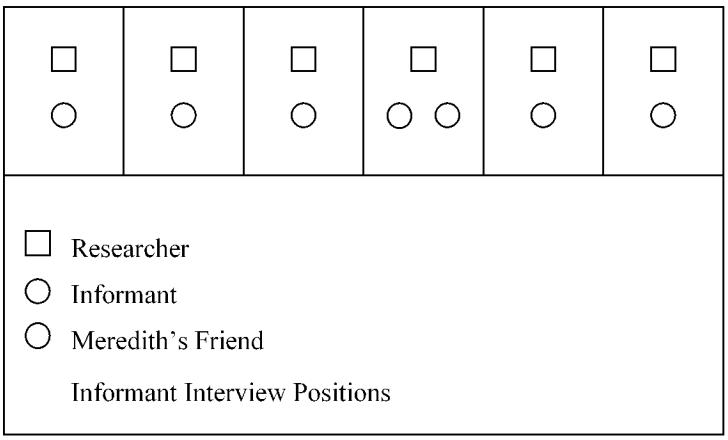
Illustration 2:



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The final set of interviews was of six randomly selected student informants. Each interview was one-on-one (with the exception of Meredith who brought a friend with her) and occurred in public places. These interviews can be illustrated, as follows:

Illustration 3:



Informant Introductions

As informants, students agreed to be interviewed several times throughout their first semester. Informed Consent forms were signed by each of the informants as required by the Institutional Review Board that approved the study. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix A. Pseudonyms were given to each of the freshmen informants, and only the researchers and registrar had access to the actual names.

The first student interviewed was named "Robert." He was a graduate from a United States Air Force Base high school in Asia. His father was a graduate of University A, and promised to pay all of Robert's expenses if he attended that school. University A was not Robert's first choice. Despite being elected Student Body President at his high school, he claimed to be extremely introverted.

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The second student interviewed was named "Beth." She was a graduate from a high school about an hour and a half drive from University A. There were approximately 1,000 students in her graduating class. She was attended the university to study journalism, and roomed with a friend of hers whom she knew from church and high school.

The third student interviewed was named "James." He was a Health and Exercise Science major from a school about 40 minutes away from University A. He had attended many sporting events at University A with his father since he was a baby, and knew he wanted to attend school there.

The fourth student interviewed was named "Meredith." She was a graduate of a private high school about 30 minutes away from University A. She was an Aerospace Engineering major who hoped to work for NASA. She was a member of a social sorority on campus. Her father was a graduate of University A, and worked closely with the University A Department of Intercollegiate Athletics.

The fifth student interviewed was named "Victoria." She was a commuter student who lived with her parents in a home within ten miles of campus. She attended a private high school, and was at University A majoring in art. She intended to transfer to an art school in the Northwest prior to graduation.

The final student interviewed was named "Landon." He was a non-resident student from a bordering state. He was undecided about his major but considered going into the medical field. There were approximately 450 students in his high

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school graduating class. His mother was an alumnus of University A which helped lead him to attending there.

The student-informants offered several insider perspectives to the discussion of student networking. Their comments are integrated into discussion throughout the paper. Spradley and McCurdy (1972) indicated a "good informant is one who knows the culture well" (p. 47). These students were living the first-year experience throughout the interviews, making them the experts.

Method of Analysis

To begin the data analysis, the researcher reviewed all of the collected information to gain an initial understanding of the essence of the overall data (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1990). Throughout this intensive examination of the data, there were three major aspects of the analysis conducted. First, the researcher's interpretations and biases were recorded to help avoid jading respondent information. A diagram of expected social networks was then drawn to document this initial bias (see Graph A-2 on page 50).

Second, the participants' responses were categorized into different themes. Categorizing the participant responses was an important technique for balancing the abundance of data. "Classifying pertains to taking the text or qualitative information apart, looking for categories, themes, or dimensions of information" (Creswell, 1998, p. 144). These categories were then divided into subgroups. These subgroups were broken into areas such as friendship influences, network composition, and reasons for convening. From these categories, the researcher began "scanning the data for

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categories of phenomena and for relationships among the categories" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p. 57).

With this abundance of data, maintaining organization and proper coding was not easy to achieve. There are several software applications (like NVIVO and EZ-Text) that allow for quicker coding methods. By design, they search for text retrievers or strings of text in the database and make combinations of commonality. For this research, though, the data was coded and separated manually. A desire to become more familiar with the data and to continually work through each individual subgroup encouraged this manual approach.

Finally, with the coding complete, the researcher synthesized the overall essence of the data and searched commonalities and interplays among the data as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and reported it in a thorough description (p.58). This was a particularly important step since the data came from three separate locations and methods.

Ensuring Quality

A vital step in the collection and presentation of the data was the researcher's efforts to ensure veracity or quality in the study. As Stake (2000) emphasized, knowledge gained in an investigation, "faces hazardous passage from the writer to reader. The writer needs ways of safeguarding the trip" (p. 443). Without proper methods of triangulation and verification of trustworthiness, the data loses value.

In this study, the researcher employed several techniques to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, interviews were tape recorded and later

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transcribed for accuracy. This allowed for the rich, thick descriptions that were vital to this report, as well as provided for hearing the subtle nuances that were often prevalent in the students' actions and voice tone.

Second, triangulation was used in several phases of the research. Triangulation was a technique that consisted of combining multiple methods of data collection to assist in verification of the information. An example of triangulation in this study was the process of observation in the cafeteria and food court. In these locations, observations were made by the researcher, and they were confirmed by the students being observed through brief interviews. Additionally, outside observers were brought in, and their views were recorded to offer additional points of view.

Third, data collection continued in each research location until saturation occurred. The researcher believed he had achieved saturation after several consecutive days of repeating observations. At that point, the researcher was comfortable enough to proceed to the next phase of the study.

Finally, throughout the process the researcher employed a type of member checking. As the data were accumulated, he discussed his results with other first-year students to see if they agreed with his findings. Most students claimed the researcher's observations accurately reflected their first-year experience at University A.

Each of these techniques assisted in strengthening the study. "Because qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data collection and analysis, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through observations and interviews.

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We are 'closer' to reality than if an instrument with predefined items had been interjected between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied. Most agree that when reality is viewed in this manner—that is always interpreted—internal validity is considered a strength of qualitative research" (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). The researcher agreed with Merriam, and believed internal validity is a major strength of this study.

Summary

Social interactions with friends during college are a necessity for academic success and student satisfaction. Several researchers investigated the importance of the peer group in the past, but focused on quantitative investigations. This research investigated peer group composition from a phenomenological approach that consisted of several qualitative data gathering methods.

In the next chapter, the researcher's anticipated results are discussed. As mentioned previously, pre-study biases of the researcher are important to note. Chapter four discusses those biases through identification of a social networking model drawn prior to the initiation of the data collection.

