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International Education Personified: Community in an International “Buddy” Program

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jannan Poppen entitled "International Education Personified: Community in an International "Buddy" Program." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in College Student Personnel.

Terrell Lamont Strayhorn, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

E. Grady Bogue, A. Gail Bier

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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International Education Personified: Community in an International “Buddy” Program

A thesis
Presented for the
Master of Science Degree
The University of Tennessee,
Knoxville

Jannan Poppen

August 2007

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether participation in the buddy program at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States by international students and students who have studied abroad is perceived to contribute to a keener sense of belonging, elimination of loneliness, and formation of social networks (Cheng 2004). Cheng describes these three aspects as “directly associated with his or her [student’s] sense of community” (p. 221). Through in-depth interviews, the researcher explores perceptions of community between the two populations of students.

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CHAPTER ONE

The value of a conversation is often underestimated. Meaningful conversations can allow understanding, learning, and compassion to take place. Although an individual may stand in the midst of many other people, there is no guarantee that conversations will take place or connections will be made. This is true for college students, who may be surrounded by thousands of peers, but fail to engage with other peers or some aspect of the university. Programs that encourage interactions among students, such as the international buddy program examined in this study, may contribute to a keener sense of belonging, lack of loneliness, and the formation of social networks (Cheng, 2004), and thus, foster a sense of community. Students who do have the opportunity to become part of a community on campus often limit their contact to their own ethnic or racial group (Tatum, 1999). International students face unique challenges in establishing their place within a university, while students who have studied abroad often must reestablish their former connections or perhaps develop new ones (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Raschio, 1987). Although they may not realize it, both groups of students participate in the internationalization of their college campus, which is increasingly important given the current global realities.

In today's globalized world there exists a great need to embrace and understand cultural ideals and differences (Hamilton, 2003; Suárez-Orozco, 2005). Although globalization began as an economic interdependence of nation-states, its definition has expanded to include technological and ideological interdependence as well (Altbach, 2002; Dalton, 1999; Stewart & Kagan, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 2005). The forces of

globalization have permeated many areas of society, and higher education is not immune to such changes. Universities often represent a microcosm of society, sharing issues with its local, national, and global communities. Among these issues are social, economic, political, and environmental concerns, many of which may have serious implications for the workings of the university itself as well as the greater world of which it is a part (Dalton, 1999; Calhoun & Cortese, 2006; Stewart & Kagan, 2005). As the world continues to become more interconnected, higher education will feel the effects of a rapidly changing global reality.

Sheppard (2004) discusses an educational environment where “incidental and individual” international education has shifted to “an organized response by higher education institutions” (p. 34). Higher education is “uniquely positioned to make a contribution in graduating ‘citizens of the world’” (Berry & Schmied, 2004, p. 11). College graduates must be able to interact with and understand the changing world. Since colleges and universities are responsible for educating future leaders of a global society, it is critical that students graduate with knowledge not only of their chosen discipline, but also with an understanding of global issues (Bales, 2005; Calhoun & Cortese, 2006; Green, 2004; Schoorman, 2000; Stewart, 2004). As Calhoun and Cortese discuss, universities must produce graduates and knowledge “that will result in a thriving, secure, and civil society now and in the future” (p. 64). Universities have the opportunity to shape and inspire large numbers of people. Higher education prepares many of those who influence society (Calhoun & Cortese, 2006). As Schoorman (2000) discusses, “The internationalization of education is an institutional response to an environment in which

knowledge of international issues has become imperative to students' future careers and roles within society" (p. 6). Students must now become part of a global community and find ways to relate to humanity as a whole. Such a goal is not only desirable, but it is essential for students to become leaders in an increasingly interconnected world.

Since higher education administrators have come to understand the great need to produce global citizens, internationalization has become a goal for many colleges and universities (Green, 2002; Schoorman, 2000). Institutions share a common goal to create an environment where students can become "interculturally [sic] effective people and global citizens" (Sheppard, 2004, p. 34). Colleges and universities are increasingly creating mission and vision statements that include the need for intercultural understanding and internationalization of both campus and global communities (Schoorman). For example, the mission statement of the University of Evansville reads, "The University is aware of the challenges of living in an international community and therefore adopts a global view in its programs and its vision" ("University of Evansville mission statement," 2006). Antioch University provides another example, "An Antioch University Los Angeles education empowers the student to act responsibly and to effect personal, social, and environmental change within a global context" ("Antioch University Los Angeles' mission," 2006).

At the University of Tennessee, an internationalization campaign is underway. The campaign is called *Ready for the World: The International and Intercultural Awareness Initiative*. It is part of a "long-range plan to transform the campus into a culture of diversity that best prepares students for working and competing in the 21st century"

(“Ready for the World Initiative,” 2007). The program was launched in 2005 and includes transforming the curriculum, new scholarships and study abroad opportunities, and support of diversity initiatives on campus. Over \$1.5 million dollars are allocated to the program over five years. Part of the goal is for undergraduate students to “understand and celebrate the complexity of cultures and peoples” and to gain an appreciation and “passion for life-long engagement with global learning” (“Ready for the World Initiative,” 2007).

Two important groups of students who participate in international education include international students on campuses in the United States and U.S. students who have studied overseas. Both groups of students comprise an influential population in their size and ability to shape campus culture. International students make up as much as 20% of the student body in some American universities (Stewart & Kagan, 2005). International students “enrich the campus community and expand our intellectual, ethnic, and cultural experiences” (“A Woman’s support group for Asian international students,” 2003, p.132).

