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Many Foreign Students Are Friendless in the U.S., Study Finds



Frederic J. Brown, AFP, Getty Images

As the number of foreign students on American college campuses grows, a new survey has found that many have few close American friends. Students from China and elsewhere in East Asia reported the highest level of dissatisfaction with personal relationships.

By Karin Fischer -- June 14, 2012

More than one in three foreign students in a new survey say they have no close U.S. friends, and many say they wish they had more, and more-meaningful, relationships with Americans.

Students from China and elsewhere in East Asia report fewer friendships and greater dissatisfaction than do other international students.

The study of more than 450 students at 10 public universities in the South and Northeast supports what educators have observed anecdotally: Many students from abroad, and especially the recent influx of undergraduates from China, are struggling to integrate in American classrooms and dorm rooms. That's troubling, college officials say, for both foreign students and their American counterparts.

"Where else can people meet and have the time and the freedom to make friends across cultures than at college?" said Elisabeth Gareis, an associate professor of communication studies at Baruch College, part of the City University of New York, and the study's author. "But we're not fulfilling that promise."

An article on the study, "Intercultural Friendship: Effects of Home and Host Region," was published Thursday in the National Communication Association's *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*.

To survey students, Ms. Gareis, who came to the United States as a foreign student, from Germany, reached out to international-student offices at the universities, seeking volunteers to complete an online questionnaire. The participants, who included both graduate and undergraduate students and were evenly split between men and women, were asked to report their number of close American friends.

Although 27 percent said they had three or more close U.S. friends, 38 percent said they had no strong American friendships. Seventeen percent reported one such friend, while 18 percent said they had two.

Ms. Gareis found distinct differences in the number of American friends depending on the students' home region. Participants from English-speaking countries were most likely to report having three or more close American friends, while more than half of the students from East Asia said they had no Americans in their circle. (Because of survey size, Ms. Gareis analyzed responses by region, rather than by individual country. Some 30 percent of the respondents were from East Asia.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, students from Anglophone countries and from Northern and Central Europe tended to be most content with the number and quality of their friendships; those from East Asia were the least likely to express satisfaction in their relationships with Americans. Half of the East Asian students surveyed said they were not happy with the number of American friends and 30 percent criticized the quality of their friendships.

Over all, 38 percent of international students surveyed were not satisfied with the number of American friends, and 27 said they were unhappy with the quality of those relationships.

Most of the students in the survey had been in the United States between one and three years.

Ms. Gareis also broke the data down by university location, in New York City, nonmetropolitan parts of the Northeast, and nonmetropolitan parts of the South. Students who attended college in Northeastern states were less pleased with the number and quality of their friendships with Americans than were foreign students attending universities in the South. Likewise, students in metropolitan areas had lower levels of satisfaction than did those in smaller college towns.

The regional differences may be attributed to Southern hospitality, said Ms. Gareis, who earned her master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Georgia. It also could be that international students at those institutions have fewer on- and off-campus networks of people from their own country or region to turn to, and thus are more likely to make American friends, she said.

Ms. Gareis asked respondents who expressed dissatisfaction why they had difficulties in forming friendships. Forty-six percent blamed an internal factor, such as shyness or poor English-language ability, while 54 percent said they hold American students responsible.

"I wish they were more open and culturally sensitive," wrote one student of his American classmates.

Another said: "I didn't expect that it is so hard to make friends with Americans. Usually I do not know what to say with them and I guess they do not either."

More research needs to be done to better understand why some students struggle to make connections, Ms. Gareis said, but she hypothesized that cultural differences could partly be the source. For example, she said, the United States is a highly individualistic country, whereas other societies, particularly in Asia, put a greater emphasis on social relationships and community ties. These students may be unprepared for Americans' independence and more relaxed attitudes toward friendships.

By contrast, European students and those from English-speaking countries may have more culturally in common with Americans and thus may find it easier to establish connections, she said.

What's more, certain behaviors can be self-reinforcing, Ms. Gareis suggested. Students from cultures that value deep relationships may find American friendships superficial and choose to associate more with students from their home country or region. Students with poor language skills may be less likely to approach their American classmates, and vice versa. Even something as simple as unfamiliarity with small talk can hinder students from starting relationships.

As the number of foreign students on U.S. campuses swells, particularly from China and especially on the undergraduate level, these divisions are bedeviling many educators. At Kansas State University, for example, cultural tensions came to a head earlier this year when the student newspaper ran an opinion column calling Chinese students potential "enemies" and arguing that they and other students from countries with foreign policies unfriendly to the United States should not be educated by public universities.

In response, the university is rethinking its cultural programming, to find ways to reach both American and international students, said Marcelo Sabatés, the university's interim associate provost for international programs. And some good has come of the incident, Mr. Sabatés said, because it has brought the two groups into conversation when they had not been before.

At Michigan State University, the increase in number of students from China alone has been "stunning," said Peter F. Briggs, director of international students and scholars. Last fall, there were 800 Chinese students in the freshman class; this year, Mr. Briggs expects that number to be closer to 1,000.

The university has struggled to figure out ways to help Chinese and American students build connections, better educating residence-hall advisers to work with foreign students, setting up a system of Chinese and American "conversation partners," and even recording a video on cross-cultural differences.

Still, Mr. Briggs said, "there is a lot of separatedness."