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Chapter Four

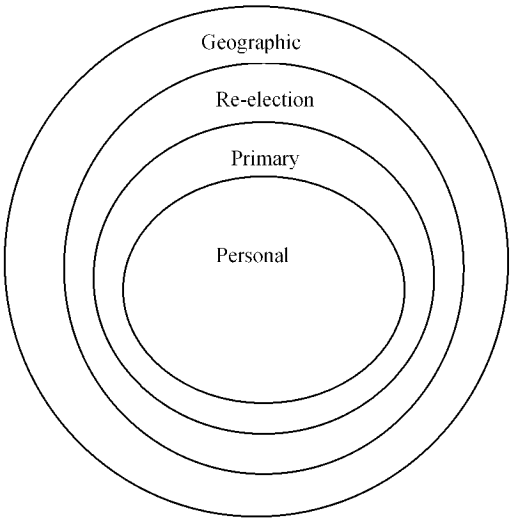
Social Networking Model Expectations

Pre-Study Analysis

In identifying who comprised the social networks of incoming first-year college students, it was important to first identify pre-study data that related to the investigation. Since this study researched social networking, it was helpful to know what other areas of social sciences offered beneficial models. One method of grouping social networks was through the formulation of concentric circles. This was popularized in the field of Political Science by Richard Fenno in his classic text, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, first published in 1978. Fenno's work added to political science research statements about the methods of representation, and how representatives viewed the people they served and the jobs they performed. Fenno identified four categories of constituents. These constituents formed concentric circles around the congressperson. The innermost circle was the "personal" constituency made up of those intimate friends closest to the member. The next circle was the "primary" constituency, which was formed by the member's strongest supporters. Following the primary constituency was the "reelection" constituency, which was composed of the member's supporters (those who voted for him). Finally, the outside circle was the "geographic" constituency that contained everyone, including those already mentioned, living in the member's district. An initial sketch of these circles would look like this:

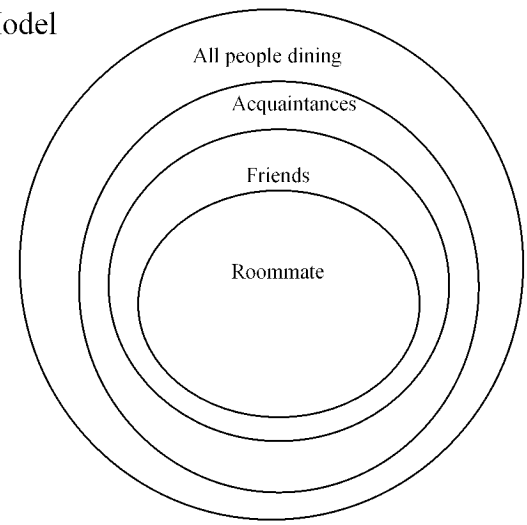
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Graph A-1: Fenno's Model



Fenno's idea of constituent groupings is analogous to placing students into potential social networks. Each circle represents the likelihood of particular students who were included in the group composition. A pre-study expectation of the concentric circles resembled Graph A-2.

Graph A-2: Pre-Study Model



The Pre-Study Model in Graph A-2 was based on the idea that the most common person to go to dinner with was the student's roommate. They saw each other the most, and they were readily accessible when leaving for dinner. The next

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circle in would be comprised of friends. This would include students from the same residence hall floor, fraternity, sorority, or friends from high school. The next circle would be the Acquaintances Circle. This circle would be comprised of students seen while walking to dinner and the decision was made to dine together, or a familiar student recognized in the cafeteria, and they joined together. The outermost circle would include anyone dining in the cafeteria. Introductions would be made, but little other conversation was likely to occur.

Summary

Prior to beginning the data collection, the researcher proposed an expected social networking model based on Fenno's (1978) work. The model discussed who students were likely to spend their time dining with based on the researcher's ideas of which students were likely to interact in the greatest frequency. Acknowledging these expectations from the beginning assisted the researcher in his cognizance of potential influential bias.

Exploration of these pre-conceived notions was the only way to verify if the researcher's predictions were true. The data gathering began in the cafeteria, which is explained in the next chapter. It describes many of the observations noted by the researcher, as well as identification of any occurring phenomena.

Due to the multiple research locations, the data were presented beginning with Cafeteria Observations, and followed by Food Court Observations. Commonly related discussions from the students are shared, and a detailed explanation of the proposed social networking model is presented.

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Chapter Five

Qualitative Discovery: Analysis of Observations and Interviews

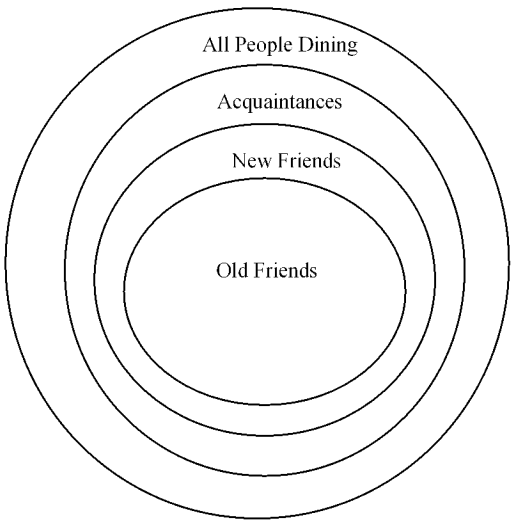
Cafeteria Observations

To test the Pre-Study Model illustrated on page 50, the researcher initiated his study in the cafeteria. First, the researcher recorded the number of people in the group. Second, he asked them how they knew each other. Third, he asked if it was a routine for them to come together or if it was random. Finally, the researcher asked if they came arrived together that evening or met in the cafeteria.

Of the 104 students interviewed, 48 were friends from high school, 39 were friends from their residence hall, 11 were in the same Greek House, and six were roommates or suitemates (suitemates shared a bathroom). Eighty-six of the students came with the other students in the group, and only eighteen met their group members at the cafeteria.

With this information, a few alterations were made in the initial circles diagram:

Graph A-3: Social Networking Model



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As these graphs illustrate, the composition of social networks was an unexpected observation (as noted from Graph A-2 to A-3). The researcher did not expect to see the significant role previous friends played in the high school-to-college transition process. This was the first phenomenon discovered in the data collection process.

Old Friends Circle

The inside circle, Old Friends, identified the most probable group to choose from in selecting who to dine with that evening. Old friends included students who knew each other prior to arriving at college. They may have attended the same school, gone to the same church, played each other in sports, etc. The key factor was the relationship began before moving into the residence halls. Weidman (1984) agreed with this category, when he suggested pre-college friends' roles in socializing students continued in college, even when the student moved away from home.

At University A, students were allowed to pick their roommates. Examples of this included: Landon's roommate was a friend from church he knew since seventh grade. Beth knew her roommate for the previous two years through school and church. Meredith and her friend chose not to live together as they *decided to meet new people and stuff like that.* She continued, s*he actually asked me to be her roommate during high school but I had already turned in my other stuff.* However, three weeks into the semester they switched rooms to be together. Since students who pick roommates pick people they already know, roommates also fit the Old Friends category.

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Some critics would argue with this grouping, because it negated students who were the only ones there from their hometowns or who were not as extroverted as others. Additionally, there were students similar to James who came to college to escape their high school friends. James said, not choosing a roommate prior to college was *great because I came here to meet people.* Even with that said, James, like Landon and Beth, said he would go to dinner with his *roommate or suitemate* that night. Those informant comments dictated the addition of roommates to the Old Friends category.

James also returned to his hometown each weekend — at least through the fourth week. He went back to see his girlfriend. *She is a senior now and will be up here next year.* He then continued, *we might break off, but we get back together later on. She is my best friend. We have been best friends for three to four years.*

In addition to her roommate, Beth spent time with her high school friends three to four times a week. She also defined many of her core group of friends as friends from high school — the same group she would likely choose to go to dinner with that evening. Meredith's best friend from high school also attended University A. When she went to dinner, it was usually with him. They spent time together everyday during the first few weeks of the semester. Additionally, in a later interview when they were not seeing each other everyday, they still made a routine meeting for lunch three times a week, which expressed the importance of having her friends around.

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New Friends Circle

The New Friends Circle represented the non-roommates who lived on the same residence floor. Students in this group may have rode elevators together all of the time, and see each other in the hallway and at floor activities, but the bond may not be as tight as those between the roommates. New Friends also included members of the same fraternities or sororities. Despite being known as "brothers" or "sisters," they were still part of the second level.