Another group consists of students who study abroad. Between 2000 and 2004, study abroad enrollment in the United States increased 45% (Kitsantas, 2004). When students return to their home institution, they have the capacity to enrich campus culture as well, but some often feel there is no outlet in which to do so (Adler, 1975; Raschio, 1987). The need to internationalize campuses and the efforts to do so are happening simultaneously. That is, at the same time administrators attempt to internationalize campuses through study abroad, the need to internationalize becomes increasingly

apparent. Still, it is vital for educators to remember that international and returned study abroad students cannot serve only as a means to achieve an internationalized campus. While their experiences do determine the effectiveness and impact of internationalization campaigns, their specific challenges, needs, and well-being must be considered and addressed.

Although international students and returning study abroad students have much to offer a university and much to gain personally from their experiences, they are also groups with needs to be met and obstacles to overcome. Adjusting to college life can be a difficult transition for many students (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Pressures are often multiplied for international students who must learn how to navigate through language difficulties and understand cultural differences (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Dee & Henkin, 1999; Meloni, 1986; Pederson, 1991, Schram & Lauver, 1988; Surdham & Collins, 1984). On the same token, study abroad returnees must renegotiate their place within their home culture while dealing with new perspectives that have emerged (Kitstantas, 2004; McCabe, 1994; Raschio, 1987; Uehara, 1983). Although both groups participated in international education, individual experiences vary greatly. These two groups of students have the opportunity to encounter life-changing events and are integral in creating an internationalized campus and community, but they also face unique obstacles.

Although these particular populations of students face different struggles, they have the potential to help one another become a part of the campus community. For both groups to benefit, exchange between international and American students must exist. In

order to develop more than a superficial understanding of the culture, it is crucial for international students to create “interpersonal relationships with members of the host society” (Tomich et al., 2003, p.22). Interaction with American students helps international students adjust (Senysyhn et al., 2000). International students struggle with holding on to existing cultural traditions while discovering new ones. Study abroad returnees, on the other hand, may seek out international opportunities at their home institution, and interacting with international students is one way to maintain a connection with their international experience.

Students need programming and planning in order to experience meaningful interaction across cultures (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999). Cross-cultural peer programs are one strategy that has been proven to alleviate adjustment difficulties for international students (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Westwood and Barker, 1990); however, American students often lack an interest in participating in such programs (Bales, 2005; Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003). Those who do may not fully participate or form meaningful relationships. As Poppen’s (2005) study indicated, communities of international students form easily, but beyond that, international students have difficulty forming close relationships with Americans because of a lack of common ground and common interests. One group of students that does demonstrate a greater interest in international issues, though, is study abroad returnees (Kitsantas, 2004; Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002). International students and study abroad returnees have the potential to form meaningful relationships, and they also have the potential to help

internationalize campus culture and create diverse communities in both a local and global context.

The buddy program at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States was initially launched in 2003 to help build connections between international students and students who have studied abroad. At the program's onset, many international students were having difficulty getting acquainted with their new institution, and study abroad students were looking for opportunities to maintain their international exposure and experiences. The program was designed for international exchange students who were studying at a U.S. institution for a semester or year and students who studied abroad and returned to the U.S. By bringing them together, the idea was to ease the process of adjustment for both groups of students and to allow cross-cultural connections and relationships to be formed. Although the two groups of students were at different starting points, their experiences were similar. U.S. students who studied abroad had already gone through the process of adjusting to a new environment in a foreign culture. International students were coming into unfamiliar surroundings, while students who studied abroad were returning to a familiar, although somewhat changed setting. Today's buddy program continues with the same focus.

The program itself is relatively simple to organize and administer. Before international students arrive in the United States, they are asked via email if they would like to be matched with a U.S. buddy, and all of the students usually agree to participate. Emails are also sent to American students while they are studying abroad or perhaps shortly after their return to invite them to be matched with an international buddy and

also describing their duties, which include meeting with their buddy at least once a week for the first month of the semester and after that, bi-weekly. The email explains that the program does require a serious commitment, and that some buddies volunteer to pick up their international buddy from the airport, take them shopping, or perhaps even take them home for a weekend. Many of the U.S. students list language or regional preferences, but while effort is made to accommodate such preferences, they cannot always be arranged. For example, the number of U.S. students who wish to be matched with Spanish-speakers far outweighs the number of actual Spanish-speaking incoming students. In this case, students are given the option to not participate, but the majority of students participate regardless of their buddy's home country. The U.S. students receive their international buddy's email address and are responsible for making first contact and to make sure their buddies are comfortable once they arrive. Buddies have the opportunity to participate in a group bowling night at the beginning of the semester to spend time with their buddy and to get to know other international and U.S. students in the program.

Statement of Problem

Although research about international students, study abroad returnees, internationalization, and community exists independently, there is little research that explores the relationships, influences, and interconnection of these broad areas of study. Furthermore, there is little research on peer programs consisting of the particular populations of international students and study abroad returnees, and no connection has been made on the formation of communities for these particular groups of students. Also, much of the research focusing on study abroad returnees is more than a decade old

(Adler, 1975; Uehara, 1983; Raschio, 1987). These are the areas addressed by the present study. Although internationalization is multifaceted (Schoorman), “the human face of international education is reflected in stories, in the power of a moment to change a person’s life” (Sheppard, 2004, p. 34). Therefore, this research study will focus on the stories, relationships, and communities that develop as a part of the buddy program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether participation in the buddy program at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States by international students and students who have studied abroad is perceived to contribute to a keener sense of belonging, elimination of loneliness, and formation of social networks (Cheng 2004). Cheng describes these three aspects as “directly associated with his or her [student’s] sense of community” (p. 221). Through in-depth interviews, the researcher will explore perceptions of community between the two populations of students.

Research Questions

1. Does participation in the buddy program by international students and students who have studied abroad influence students’ perceptions of a sense of belonging, lack of loneliness, and quality of social networks?
2. In what ways does participation in the buddy program contribute to these three factors for international students and students who have studied abroad?
3. How do international students and study abroad students who participate in a buddy program perceive the three aspects similarly or differently?