Pike (2002) agreed with the development of this circle. He discussed one benefit of living on a campus was the introduction to new peer groups; whereas, living at home caused students to remain in the same friendship circles over time. The people around you helped to define who you are and can influence your life. Moffatt (1989) would agree. "A good dorm floor, most students believed, should be a relaxed place full of girls and guys who 'got along,' who were able to enjoy the informal pleasures of college life in an easy, personal atmosphere of their own making….You were not a bad person if you did not hang out on the floor, you were just a nonperson. A much worse thing to be was a person who was around a lot but not friendly" (p. 89).

Landon agreed with Moffatt's findings. He and his roommate often spent time with people on his residence hall floor. Landon said, *a lot of us are Baptist Christians, so we go to the Baptist Student Union and hang out or go to the TV lounge. We met naturally,* he said. *We met while living there.*

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Since no one from Robert's high school attended University A, the residence hall floor was vitally important to his socialization. The New Friends Circle was most pertinent to classifying a student like him. *I met some Christian people on my floor, since I am a Christian, I like to associate with them.* He then continued by saying, *I finally got out this week and went to a movie. That was the first time I actually went off campus, you know—not with my parents.*

James' comments would place many of his friendships inside the New Friends circle, as well. He explained, *I usually hang out with fraternity brothers a bit* and *people on my hall.* He said they were *always asking to go do stuff, late at night: go play basketball, go play volleyball, go lift, go do whatever.*

Moffatt (1989) found that "though many incoming students had hometown friends at Rutgers, almost all of them believed that they would not benefit from higher education unless they also made new friends in college. And most of them did so very quickly" (p. 42). This would seem to agree with both the necessity of the New Friends circle, and the appropriateness of placing it as the second most important circle in the Social Networking Model.

Acquaintances Circle

The Acquaintances Circle was made up of people who may have had classes together or known each other from campus activities, in addition to the two groups above. They were recognizable, but personal relationships had yet to be established. Several of Landon's friends fit in this group. He met many of his friends through the

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Baptist Student Union (BSU) during the first week of school, highlighted by the following conversation:

Researcher—Going back to the first week when you were here did you hang out with the BSU group too?

Landon—*Yeah.*

Researcher—Was it a quick meeting?

Landon—*Yeah.* (He smiled.)

Researcher—Like the first day?

Landon—*Not that quick, maybe the third day.*

Researcher—What did you do the first couple of days?

Landon—*I guess just chilled in my room.* (His eyes moved away from the Researcher.)

Landon's comments illustrated the importance of socialization as a way of enticing new students out of their rooms. He was almost embarrassed about remaining in his room. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory further described the importance for students to become active on campus, which cannot be done while, "chilling in the room." The Acquaintances Circle was helpful in this socialization process.

The Acquaintances Circle also included those students who would be walking together from class and an offer and acceptance to dine together was made. They were also students already dining that may have joined together. Whether or not there was an abundance of conversation during the meal, this category of students would rather have been seated with someone who was familiar, than dine alone.

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An example of two female students from the Acquaintances Circle joining together occurred one evening during observations. It still fairly early in the evening, and there were not many people in the cafeteria. They were both dining alone about two tables from each other. Upon making eye contact, one of them said, *Hey! How are you?* The response was, g*ood, I didn't even see you sitting there. Well come on over and join me.* The second student stood up and walked over and sat across from the first student.

Following a brief conversation, the second person picked up a student newspaper and began reading it. Not another word was mentioned until they departed. While these two would be on the lower end of the Acquaintances group, they did seem to minimally know each other and joined at the cafeteria.

All People Dining Circle

The All People Dining Circle included everyone eating. It included all of the above groups in addition to students who had yet to meet. One student may have asked, i*s anyone sitting here,* and join in or be joined in by people he/she did not previously know. Part of the community building of a college environment took place among students in this group. It usually took one extroverted student to initiate conversation; or, even something as simple as a student beginning conversation by asking to pass a napkin.

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Landon added a classical college-type response to why he ate with people he did not previously know:

Researcher— If you went to the cafeteria by yourself would you ever go join a table that had someone sitting there?

Landon— *Yeah, I would debate it, though.*

Researcher— What would make you want to do that?

Landon— *Hot chicks!* (He said with a large smile across his face.)

In a less common occurrence, Beth tried to meet some new friends in the cafeteria the first week of class. *We sat down next to this group of girls but they didn't speak English. So, we were like, oh well,* she said. Similar to other types of initial meetings, these discussions did not always develop into relationships beyond the meal.

The Student Affairs practitioner must wonder why so much effort is spent trying to provide opportunities to meet new people, if almost one-half of them are just "hanging out" with their friends from high school. The second highest total, friends who lived on the same residence hall, also make up a large percentage. There are ample opportunities for community building on these floors, so it seems logical that they may eat together. The third highest total was the Greek community who dines together. This would be anyone in a fraternity or sorority that became friends from that connection and chose to eat together. With this information, new targeted programming can occur.

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Food Court Observations

With the concentric circles illustrated from the cafeteria (see Graph A-3, p. 52), an interest was developed in investigating the value of the new circles in other environments. This took the research into the student union food court. Here, the researcher observed a similar length of time as in the cafeteria, and followed it up with similar short interviews. Due to the more diverse age groups in the food court, data were also differentiated by classification.

Several lunchtimes were spent in the food court observing the surroundings and interactions. The ebbs and flows of the crowds were predictable — they followed class breaks. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays the crowds arrived at 11:25 a.m. and 12:25 p.m. On Tuesdays and Thursdays they arrived at 11:50 a.m. Each of these times is five minutes after the scheduled completion of normal class times. During peak times an estimated 400-500 students were in the food court area.

Buckner, Laurier, and Whyte (2001) encouraged observers to note seating locations in noting their environment. In the food court, where the students chose to sit was fascinating. A phenotypic polka-dotted visual appeared each day in the food court. While the student affairs practitioner would be pleased at the great diversity of the students taking advantage of the gathering opportunities in the food court, it was disgruntling to observe that the students segregated themselves upon arriving. Jimmy explained,

> *You think about the area where the TVs are is like the international students area, you think the corner where I sit is mainly African-American students*

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> *then to the west of that is African students and Hispanic students then across the way towards the jukebox you have the Caucasians, and I guess people in between there* (between the vendors) *is mixed* (Appendix E). . . . *I think it's just, you know, people like to sit with people that not only act like them, but look like them which I think is kinda sad but it's just the way of American thinking.*

These segregated seating arrangements at least proved the food court to be welcoming to everyone.

Interactions between ethnic groups seemed fairly positive from an administrators point of view, despite tendencies to congregate in certain areas, there was a great deal of interaction and exchanges of greetings and kind words. In a lunchtime ethnography done by Asante and Al-Deen (1984) at another university cafeteria, it was noted that many students preferred to be with others of their own race. When there were no empty tables, they joined together and started conversations which were usually quite brief. While this was similar to University A, interactions appeared to be genuine and discussions more lengthy. This could be the improvement in cultural understanding since 1984 when Asante and Al-Deen's ethnography was written.

Beyond seating locations, it was rare to observe students seated alone. The students that were alone would often be joined by other students a few minutes later. Perhaps, students who were not with others chose to eat elsewhere, or purchased their food to-go. Kate discussed this in her extensive interview:

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I used to see a lot of people eating by themselves, but we don't have a lot of eat-by-yourself tables here. It's not as easy to get away with eating by yourself when sitting at a four-person table during the peak hours of lunch. I see a lot of people saying, "Hey, can I sit here?" It is almost like due to the lack of space, we will interact.

These comments seemed to fit the researcher's observations. In testing this theory; however, the researcher spoke with about 20 groups. Only one of them actually met in that way. It was much more likely to have joined a table of people you already knew.

The researcher's next focus was what students were doing while sitting there. An initial guess would be that considering it was lunchtime and the location was a food court, most people would be eating. This was not always the case. Most students were doing a combination of several activities: eating, relaxing, passing time between classes, socializing, studying, and/or people watching. It was rare for students to have only come to the union for one reason. It is a place for food and much more. Jimmy said:

Going to the union is like a quick little way to see what's going on around campus. You got the [campus radio station] there, you got the TVs there so you can see the news real quick. You have all types of organizations setting up booths. If anybody is having a function going on or if there is something free going on you can almost always catch it at the food court. I guess it is for people that just want to get their food...and information at the same time.

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Kate added, w*ith our increased numbers at (University A), we have seen an increase in them wanting to be here for our services…at any given time there are at least 100 people in the building.* This was important since more introverted students may not choose to be in such social atmospheres.

One particularly interesting activity that appeared was what some students called "social studying." There are often books on tables all around; but, there does not appear to be a great deal of learning. Jimmy said, i*f I just have to skim some notes then I'll go over there and pull out my notes, but if it is a test coming up, I usually study somewhere else. Studying there is kinda hard.* Students would open books, spread out papers, get out their pens and paper, and then look around the room until finding an appropriate distraction. Kate said, s*ome do studying, but it is the kind of studying that you want to be interrupted. You sit there with a book open, but you are looking for an interruption.* This kind of studying seemed new, but other students readily agreed it was common.

After identifying what students were doing while in the food court, the researcher then turned to his next objective which was identifying how the students eating at the same table were related. Kate said, w*hen I was a student I came with people I had classes with either before or after. We would eat together on specific days. I don't get that impression these days. I think people are meeting here because they know each other. They don't walk in together.* Observations tended to agree with Kate. Individuals would hold tables until their friends would join them. Certain groups often came back on particular days of the week. Unlike the cafeteria in the

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previous semester, students seem to be on more of a regular schedule when arriving. One student even mentioned that this was *their table.* His group met there every Monday and Wednesday at 12:30 p.m.

Similar to the cafeteria, informal interviews in the food court allowed for a more thorough understanding of previous observations. Throughout this phase of the research, 69 students received brief interviews. From these interviews, about half of the students came together and the other half met in the food court. Of those that met there, it was a normal routine for most of them (i.e. meeting every Wednesday at 11:30 am). Meredith expressed this well in one of her interviews:

Meredith—*Yeah, well I eat in the Union for lunch a lot.*

Researcher—Who do you eat with there?

Meredith— *I usually eat with John* (best friend from high school).

Researcher—Is that a routine?

Meredith— *We usually eat there three times a week.*

Researcher— When you meet him at the Union for lunch, are you coming from class?

Meredith—*Yes.*

Researcher—The same class as John?

Meredith—*No, I would call him before or after class and say we are going to meet in front of the union at 11:30.*

These type of cell phone interactions provided for fascinating observations on how students convened. Kate discussed this at length:

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Kate—*You know they are on cell phones now, they just don't come from class.*

Researcher—So are you saying they call each other when leaving class to meet at the Union? Are they also calling each other after one gets his pizza and the other her tacos and calling to see where they are going to sit?

Kate—*I've seen that, I have actually witnessed someone in one room saying, "I'm in here, I'm in the third booth, no you can see me, really I am." I am listening and watching and I'm looking around for this other person* (demonstrated with her head)... *I am amazed on how many people use those phones. They are not talking to anybody else, not looking at anybody else; they are just on their phones.*

While cell phones may have an influence on it, Jimmy offered another point of view:

I think I have heard people say, and I have done this several times, asking what time are you going to be at the Union. They say I am going to be there at 1:30, or I have class at 1:30 so I will be there from 1:15 to 1:30....You know on certain days what people are going to be there. I don't really think cell phones have influenced it that much. To me, it is just one of those things that is still maintained by word of mouth.

The method of gathering by mobile phone was obviously contrasting between Kate and Jimmy, but as Meredith discussed earlier, this research agreed with Kate's

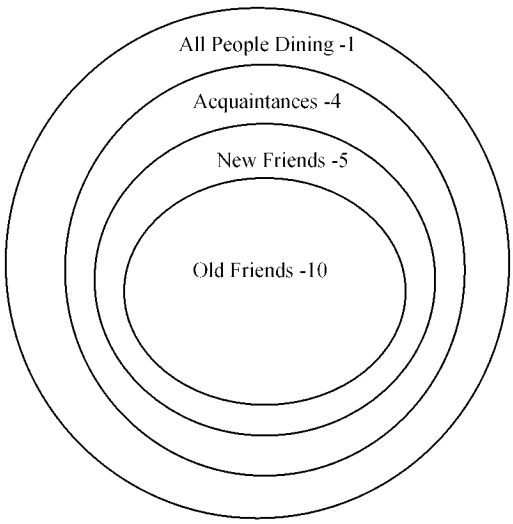
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explanation. It was apparent the important role mobile phones played in the social lives of the students. This topic should be investigated further in the future.

Concentric Circles in the Food Court

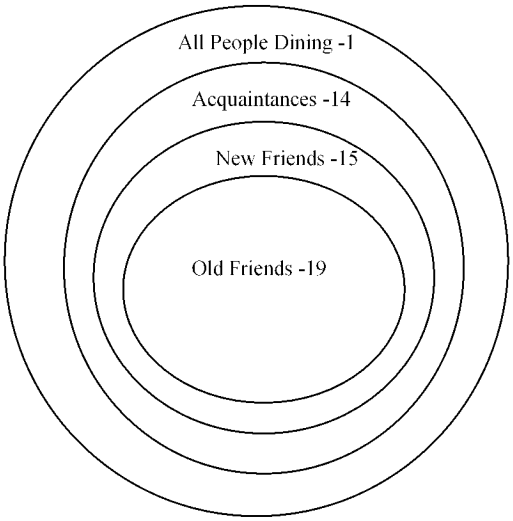
The focus of this portion of the study was to determine if the concentric circles diagram previously proposed (see Graph A-3, p. 52) held up with freshmen even when dining in an area of a mixed group of students. To do this, the researcher questioned several groups regarding how the individual group members were acquainted and documented their responses. Out of the 69 students, 20 were freshmen, 23 were sophomores, 7 were juniors, 9 were seniors, 1 was a "fifth year," 4 were graduate law students, and the other 5 were classified as international exchange students. As Graph B-1 shows, the circles were upheld among freshmen in the food court (number of freshmen fitting each circle is shown) and Graph B-2 illustrates other classifications in the food court.

Graph B-1: Freshmen Circles in the Food Court



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Graph B-2: Non-Freshmen Circles in the Food Court



Transition Timeline

The initial phenomenon observed in this research — students are still hanging out with the friends formed prior to college — was substantiated in the food court results. In the food court, though, the difference between the circles tightened. This was a very important finding. The Social Networking Model was upheld among upperclassmen.

According to Terenzini et al. (1993), "Old friends perform this 'bridge function' only for a limited time. As friendship networks extend beyond the set of high school acquaintances, students develop closer relationships with their new college friends, and pre-college friends slowly fade in importance" (p. 5).

Unfortunately, Terenzini's "limited time" was not defined. A follow-up discussion with Terenzini included an expression of difficulty in developing a

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timeline. However, he acknowledged several students had discussed this in some of his focus groups (P. Terenzini, personal communication, November 16, 2004).

Moffatt (1989) offered this explanation: "After a month at Rutgers, the average freshman already considered half a dozen new college acquaintances to be friends or close friends. Within two months, the average dorm resident named almost one-third of the other sixty residents on her or his dorm floor as friends or as close friends. In one longitudinal sample, freshmen and sophomores indicated that almost half of their five best friends in the world were friends they had made since they had come to college. The percentage of best college friends then rose to about three in five for juniors and seniors" (p. 42).