Significance of the Study

Research on the impact of the buddy program at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States is significant for several different groups. First, it is significant for international educators who work with either population of students at this institution in order for them to understand the ways in which these groups of students form communities. It is particularly useful for those who work with the peer program, who may be able to improve the program based on students' comments or thoughts. Furthermore, educators who work to internationalize the campus will find the results useful in structuring internationalization campaigns and programs. The results of the study enable educators to understand how community is formed for international students and students who have studied abroad and perhaps help them build a stronger community.

Secondly, it allows both populations of students to contribute to research that is relevant to them. The results of the study will allow international students to understand other international students' experiences of community, as well as experiences of students who have studied abroad. The same is true for study abroad returnees.

Third, the results of this study will benefit members of the campus community who may be unaware of the existence or concerns of these student populations. Learning about how international and study abroad students experience community may encourage a more accepting and open campus community.

Finally, this study has implications for further research. Although the current study will provide insight into experiences of community, it does so based on a defined framework. Further study might be to explore how these particular groups of students perceive the concept of community. Also, a quantitative study on the effectiveness of peer programs for these student populations would be useful in producing generalizable results.

Delimitations

As with all research, this study has some delimitations. First, the results of the study will only apply to these particular students in this buddy program. The results, although useful to several constituencies, are not generalizable to all international or study abroad students who have participated in peer programs. Rather, the results provide information about these students' experiences and may only provide clues about international and study abroad students in other programs and settings.

Secondly, students may perceive community differently than what Cheng's (2004) framework provides. In order to examine community building of both student populations together in a peer program, one succinct definition of community was necessary (Berg, 2002). Although Cheng's framework encompasses students' perspectives of community, all student populations may not view community in exactly the same way. Further exploration of how international students, study abroad students, and other student populations view community would be interesting and useful studies but were outside the scope of the present study.

Despite its delimitations, this study should prove useful to international educators, students, and the campus community at large. It studies two populations of students who have not been studied together in previous research, and it provides insight into their experiences of community within a peer program.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The literature in this chapter is organized into four sections. First, the literature is examined within the context of Cheng's (2004) conceptual framework. This section also highlights the challenges that international and study abroad students face in building and becoming part of community. Peer programs are one strategy that may alleviate some of the students' difficulties. Therefore, a review of studies regarding peer programs is included. Lastly, this chapter incorporates literature about communities for international students and students who have studied abroad.

Conceptual Framework

Cheng's (2004) study on campus community will provide the framework for the current study. Cheng's study was inspired by and adapted from Boyer's (1990) work on community. Boyer defined six characteristics of successful campus community. Colleges and universities should strive to create purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative communities. Cheng intended to discover if students' perceptions of community were consistent with Boyer's characteristics. Cheng examined aspects of college life in order to determine students' perceptions of campus community and to unravel any underlying constructs related to community. He conducted web surveys focusing on issues of community building at a private university in New York City where ninety-five percent of students lived on campus. In prior student life and satisfaction surveys, students at this particular university had consistently rated campus community with low scores. A bivariate examination of 26 items revealed insights into community.

He determined three aspects that either create or hinder campus community: feeling a sense of belonging within the campus community, eliminating loneliness, and forming social networks. These concepts do not exist independently of one another, but rather, they overlap and intertwine.

Although Cheng's study looked at how all students engage in campus community, the current study of the buddy program at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States will concentrate specifically on two populations of students. For the purposes of this research study, international exchange students are defined as any foreign student who studies in the United States for at least one semester. Study abroad students are defined as American students who study outside of the United States but who have returned to their host institution.

Belonging

The most important aspect of campus community engagement is feeling a sense of belonging. Brazzell (2001) discusses its importance for college students, stating, "They yearn for a sense of belonging, and the lack of it may prompt some to abandon either their institution—or worse—their education" (p. 31). Students must "feel cared about, treated in a caring way, and valued as an individual" in order to feel a sense of belonging (p. 227). Students do not want to feel as if they are "a number in a book" (Boyer, 1990, p. 48). Instead, they need the institution to feel like home, and their individual values and differences must be recognized and respected (Cheng, 2004). As Olson and Mittler (1996) add:

It is a challenge for colleges and universities to help students find ways to express who and what they are as functioning members of the campus community. This implies that the campus community has an identity, but one that is based on principles rather than rules, one that is elastic rather than rigid, one that has room for the differences students bring to campus or discover after they have arrived. (p. 89)

Students who feel open to express ideas and differences will possess a greater sense of belonging. Cheng (2004) confirms the importance of openness. Cheng's study attempted to address this issue with agree or disagree statements such as, "I feel accepted as a part of the campus community, I feel valued as a person at this institution, and this institution is an environment for free and open expression of ideas/opinions/beliefs" (p. 222). From the responses to these questions, Cheng concluded that in order for students to develop a sense of belonging, the college or university should be a place with an open environment where "free expressions are encouraged and individuality is accepted and respected" (p. 216). A campus community as a whole cannot be open unless individual students and faculty members are open as well. As Tomich, McWhirter, and Darcy (2003) discuss, "Openness refers to an individual's ability to accept new information, new ways of doing things, and minimal resistance to change" (p. 25). International and American students as well as faculty and staff must all possess open attitudes in order to promote a sense of campus community (Boyer, 1990).

Respecting differences is not only a component of openness, but it is also necessary in understanding students' diverse needs. Castro-Abad (1995) distinguishes between assimilation, where cultural characteristics are lost, and acculturation, which is the process of adapting to a new culture while still maintaining a separate cultural

identity. Acculturating into not only a new society but also a new campus culture can be a challenge. International students may find a completely different culture on campus than they are used to in their home countries. In a study about adjustment problems for international students, Galloway and Jenkins (2005) determined a disparity between students' and administrators' perceptions of adjustment challenges. They surveyed 417 international students at two universities. Students named financial aid, placement services, and English language as their top three areas of concern. Administrators, on the other hand, thought the areas with the most difficulty were English, living/dining services, and socio-personal concerns. Such a difference in perceptions may mean that international students are not receiving the type of help they need and may have more difficulty adjusting and feeling a sense of belonging as a consequence. Understanding and listening to the needs and concerns of international students as individuals becomes important in eliminating such disparities.