This research showed students transitioned into a moderately more diversified peer network around the fourth week, which would be similar to Moffatt's findings. After four weeks at University A, interviews with Robert and Beth provided the following statements:

> Researcher—Last time you told me you spent 8-10 hours a day on the internet. Is that still true?
>
> Robert—*No, I changed. When I'm in my room, I am usually on the internet but now I am not in my room so much. I am over in my friend's room down the hall.*
>
> Researcher—And how did you meet that person?

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Robert—*He is from the Christian group I was talking about* (met during first couple of weeks). *We just watch movies every night pretty much, so I am out of my room a lot.*

Researcher—Is that the main group you hang around with?

Robert—*Yeah, there are about 8-10 of us.*

An interview with Beth offered similar comments:

Researcher—Do you still spend most of your dinners with your roommate?

Beth—*Not as much.*

Researcher—Who do you go to dinner with now?

Beth— *I go with my roommate or there's a group that like we've met through her home school group.*

Researcher—These are your roommate's friends?

Beth—*Yeah, well they are my friends now.*

A follow-up interview with Beth in the fourth week of school discussed other new friends as well. The researcher asked her if she would be likely to go with high school friends to dinner that evening. Her response was, l*ately, I have also been hanging more with friends from the* (Christian group).

Meredith said at about the three to four week point she began the transition where she spent more time with her sorority sisters than her high school friends. She said it was because *I know them better, now.*

These conversations with Robert, Meredith, and Beth offered evidence to the social impact of the critical first six weeks. Additionally, during the first few weeks,

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"Pre-college friends appear to be instrumental in how successfully many new students make the transition to college. When a student knows pre-college friends who are also new students (or already enrolled) at the same institution, these friends function during the early weeks of college as a bridge from one academic and interpersonal environment to the next. These earlier acquaintances provide important support for the transition" (Terenzini et al., 1993, pp. 4-5).

Moffatt (1991) and Terenzini et al. (1993) emphasized the process of transitioning friends early in the first year. While discussion with informants in this study agreed with this process, the food court data illustrated the role of old friends maintaining importance beyond the first year. While students began to explore new relationships and meet new people, they still held on to their old friends that were also at University A. This delayed transition timeline is the second phenomenon observed in this research.

These peer networks assisted in the transition from high school, as well as, provided a connection to the past that comforted students in the newness of the present. It appeared the first few weeks were spent primarily with old friends. As the first semester progressed, students at University A began making new friends but still held on to the old ones. Meredith explained this best. She spent a lot of time with new friends after about a month, *but its still like, I still hang out with a lot of people from high school...my boyfriend and all his friends are from high school, so it is wherever I go, it is all high school friends everywhere.*

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Transitioning into a new environment appeared to be done with old friends at your side, and even with the introduction of new friends the previous bonds were still tightly held.

Summary

Through the use of several qualitative techniques, this phenomenological study focused on the identification of campus social network composition. The phenomenon was discovered through observation of repeating characteristics of social network composition. Social network compositions were shown through concentric circles to represent the most likely social interactions. With this graphic representation, a more explicit understanding of the relationship between new freshmen was offered to assist Student Affairs professionals in targeted marketing of their programs. As students become more involved in these activities and organizations, satisfaction (which was best defined by the students) was also enhanced.

A social networking model was proposed to identify the students who were most likely to spend time together in the first-year transition process of students at University A. It was determined that the most common connection between students was a friendship that began prior to college.

Once the social networking model was established, a transition process timeline was discussed. While some of the data concurred with previous literature, the food court observations and interviews identified the "bridge function" may last

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longer than previously identified. This timeline was the second phenomenon observed in through the data collection process.

In the next chapter, the researcher will review the literature that guided this study. Responses are made to the claims in the literature based on the observations, interviews, and analysis of this study. Additionally, the study's potential impact is discussed. This includes the issue of the collegial experience that was addressed in the second research question, as well as the impact of the study on the Student Affairs profession.

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Chapter Six

Response to the Literature and Discovery of New Insights

Introduction

With the completion of the data analysis, the focus returns to the literature review. Several statements were made regarding the intentions of this study vis-à-vis the scholarly production reviewed. This chapter directly responds to those statements, based on the observations and interviews taking place through data gathering and analysis.

Separation Versus Yearning

Tinto (1987) identified the first stage of a student's college career as "separation." Here, individuals "disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence" (p. 94). This study showed the timeline to not be as immediate as Tinto implied, at least not at University A. It seemed a better term for that first stage may be "yearning." This would represent a desire to remain connected to that past, and a desire to maintain those comforting relationships.

Landon expressed this when searching for people to hang out with during his first week. He looked up a high school classmate, since he did not know anyone. *There is a girl in* (residence hall) *I know…she had never gone to* (restaurant), *so I took her there.* This was quite similar to the opening case scenario of this paper.

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An additional issue discussed was the topic of loneliness and depression. As an example of this, Beth broke up with her longtime boyfriend during the first weeks of school. Immediately, she *had to go home to momma and my friend from* (another school) *came* (home), *too*. This was another statement lending to the idea of the importance of previous relationships during the first-year transition.

Academic Networking

Weidman's (1989a) model of social networking offered a preliminary idea of the importance of social networking in the first-year experience. His research, however, expressed the importance of network development through academic majors and curricula. While this research data would concur with the idea of the networking, it illuminated the fact that the academic major played a minimal role in networking during the first-year attending University A. First-year students who may be undecided, who may often change their major, or who may be only enrolled in general Education courses would not have opportunities to participate in Weidman's undergraduate socialization model. At University A, approximately one out of three first-year students were undecided. The social networking model proposed for this research included those undecided students, as well.

"Disease of Loneliness"

Investigations in social atmospheres such as the cafeterias and food courts can overlook lonely students. The researcher considers these isolated students as limitations to the proposed social networking model.

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Additionally, through observation, it was apparent that not every member of the dining group played the same role as the others. Many would sit quietly, occasionally smile at a joke or nod their heads in agreement, but they really were not part of the conversation. Perhaps they were not interested in conversing, but more likely, they were outside members of the group and were not as readily known by other participants in the group. Goffman (1961) would agree to this differentiation. He emphasized the distinct difference between being a member of a group and being a participant in a gathering. These students could also be categorized as dining alone.

Other observations in the cafeteria spotlighted several other students who may not have been alone in the cafeteria on their own accord. An interview with one particular student emphasized this topic:

Researcher—How often do you come here?

Student—*I eat here about three times a week.*

Researcher —Do you normally eat alone?

Student —*I can't find people to eat with me.* (He looked down, apparently displeased.)

Researcher —Do you ever just join someone else and strike up a conversation?

Student —*No, I just eat alone*. (He said, as he continued to look down.)

Researcher —Do you ever sit in the sports grill and watch TV?

Student —*Sometimes I sit there, but don't watch TV.*

Researcher —Do you have a roommate?

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Student —*No*.

Researcher —Suitemates?

Student —*Yes, but they do their own thing.*

Researcher —Are you in any campus activities?

Student — *Black Student Association.*

Researcher —Do you ever eat with any one from BSA?

Student —*No.*

Remaining questions had similar responses. The student appeared to have slipped through the cracks of socialization opportunities and did not appear to be very satisfied with his college experience. The student said he had tried making friends, but was not having much luck. From a Student Affairs perspective, it was a very disheartening interview. Mehrabian's (1972) emphasis on noting facial expressions and body movement added important details to this interview, and made it that much more saddening to see. Additionally, these comments and nonverbal communicators emphasized Astin's (1993) study on peer groups influence on psychological and behavioral development.