Students who have studied abroad may be able to help create a more open community. The concept of global perspective has been described as a "combination of social, psychosocial, and environmental understandings within an individual's life which are world-wide in scope" (McCabe, 1994, p. 275). A global perspective includes a general recognition of human conditions, and it can be viewed as a level of consciousness about the world. Global perspective develops in response to both formal and informal learning (McCabe). McCabe looked broadly at global perspective development among students participating in a Semester at Sea program. He found that the degree of openness increased for all students, and some of the students demonstrated increased

awareness and interest in world events. He also determined that students possessed a higher degree of globalcentrism, which implies looking at issues from the standpoint of a citizen of the world. Kitsantas (2004) examined the effect of goals before studying abroad on cross-cultural understanding. Two hundred and thirty-two students completed pretest and posttest surveys, including the Study Abroad Goals Scale, and results indicated that goals could successfully predict students' global understanding and cross-cultural skills. In fact, goals accounted for 16% of the variance for global understanding. Kitsantas (2004) concurred that students who study abroad attain a wider global perspective, but she clarified that certain factors about the experience contribute to the level of gain.

Despite a wider global perspective, students may not have the opportunity to share experiences and thus still feel disconnected from campus community. In fact, these students have to redefine their place within communities they were once a part of and campus community as a whole. In Raschio's (1987) study on the reentry process of study abroad students, he determined two patterns. First, most returning students changed their groups of friends to include those who had similar experiences, which means they may seek friendships with other study abroad students or international students. Secondly, students expressed a feeling of being different or separate. Both of these feelings were also cited as new thoughts that did not exist before studying abroad. Students who have studied abroad must also negotiate differences between home and host countries. One student shared his feelings, upon returning home "America is still America. You don't want it to be, but it is. So you have to readjust; just trying to readjust to your own

country” (p. 157). Students may have new negative feelings toward the United States, and balancing old and new ideas may prove difficult (McCabe, 1994).

Loneliness

Loneliness is a significant factor in preventing students from engaging in campus community, and particular groups of students are especially susceptible to feelings of loneliness. Cheng (2004) named loneliness as the most negative influence on a student’s sense of community. Feeling lonely is the “flip-side” of feeling cared about (Cheng, p. 227). The lack of sense of community is most likely the result of feeling deprived of care, respect, and individual value on campus. Once international students arrive in America, they immediately lose the shared identity that comes from being with family and friends at home (Pederson, 1981; Romero, 1981). As a consequence, these students often feel lonely (Schram & Lauver, 1988). Cheng reports that students view a strong campus community as one that helps students when they feel lonely or depressed. Again, all students want to feel cared about and valued, and if they feel unintegrated, the cycle of loneliness will continue (Brazell, 2001).

Previous research suggests that the issue of language permeates nearly every area of adjustment for international students, which leads to lack of self-confidence and feelings of loneliness. Engagement within campus community as a whole is no exception. Engagement is important because, as Whitt (2006) suggests, “focusing on student engagement—that is, what students do during college—is the best way to enhance student success” (p. 2). Students who have difficulty communicating in English often face more significant social adjustment problems than those who do not. In a study

by Dee and Henkin (1999), all Korean students at a Midwestern research university were surveyed. Sixty-one percent of the respondents named language as the biggest obstacle to adjustment. The researchers report, “Communication problems may be underlying factors in a number of adjustment difficulties” (p. 54). Limited communication may prevent interaction with American students and faculty, and thus, opportunities for social learning are restricted as well. English proficiency is an important indicator of social interaction and adjustment (Meloni, 1986; Pederson, 1991, Schram & Lauver, 1988; Surdham & Collins, 1984). Forming and maintaining friendships with students who do not speak the same native language becomes less likely. International students have difficulty understanding American colloquialisms and slang, “a skill deficit that may interfere with the development of personal relationships with American students” (Dee & Henkin, 1999, p. 54). These limitations lead to isolation and loneliness, in turn increasing adjustment problems as well.

Issues with language may also affect self-esteem, which can spiral a student into further feelings of loneliness and depression. In Poppen’s (2005) study examining international students’ integration into campus community, students discussed several difficulties with language upon arriving in the United States, but language was not the most significant factor in preventing community for most students. The connection, instead, may be indirect as language difficulties affect students’ interactions, relationships, and self-confidence. In fact, self-confidence is an important indicator of adjustment. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) explain this factor and how it relates to adjustment for international students. The authors view adjustment as a transitional

experience that unfolds over time as students learn to cope with pressures of the university environment. Self-esteem is not a static attribute and certain conditions allow self-esteem to be disturbed. Experiences with new people, opportunities, and situations have the potential to upset the stability of an individual's self-esteem. International students in particular may experience a lack of self-esteem because their entrance into American universities can involve a "loss of social status" and interactions with different types of people (p. 702). The student may lose the ability to perform daily functions and meet social and personal life needs, including academic demands.

Like international students, students who study abroad are vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and transition challenges as well (Adler, 1975; Raschio, 1987). Researchers have suggested that struggles associated with reentry may be more traumatic for the traveler than the problems experienced upon adjusting to a foreign culture (Adler, 1975; Hall & Moran, 1979).

Students who have studied abroad are also susceptible to feelings of loneliness. Many students experience reverse culture shock, but each individual faces a distinct reentry process. Uehara (1983) defines reverse culture shock as "psychological difficulties (sometimes associated with physical problems) that a returnee experiences in the initial stage of the adjustment process at home after having lived abroad for some time" (p. 416). Raschio's (1987) study examines the nature of reentry from students' perspectives. Students acquire a new perspective while overseas, and this perspective exists in both how they view themselves and how they view home. Students gain a "sense of personal change" as well as feelings of "alienation and separateness" (Raschio,

1987, p. 158-9). A new reluctance “to go along with the crowd” emerges as well (p. 159). Other aspects of this new perspective include “patience, objectivity, priorities of goals, increased language skills, a global view, and increased awareness of people as individuals” (p. 159). One student in Raschio’s (1987) study commented on the personal nature of reentry:

The degree to which you feel this reentry process is based on individual psychological makeup. It’s who you are, where you went, how long you were there, and the impressions it all made on you weighed against what you found here at home. (p. 158)

This emerging sense of uniqueness and independence may seem empowering while the student is still abroad, but as the student returns, those feelings often change to isolation, strangeness, or disconnectedness.

Lack of familial support may influence feelings of loneliness as well. As students in Raschio’s (1987) study commented:

I expected more from my family, but I accepted that knowing that I had other outlets, other people to talk to...It was hard for them to listen to what I had done. They wanted to tell me more about what was going on here. They just haven’t gone through the same things I did. (p. 158)

I told them about my experiences, but it didn’t affect them at all...They wanted to be concerned with just the things of the U.S. What happened in France was so far away. So I would look for people to talk to who had been there. (p.158)

These comments also suggest a need and desire to reach out to those who understood their experiences. Students sought support and connection through other people.

Social Networks

Creating social networks is one way to combat feelings of loneliness and move towards forming a community, but the types of social networks formed can affect the

adjustment process. Cheng (2004) states that the quality of social life on campus enhances students' sense of community. Forming social networks promotes feelings of belonging within the institution, and thus, communities are formed as well.

International students are typically committed to maintaining cultural heritage, which can hinder adaptation (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Ward & Kennedy, 1992). As Komiya and Eells (2001) point out, "These [international] students have inadequate informal social support and thus feel socially isolated." Seeking social support within one's own ethnic group or with other international students can serve as an effective coping strategy and help ease the initial adjustment period (Mori, 2000); however, these types of social support may discourage acculturation and engagement within campus community as a whole. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) studied international students' strategy of relating to other persons with a similar cultural background or nationality. They found that forming similar ethnic communities eases the process of adjustment for international students. International students greatly benefit from social support within their own ethnic groups. Because family and friends at home cannot fully appreciate or understand the overseas experience (Thomas & Althen, 1989), establishing a supportive network with fellow nationals becomes "indispensable for their well-being" (Pederson, 1991, p. 10). Foreign students are able to examine cultural and personal identity in a new context, and that is part of the growing process for these students. Ping (1999) agrees that the joining of like-minded or same national groups can help "nurture and strengthen identity in the midst of contrasts" (p. 17). Maintaining one's cultural identity is an important part of discovering and maintaining personal identity, and forming social

groups within similar ethnicities can eliminate loneliness and promote social adjustment by allowing students to hold onto and appreciate cultural identity.

Although ethnic social groups promote an immediate sense of belonging, they may also prevent acculturation in its entirety. Hayes and Lin (1994) demonstrate this catch:

The positive functions of this cultural subgroup provide a place where international students can establish new primary relations, thereby developing a sense of belonging and a place to share familiar traditional values and belief systems. Alternatively, the formation of cultural subgroups tends to isolate international students even further (p. 2).

Students may feel a part of one particular group, but they need inclusion into other groups as well as interactions with other types of students in order to acculturate. When similarity becomes the primary reason for contact, assimilation occurs rather than acculturation (Ping, 1999) and relationships are forced and artificial (Mori, 2000). International students “must interact with the host population in order to develop more than a superficial understanding of the culture” (Tomich et al., 2003, p. 22). Developing meaningful relationships with members of the host society is an important aspect of the transition. Residence life proves as an important area in terms of social interaction between different groups of students. Integrated housing arrangements, such as those organized around a specific interest, can help join cognitive and experiential learning (Ping, 1999).

Cheng (1987) recommends international students joining social groups, clubs, and student organizations such as the student government organization to help students become more fluent in English and adapt to the American way of life. Conflicting

literature exists on this topic. Certain organizations, though, such as Greek societies, show a negative impact on community. Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992) report, “Greek societies have the potential both to enhance and undermine the quality of community on campus” (p. 79). For example, their study found that “the amount of time required for Greek activities was so great that it precluded significant participation in other student organizations” (p. 82). The type of participation does seem to have significance.

It is difficult to determine if social networks within ethnic groups or outside of ethnic groups are more beneficial to students, yet it is important to recognize the significance of both types of social networks for international students’ adjustment. In fact, many international students wish for increased interaction with Americans but find they are unable to do so. Senyshen, Warford, and Zhan (2000) claimed that students’ major motivation to study in the United States consisted of a desire to live in a society different from their own and a desire to experience another culture. Poppen’s (2005) study supported the claim and found that many international students came to the United States to meet new people and form relationships with students outside of their ethnicity.

One group of students that does demonstrate an interest in international issues is study abroad returnees (Kitsantas, 2004; Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002). Study abroad returnees also demonstrate a more than superficial understanding of individuals of other nationalities. Drews, Meyer, and Peregrine (1996) designed a study using free association task in order to understand the effects of study abroad on the conceptualization of other national groups. The authors created three groups of students: those who had studied abroad for one semester or more, students who were planning to

study abroad, and a group that did not plan to study abroad. By comparing groups, the authors found that those who had studied abroad were more likely to conceive of other national groups in “terms associated with the characters of individuals” and less likely to associate national groups with “food, historical events, geographical characteristics, and similarly non-personal attributes” (p. 452). Furthermore, another study shows that students who have studied abroad are more likely to empathize with students who are not native English speakers (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002). Study abroad returnees at Missouri Southern wrote journals and reflection papers and expressed a greater appreciation for the contributions of non-native English speakers and discussed and increased empathy for the particular population even after they returned home. One student reflected:

Their kindness has me thinking, though. Would they get the same treatment if they came here? I am not so sure...Americans are raised speaking English, and only English. (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, p. 50)

Increased global perspective and empathy allow study abroad returnees to be able to relate to international students studying in American universities.