Throughout the entire observation period, only a couple of students were obviously this alone. However, the data collected in this research did not account for those students sitting alone up in their rooms that observations would never note. Meredith described her roommate as one of these students:

My roommate creeps me out...she doesn't have any friends, she's in a sorority and so am I, but she doesn't hang out with anyone from her sorority. She just

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sits in her room all day and talks to her mom on the phone. And, her mom is always in our room and stuff. It's just weird. She watches the Wedding Singer all the time. I have seen it like 14 times since I have been here.

It is especially difficult when accounting for the students who came from out-of-state or were the only ones from their hometown. Robert fit that description and said the following during one of his early interviews:

Researcher— If you were to go to dinner tonight, to the cafeteria, who would you go with?

Robert—*I never go with anybody. I don't know anybody.*

Researcher— How about people on your floor, do you know any of them?

Robert— *Like last week, I didn't know anybody. I just stayed in my room and chatted with people back home, online.*

Despite having other circles where students like Robert would fall in, the researcher expected the transition was likely more difficult for them. They may not have attended activities designed to help in their transition since they would not have known anyone to attend with. They may have also been less inclined to leave their room and comfort zone.

The study noted students in social settings, but what happened to all of the students that were not in the food court? There were many students attended class and went home. Who were they hanging out with? From what was observed, this research would agree with Cutrona's (1982) study on loneliness in college.

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Student Satisfaction

Successful identification of the social network composition allowed this research to progress to the discussion of its effects on student satisfaction in college. This was the second research question, and investigated how social networks enhanced the collegial experience. While satisfaction was previously defined as happiness with a university, it is often based on positive and rewarding encounters (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This research found that this definition varied among the student informants.

Meredith wanted to fulfill her goals in every aspect of her life. Then she would know she was a success at University A. *Personally, I want to make good friends and keep those friends, because I see like my parents keep their friends from college and that's really cool. And to keep my relationships from high school that were important to me, which is hard since not many went here.*

Beth's success and happiness is determined by academic success and productive campus involvement. *I want to get like deep in organizations. I don't want to be involved in lots of little organizations. I want to be involved like deep in one or two.*

Robert's success was measured academically by getting a *C* in Calculus and a *B* or above in his other classes. He continued by indicating he wanted to *make more friends and get involved in activities.* He wanted to get into medical school and *have a fiancée or something.*

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While each of these responses varied, they all showed interest in making lasting friendships. Tinto (1975) agreed by identifying social integration as important personal goals of individual students. However, if most students were already connected to old friends, the role of student affairs professionals may be primarily to facilitate their convening, and then, secondarily, assist students in the establishment of new relationships.

This research showed the second most common circle to be New Friends, comprised of students from the same residence hallway as well as members of student organizations. It was apparent from these definitions of satisfaction that Student Affairs practitioners at University A can be most productive by intensifying their efforts with those two groups.

Impact

The results of this study were intriguing for student affairs professionals. Often scholars discussed the importance of building relationships in college. Perhaps the most important relationships came to college with them. With this knowledge, targeted programming can take on a new look. Lewin (1943) said, "It is easier to affect deeply the personality of ten people if they can be melded into a group than to affect the personality of any one individual treated separately" (p. 115). As an example, in sorority recruitment it may be necessary to recruit the friend of a top prospect in order to influence the sorority's top choice. This could also be effective at assisting in tutoring and mentoring techniques. Students could come together to activities or tutoring more often with friends than they would if not attending the

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event with anyone else. It was a type of peer-pressure to make sure to attend. Victoria explained this well in one of her interviews:

Researcher— Do you see yourself getting involved in any organizations on campus?

Victoria—*Yeah, I want to get involved in a few clubs but I have to get my friends to join because I don't know if I want to do it by myself.*

Robert also agreed with this. *I have been avoiding all the engineering clubs and pre-med clubs. I missed the first two meetings and now I don't want to go, because I don't want to jump in.* He did not want to go late if he was alone, but indicated he might be more likely to attend if it was with someone else.

An additional potential impact of being able to assist students in their peer networking development is "students who reported that they derived significant social support from close college friends had higher moral judgment scores than students who did not perceive their friends as particularly supportive" (Derryberry & Thoma, 2000, p. 16). They can influence each other in many ways. Beth illustrated this well. In an interview in the fifth week of class, she was asked if she still saw one of her old high school friends as often as four to five times a week. She responded, *we have dinner together, and we have classes* (together) *three times a week. I don't know. I am going to try to get her to* (a Bible study group) *with me, because she is beginning to party a lot.*

Despite the daunting task of playing matchmaker or trying to force friendships, these communities of students (once created) can begin to monitor

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themselves. Student Affairs professionals cannot be at every student's side all day, but these networks of students can assist each other. Victoria explained how one of her old friends began introducing her to new ones. A friend from high school i*ntroduced me to four other girls in her engineering class. We all share a common interest, so we meet every Thursday after class,* she said.

Friends can also assist each other with first-year student problems. Victoria said she would turn to one of her high school friends if she ever had a problem in school. *She is so smart,* she said. If friendships enhance satisfaction and are readily available, perhaps the transitioning process from high school to college anticipated to be difficult is not as threatening as originally perceived.

Summary

Throughout this study, data were gathered that directly related to previous research done on the college student. This chapter discussed comparisons between phenomena noted at University A, and the scholarly works previously available. This included discussions of Tinto's (1987) suggested transition process of first-year students, Weidman's (1989a) model of social networking, and Cutrona's (1982) study on loneliness.

Additionally, the implications of the study was addressed. Vonnegut (n.d.) asked for the creation of "stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured" (http://quotes.prolix.nu/Loneliness). Successful utilization of the proposed social networking model assists student affairs professionals in fulfilling

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Vonnegut's request. It can lead to bringing students together to discuss their transitions, as well as facilitating networking situations.

The next and final chapter will offer additional recommendations for practical application of the impact of this research. The chapter will review the research questions again, and offer conclusions.

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Chapter Seven

Qualitative Certainties

Introduction

Woodrow Wilson (as cited in Clark & Trow, 1966) wrote, "The real intellectual life of a body of undergraduates, if there be any, manifest itself, not in the classroom, but in what they do and talk of and set before themselves as their favorite objects between classes and lectures. You will see the true life of a college in the evenings, at the dinner-table or beside the fire in the groups that gather" (p. 17). Gaining a better understanding of the Social Networking Model can only help sociologists and educators in their roles with college students. A more thorough understanding can allow for targeted programming and directed satisfaction-building endeavors. Satisfaction with the university in the first-year (or the lack thereof), begins with the first trip to campus, and continues throughout the first-year transition process. While the impact of social networks has been emphasized, few studies have explored the group composition. Based on the concentric circles presented in this research, a new trend in higher education may need to be emphasized.

Research Questions Revisited

These are possible recommendations that can be inferred from the research. Additional individual review of each research question can provide more recommendations. The initial question asked who comprised the social networks of incoming first-year college students. Primarily, this research question could be answered at University A by first identifying roommates and friends known prior to

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college who were also attend the institution. These students represented the most likely groupings for social network composition, especially during the crucial first few weeks of the first year. This "old friends" group indicates the importance of orientation activities by geographic region.

The next greatest chance for connecting students included friends from the residence hall floor, social organizations, and campus activities. These social networks identified the importance of residence hall programming and provided additional value to student activities and programming. It also added value to freshman interest groups or learning communities on campus. While these activities did not occur at University A, the New Friends Circle offered itself to the belief that they may be advantageous to implement.

The last two circles who comprise social networks were acquaintances and everyone else at the institution. These circles represented the opportunity for the greatest growth as a student in meeting others. They indicated opportunities for intercultural communication, as well as the sharing of various backgrounds and cultures. These groups became more important as the first-year experience came to a close, and students begin to more seriously explore their majors.