Although much of the returnee’s reentry experience is shaped by personality, opportunities for involvement and support are important as well. Raschio (1987) reports that some students are surprised at the lack of support from friends and family members. Furthermore, friendships and social circles may differ or change. The author discusses part of the reason for this change, “They had become used to dealing with people on a deeper level than that sustained by their old friends” (p. 159). Students expressed a need for informal opportunities to discuss experiences and feelings as well as a desire for more

formal, planned activities to develop an individual help plan. Many students return to a monolingual and monocultural society that provides few opportunities to pursue interests in other cultures (Raschio, 1987). Sheppard (2004) reflects on her own reentry experience and echoes the need for support:

A lot of my learning happened after the fact. I came back from exchange and think some of my learning would have been lost without the opportunity to reflect on it and bring it back to my home campus. I became a volunteer at the International Student Center on campus. I participated in re-entry orientations, international student activities, and volunteered in the study abroad resource center. I spend the next two years doing everything I could to use what I learned to help others. Without this opportunity I would have felt frustrated and lost when I came back (p. 38).

The need for reflecting and sharing experiences can last from a couple of weeks to several months (Raschio, 1987). The process of reentry and reflection is an important element of learning associated with study abroad. As Sheppard (2004) states, "It should be clear from the beginning of the process that education abroad is not an experience that starts when a student leaves and ends when they get home" (p. 39). Continuing to experience and participate in international activities helps to ease the process of reentry.

Peer Programs

The importance of peer programs, or programs that encourage interaction among peers, can be effective in encouraging cross-cultural interactions and strengthening understanding of other cultures. Peer programs help promote the formation of meaningful interaction between international and American students and eliminate the formation of "international ghettos" that can develop if "comfort and friendship are found

solely with others sharing the common experience of adjusting to American behavior”

(Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999, p. 69).

Geelhoed, Abe, and Talbot (2003) studied American students' experiences in an international peer program. Sixteen host students participated in focus groups and were asked questions regarding their experiences in the program. The students who participated in the program were not returned study abroad students, but after having a negative overseas experience, one student volunteered for the program because she wanted to help international students avoid some of the difficulties she had encountered. Most students, though, participated to make friends and did not anticipate the amount of effort required to have a successful partnership. The initial contact between American host students and international students proved to be awkward and discouraging for some students, and therefore, participation in the program was limited for these students. Those who did persist, had mostly positive experiences, learned about another culture, and erased stereotypes. Some students, though, thought the program mainly benefited international students. This finding is consistent with others who have demonstrated the effectiveness of such programs on international students' social adjustment and use of campus resources (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Westwood & Barker, 1990). While there are some resources available, the groups do not seem to take advantage of those available. A peer approach seems likely to provide some relief as supported by existing literature.

Peer programs also allow both groups of students to learn about other cultures. The Intercultural Communications Workshop at the University of Oregon, organized by

the Intercultural Communications Institute of the Office for International Students and Scholars, demonstrates the effectiveness of peer programs in providing increased understanding of one another. The two-day workshop brings together as many as eighty students, half international and half American, and includes role-plays, skits, small-group discussions, and lectures. As one student from India shared:

With thousands of languages, religions, ethnic groups, and my own limited experiences, there is no way I could accurately characterize India. However, if Americans take the time to know me, they may also learn something about India. (Peterson, et al, 1999, p. 69)

Participants are encouraged to reveal personal experiences rather than trying to serve as a representative for their ethnic group or nationality, and thus, the workshop helps to eliminate stereotyping on both ends. Furthermore, it provides a way in which long-term interactions between American and international students may exist (Peterson, et al, 1999).

Existing research suggests that peer programs create an opportunity for meaningful intercultural interaction among participants, and they increase knowledge about other cultures. Both of these effects increase internationalization and create a more accepting, open environment. For international students, forming meaningful relationships with Americans adds an integral aspect to their social network. Social and cultural adjustment becomes easier, allowing students to feel a sense of belonging within the campus community and decreased feelings of loneliness. Developing friendships is also important for returned study abroad students who are attempting to rebuild social networks. They, too, may feel a greater sense of belonging and decreased loneliness, and

meeting and befriending international students serves as a way in which to continue learning about and experiencing different ways of life. Doing so helps to shorten reentry culture shock so students are able to become part of campus community once again. For both groups, understanding differences in culture and forming relationships across cultures may also foster a sense of participation in a wider, more global community as well.

The word community inspires various images. One may think of a group of volunteers working to improve a local neighborhood. It may signify a larger population of members of a professional association. Or, community may conjure thoughts of a non-governmental organization with members from all over the world, such as the Red Cross or Amnesty International. Ideas such as the “global village” and “global human family,” suggest an expanded view of community where all of humanity exists as a single community (Esteva & Prakash, 1996; Suarez-Orozco, 2005). Snow (1990) states, “Our presence is the fundamental gift we bring to the human community” (p. 359). Since membership of this global community is automatic simply by being human, it is also abstract. As Esteva and Prakash claim, it is an “illusion” because each person’s world and reality is so entirely different (p. 279). Therefore, it is important to recognize individual differences as well as similarities in order to build community.