Until they began taking classes inside their major during their upperclassmen years, however, students tended to have a greater likelihood of closely following the proposed concentric circles. This grouping tendency was an intriguing phenomenon that should be explored by practitioners in a more proactive method. Social networks

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at University A provide excellent target populations for orientation activities and should be more efficiently utilized.

The same stories are repeated throughout campus. Students arrive on an unfamiliar campus. They turn to familiar faces from the past to assist in the transition period, and they hold on to those "old friends" for continued support, similar to the one in the case scenario at the beginning of the paper. This led many students to a more comfortable first year transition process, and a greater collegial experience.

The investigation of how social networks enhance the collegial experience was the last research question. Each of the informant interviews expressed establishing friendships as a key to their satisfaction, which has often been shown to increase the chances for academic success. Upcraft (1989) said, "Establishing close friends is important to academic success," and continued that it assisted them in fulfilling "their need to affiliate with one another" (p. 150).

Interviews with student informants, observations, and other brief discussions with students at University A identified social groups as important influences on what they defined as necessary for their enhanced college experience. Some students expressed their hopes of cultivating lifelong friendships as key outcomes of their collegiate experiences.

Students who were more isolated from social interactions with other students discussed their desire to meet others to enhance their college experience. Without this interaction, students were dining alone in very social atmospheres, became

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isolated in their residence hall rooms, and spent excessive amounts of time on the Internet.

Connecting students to other students from their hometowns or regions can assist them in the socialization process even before college starts. Too often students like Robert and Landon spent their first few college days *chilling in their room*. Successful utilization of the concentric circles proposed in this study can assist practitioners in helping the students connect to the university.

Case Scenario Revisited

Utilizing the social networking model proposed in this research, a rewrite can be made of the initial case scenario on page one. Originally, the scenario began like this:

> As you enter orientation you begin to wander among many other peers, searching for a friendly face. Another graduate from your high school appears in the crowd. You did not know this person very well; but, the connection to the past offers a gratifying relief. You chat briefly and discover her similar fears. There is a welcoming barbeque that evening and neither of you want to attend alone. You decide to go together (see page 1).

While this was an effective opening, perhaps it would be better stated as:

> Upon reading your activities for the day, you noticed something called the "hometown social." You enter the orientation event and begin to wander among many other peers, searching for a friendly face. You notice a sign up on the side of the wall with the name of your county. Upon arriving at this

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sign, you find many familiar faces. You may not have known these people very well, but the connection to the past offers a gratifying relief. You chat briefly with several of them and discover you have similar fears. There is a welcoming barbeque that evening and you all decide to go together.

While this type of orientation activity is simple to employ on college campuses, the results of successful utilization of the social networking model offered in this study are very visible. The ending of the case scenario remains the same:

Immediately, you start to feel more confident as you have a link to the past to assist you in this new endeavor. You still have many questions and fears; but, now you know you can face them together.

Concluding Thoughts

Brownell (1959) said, "On entering college the student must be born anew as it were. He must cross the River Jordan. It is time, not to look back, but to cast off the garments of his past and go with a new vision and a different accent into the better world" (p. 473).

It appears Brownell's study, while perhaps accurate at that time, may be dated. It does not appear to be descriptive of University A, because students were holding on to "the garments of the past" a bit longer. However, additional studies will be necessary to effectively confirm the appropriate usage of the proposed concentric circles. Until then, it appeared to be important to target groups of long time friends for programming, and not necessarily expect every student's social transition to be as complicated as often discussed.

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This research graphically highlighted a set of concentric circles in a model that illustrates the most common social networks for first-year students. Effective utilization of those circles provides numerous opportunities for student affairs professionals. The importance of connecting students to previous friends was also shown. "Institutions can help new students identify and locate already-enrolled students from their high school or community. They may also want to establish a peer counselor or mentor system that would match new students with other students who know something about the schools from which the new students come (Terenzini et al., 1993, p. 9). The Social Networking Model reflects potential success in that type of activity.

Additionally, the circles highlighted an additional at-risk group of students — those who may have been the only student coming from a particular high school or region. Those students would have a more difficult time integrating into the social environment and therefore face a more difficult route to gaining satisfaction on campus and persisting to the second year. "An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life" (Tinto, 1987, p. 180).

This study also emphasized the numerous effects that friendships can provide. Antrobus, Dobbelaer, and Salzinger (1988) proposed, "College friendships provide a student with information that supports college achievement, and perhaps post college success….College friends can provide information about how to successfully

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navigate the college environment as well as, on occasion, specific course-related information" (p. 227). Practitioners must find a way for students to make these connections.

One possible solution is, "Institutions can consider such issues as the availability of private space for after dinner conversations in the dining halls or in the student pay cafeteria" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 147). These are locales where students are comfortable spending time and conversing with others.

Moral Certainty

This qualitative research design was intended to provide a glimpse at student social networks at University A. Cunningham (1993) suggested that qualitative research must be read not to discover "a demonstration of absolute 'lawlike certainty' as is obtained in a laboratory experiment in the physical sciences," but instead to unveil a "moral certainty, which is the degree of proof which produces a conviction in an unprejudiced mind" (p. 181).

While social interactions were often unique to particular students, this research identified several reoccurring phenomena through observations and interviews. These included identifying the importance for investigating a transition timeline for first-year students and identifying a social networking model that can assist administrators in planning processes. This researcher believes that at University A, that "moral certainty" was obtained.

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Summary

Cicero once said, "In friendship, let the influence of friends who give good advice be paramount; and let this influence be used to enforce advice not only in plain-spoken terms, but sometimes, if the case demands it, with sharpness; and when so used, let it be obeyed" (friendship, p. 5).

Paramount advice, valuable partnership, and an unyielding crutch between friends was what led to the investigation of the composition of these social networks. Friendship networks were an integral part of the maturation process. The process was at its apex during the formative college years and was particularly vital during the first-year experience. Having a cohesive social network throughout that process allowed for greater ease in transition. The easier the process, the greater the chance will be for students to become more satisfied with their academic experiences.

As a long-term goal it would be noteworthy to follow these students throughout their college careers and repeat several of the interviews. The informant answers changed dramatically over the first few weeks of college. It would be fascinating to hear responses after the first few years.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH BEING CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA-NORMAN CAMPUS

I understand that this study, entitled "Couch Cafeteria Culture Ethnography," is being conducted by Jay Corwin, under the direction of Rosa Cintrón, PhD., both of the Department of Adult and Higher Education.

This study is being done to help identify the different cultures that surround student interactions inside the first-year experience. It will explore individual dynamics, group dynamics, as well as other types of social interactions. I understand that this information is being used for research purposes and will be held in strictest confidence.

I, _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this interview session.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: You will not receive any payment for participating in this interview. Also, there are no direct risks or benefits for participating in this screening. Because there are no risks and no direct benefits, there are no alternatives available, other than to not participate.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION: Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Furthermore, the participant may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Findings will be presented in aggregate form with no identifying information to ensure confidentiality.

AUDIO TAPING OF STUDY ACTIVITIES: To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. Participants have the right to refuse to allow such taping without penalty. Please select one of the following options.

[ ] I consent to the use of audio recording.
[ ] I do not consent to the use of audio recording.

DURATION OF SUBJECT PARTICIPATION: This interview will require approximately 30 minutes of your time.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY: Participants may contact Jay Corwin at (405) 325-3467 or Dr. Rosa Cintrón at (405) 325-0549 with questions about the study.

For inquires about rights as a research participant, contact the University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405/325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

PARTICIPANT ASSURANCE: I have read and understand the terms and conditions of this study and I hereby agree to participate in the above-described research study. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

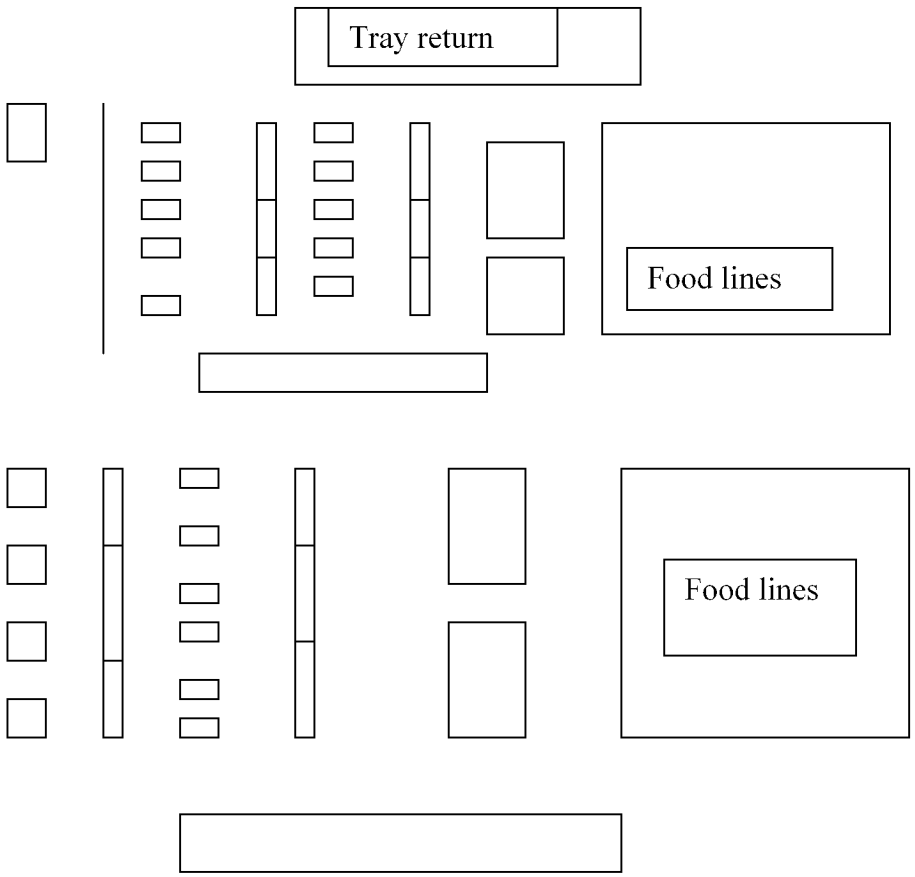
_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____
Printed Name of Participant Researcher Signature

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Appendix B: Cafeteria Layout

Sketched sample of cafeteria dining room layouts



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Appendix C: Cafeteria Interview Protocol

1. How many are in your group?
2. What year are each of you?
3. How do you know each other?
4. Did you come here together or just meet up here?
5. How long have you known each other?
    a. If from class, are you the same major?
    b. If from the same hometown, about how many from your school went here?
6. What bring you to the Union? Eating/ Business/ Studying/ Hanging out?
7. Is this usually where you come to do that?
8. How often do you come here?
9. Is this normally where you sit or is it just a place that was open?
10. Do you spend time with this group of people outside of here?

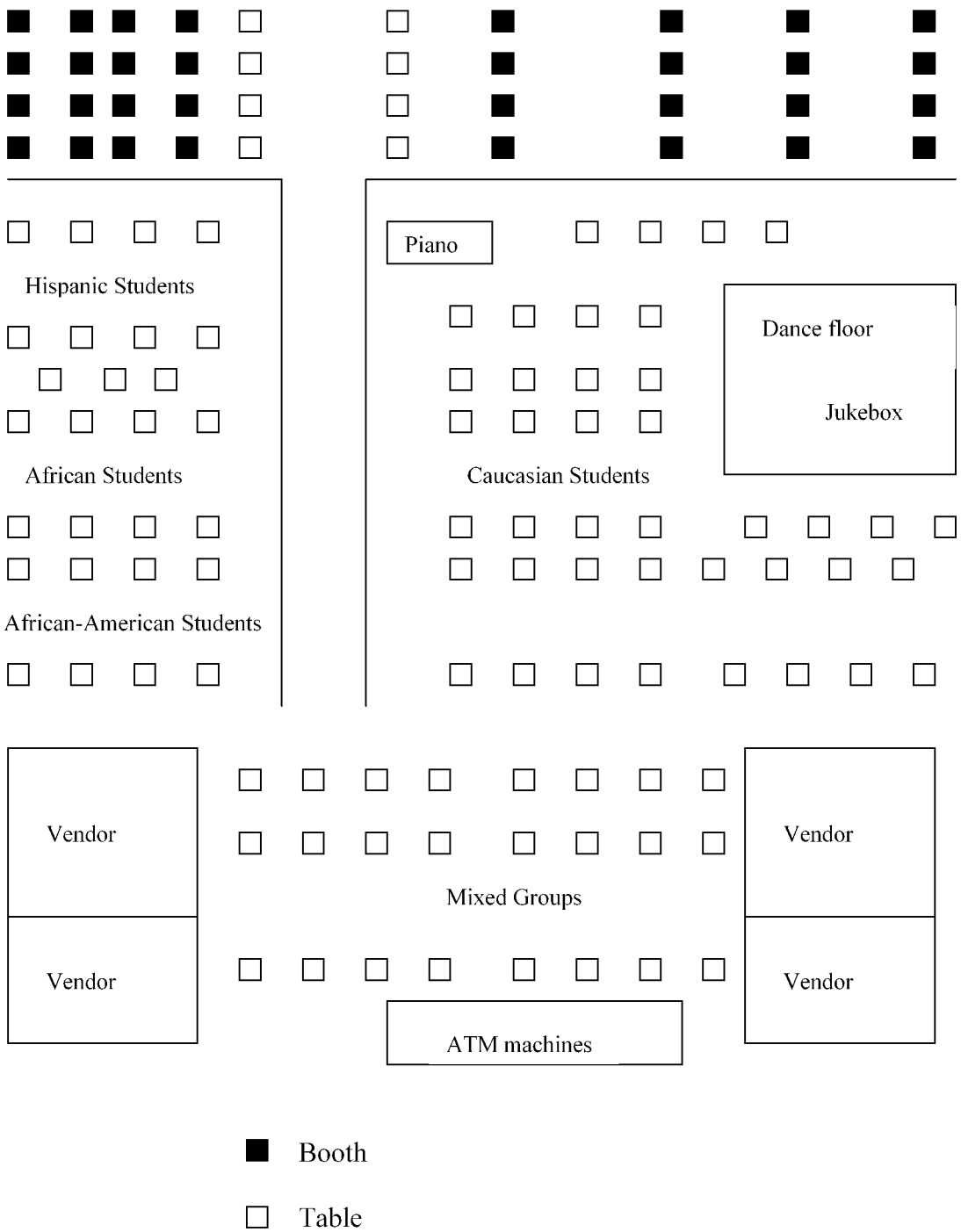
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Appendix D: Student Informant Initial Interview Protocol

1. What is your major?
2. What is your hometown?
3. How many students from your high school do you think attend OU?
4. Where do you live?
    a. If dorms, did you request roommate or go potluck?
    b. If request, how long have you known each other?
5. Do you consider yourself more of an extrovert or introvert?
6. How do you know the people you would say you hang out with the most?
7. How often do you dine in the cafeteria? In the Union?
8. Do you ever eat alone in the cafeteria?
9. Do you have a routine set of friends you eat with?
10. What are your biggest fears about college?
11. What do you hope to get out of college?
12. How would you describe your best friend from high school?
    a. Where is he/she now?
    b. Do you keep in touch? If so, how?
13. If you were struggling at OU, who would you turn to for advice?
14. Do you have any study groups formed yet? Do you plan on it?

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Appendix E: Food Court Layout



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