Commonality and common purpose are important in creating a community. Lloyd-Jones (1989) defines campus community as “the binding together of individuals toward a common cause or experience.” Komives (2006) clarifies community as an “interdependence, a spirit, a place.” She also provides a metaphor through which to

understand community. She tells a story of grand redwood trees in California that grow to be some of the largest in the world. Their intricate networks of roots join together to produce a strong foundation for the trees. They depend on each other and in essence form one enormous organism, or community. Individuals must depend on one another as well in order to build strong, healthy communities. As Komives explains, in order for students to decipher what community means, they must be able to ask and answer three questions. They must determine, “How am I unique? How am I like some others? How am I like everyone?” Bogue (2002) discusses community in a similar light, “Shared purpose, shared commitment, shared relationships, shared responsibility—the need for community is a primal yearning and a practical necessity in our lives and in our society” (p. 3). Themes of connectedness and commonality exist in all of these definitions.

Finding that common ground with those who are seemingly very different while also respecting those differences can be a challenge. Establishing commonality may be especially difficult for students who identify as members of particular subgroups within a college or university, such as racial and ethnic minorities (Tatum, 1999), international students (Schraum & Lauver, 1988), and those who study abroad (Raschio, 1987). Students who are part of these groups may not feel connected to campus community as a whole. In understanding how one is “like everyone,” as Komives (2006) suggests, students are able to relate to humanity in its entirety and understand community in a broader sense.

In this chapter, literature regarding international education, community, and peer programs has been summarized and presented. Although there is much literature on the

three topics individually, there has been little, if any, research specifically focused on the nexus of the international education, community, and peer programs. The purpose of this study was to examine this nexus, specifically focusing on international and study abroad students.

The next chapter outlines the methodology of this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings, and Chapter 5 will contain discussion, reflection, and implications of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether participation in the buddy program at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States by international students and students who have studied abroad is perceived to contribute to a keener sense of belonging, elimination of loneliness, and formation of social networks (Cheng 2004). Cheng describes these three aspects as “directly associated with his or her [student’s] sense of community” (p. 221). There is no definitive hypothesis to be tested, but instead there are ideas to be explored and perhaps further questions to be raised. Therefore, the research design follows a qualitative model. The researcher’s research questions are based on Cheng’s conceptual framework of community.

Sample

The sample consists of six American students who had recently returned from studying abroad for at least a summer or semester and six international exchange students at a large, research university in the Southeastern United States with an overall student population of more than 25,000. International students in this study are non-degree seeking students who are studying on an exchange program for one semester or one academic year. Returned study abroad students in this study have studied abroad for a semester in length. The international students in this study were from various countries, and the American participants have studied in several different locations. Ages range from 20 to 22 years. Four males and eight females participated in the study. Table 1 presents additional information to describe the sample.

Table 1

Profile of interview participants

Gender	Age	Major	Home Country	Studied Abroad
Male	22	Logistics		Wales
Male	22	Political Science		Wales
Female	20	Social Work		Costa Rica
Female	21	Political Science Global Studies		South Africa
Female	22	Chemical Engineering		Malta
Female	21	Nutrition		Switzerland
Male	22	Sports Management	Canada	
Male	21	English	United Kingdom	
Female	21	Political Science	Ireland	
Female	20	Language and World Business	France	
Female	20	Marketing	Australia	
Female	20	Industrial Engineering	Spain	

Although the range of participants' home countries and study abroad locations is diverse, one weakness is the lack of participation from international students from Asian nations or developing nations. All the participants are from Western Europe, North America, and Australia, although the student from France is originally from Russia and spent the first fifteen years of her life there. One student from China had agreed to participate in the study but she failed to show up for the interview. Perhaps differences in culture, language, and perceptions of privacy and trust contributed to the lack of participation from students from various cultures. A second weakness is that all of the participants are of traditional college age. Students in non-traditional age groups may have very different experiences. Diversity of majors, however, is strong, and participation from males was consistent with the number of males that study abroad.

Before the start of each semester, students currently studying abroad or students who had recently returned were invited to participate in the buddy program for the following semester. All 42 incoming international exchange students chose to participate, and 69 returned study abroad students responded to participate, so some international students were matched with two buddies. The returned study abroad students were asked if they preferred to be matched with an international student from a particular area of the world. Effort was made to meet requests when possible, but some requests could not be met. In these cases, students were given the option not to participate. Study abroad students and international students were then matched based on location, major, and gender preference. The U.S. students were given the email address of their buddy and were instructed to make contact with the student before they arrived in

the U.S., if possible. Once the international students arrived, some U.S. buddies picked up their buddy from the airport, offered to take them shopping, or simply met for a cup of coffee. At the beginning of each semester, the entire group met for a bowling night on campus to meet other students in the program.

Interview Protocol

This descriptive qualitative study used in-depth, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. The first section of the interview protocol includes demographic questions specific to the population. For example, if the student has studied abroad, they are asked to share where they studied and for how long. If the student is an international student, the researcher asks where they are from and how long they have been in the United States. They are also asked to indicate their age and gender.

The interview protocol was guided by the research questions and Cheng's (2004) conceptual framework (see Appendix). In order to develop specific questions, the researcher "unpacked" components of belonging, loneliness, and social networks from Cheng's interview protocol as well as from other literature. Before interviews took place, three students tested the interview protocol. Two international students, one from China and one from Australia, provided feedback about the cultural relativity as well as the comprehensibility of the questions. The student from China commented on several places where the questions were confusing or unclear to her. A student who had studied abroad also tested the interview and noted that she was unclear whether she should answer the questions in the here and now or how she felt when she first returned from studying abroad. Therefore, the researcher clarified with each participant that they

should respond with how they feel at the current moment. In addition, someone with strong qualitative skills reviewed the interview protocol in order to help eliminate any leading or biased questions. She also helped to simplify the protocol into more general, open-ended inquiries.

Students were asked to respond to the questions and also to share any additional thoughts or opinions they may have had. Questions posed were open-ended in nature, so as to allow the students to share as much information as they wished. Interview protocol was semistandardized, meaning the researcher asked the same series of questions to each interviewee but allowed room for probing questions based on the student's answer. As Berg (2001) points out, "Questions used in an semistandardized interview can reflect an awareness that individuals understand the world in varying ways. Researchers thus approach the world from the subject's perspective" (p. 70).

Accuracy of Data

Maintaining accurate data is crucial in order to draw conclusions. Shank (2002) describes validity as the "notion that what you say you have observed is, in fact, what really happened" (p. 92). In any qualitative research, it is inevitable that some amount of bias may exist. Shank advises the researcher to be as honest as possible about any biases that may occur during research, including strong feelings that may emerge. Therefore, the researcher maintained thorough field notes, noting feelings, thoughts, and impressions. These notes were taken into consideration when analyzing data. Any differences in setting were noted as well.

Another issue with maintaining accurate data in qualitative research is that of trustworthiness. There is always a chance that the subjects may not answer questions honestly. Shank (2002) discusses the issue, "More often than not, we have to deal with interviewees who 'lie' because they are either confused or misinformed" (p. 38). Therefore, in addition to written informed consent outlining the purpose of the study and confidentiality, the researcher made sure to verbally describe the purpose of the study and confidentiality to participants as well. The researcher also asked participants if they had any questions or concerns before the interview began, and she took time to answer any questions from the study participants. During the interview, the researcher rephrased or clarified questions when participants seemed confused or unsure of the question's meaning.

The researcher had access to the two student populations through her assistantship at the Programs Abroad Office. In addition to having sole responsibility for the buddy program, as graduate assistant, the researcher had several roles in which she interacted with students in the buddy program. These included assisting with orientation for the incoming international exchange students, helping with reentry seminar for study abroad students, and interacting informally with both groups of students at various functions not associated with the buddy program. Therefore, the researcher had developed a relationship with many of the students.

Data Collection Procedures

After developing the interview protocol, the first step was to conduct a pilot study with one or two students to test the clarity of the interview questions. In order to collect

data, the researcher selected the interviewees. Participants were purposefully selected in order to help the researcher best answer the research questions posed (Creswell, 2003). Interviewees were drawn from study abroad returnees and international exchange students. Participants were invited to partake in the study via email. The email described the purpose of the study, requirements of participants, time commitment, and confidentiality. Those interested responded via email, and then the researcher selected the first six students in each group who responded. She then scheduled interviews based on students' availability. Most of the interviews took place in the International House on campus, although two interviews took place at different locations at the participant's request. Once the student and researcher met, the researcher again explained the purpose, requirements, and confidentiality. The participant was also informed that they did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering, and they had the right to exit the study at any time. They were also informed that the tape recorder was only there for research purposes and that the audio tape would be kept in a locked safe when not in use. The student received a copy of the informed consent form to sign and return to the researcher, and they also received a copy to keep. The researcher then proceeded with the interview protocol.

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze data, qualitative analysis methods were used to look for themes regarding the research questions. The researcher utilized Creswell's (2003) approach to analyze qualitative data. First, the researcher had to "organize and prepare" data by transcribing audio-recorded interviews (p. 191). Secondly, she read through all data to

gain a “general sense” of the information (p. 191). The third step was to begin the coding process of organizing material into categories and labeling those categories. Specifically, she used the research questions as a guide to search for themes and answers to those questions. The researcher used the coding process to create descriptions and themes, which are represented in qualitative narrative of “rich, thick description” (p. 196). Finally, the researcher interpreted the meaning of the data.

This type of open-ended, qualitative research design will allow the researcher to answer her research questions for several reasons. The first research question focuses on students’ perceptions of belonging, loneliness and social networks. Since participants will respond to questions from their own perspective, they will have a chance to share their various understandings and perceptions of those three factors. Furthermore, insight about the ways in which participating in the buddy program may or may not contribute to those three factors contribute can be achieved because the researcher does not ask specific questions about the buddy program. Rather, the research design allows the students to bring up their participation in the program and its impact only if he or she wishes. Therefore, no assumptions are made before the interview begins. Finally, interviewing both groups of students is an important aspect of the design. By interviewing both U.S. and international participants in the buddy program, comparisons can be made between the two groups about differences or similarities in their experiences and will provide insight into the final research question.

The next chapter presents the findings. Chapter 5 presents final discussion and conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The researcher conducted twelve in-depth interviews in order to compile a wealth of narrative data on students' perspectives on belonging, loneliness, and social networks. Since the core of the information is narrative, the results will be presented in a thick descriptive form to provide insight into the conversations that took place between the interviewer and the participants (Creswell, 2003). In this chapter, the researcher will first present findings within the context of the framework on which this study's interview questions were based. In essence, these are the students' responses to the questions they were asked. From these findings, the researcher was able to answer the proposed research questions, and the answers to these questions will also be discussed throughout this chapter. Based on previously existing research on international education and community, the researcher established three questions that she sought to answer throughout the course of this research study. To refresh the reader, the research questions are repeated below.

1. Does participation in the buddy program by international students and students who have studied abroad influence students' perceptions of a sense of belonging, lack of loneliness, and quality of social networks?
2. In what ways does participation in the buddy program contribute to these three factors for international students and students who have studied abroad?

3. How do international students and study abroad students who participate in a buddy program perceive the three aspects similarly or differently?

In addition to presenting the findings and answers to these questions, this chapter will provide the reader with a snapshot of students' perceptions and experiences.

Belonging

Participation in the buddy program did not seem to significantly influence students' sense of belonging for either group of students. None of the students interviewed mentioned the buddy program as influential in contributing to their sense of belonging. Instead, perceptions of belonging were most influenced by participation and involvement in various organizations, activities, and programs.

The first interview question that attempted to gain insight into students' perceptions on sense of belonging asked about comfort level at the university. All of the students from the United States commented that they felt comfortable. Perhaps the most interesting finding for this group regarding this particular question was their tendency to divide feelings of comfort into academic and social categories despite no distinction by the researcher. One student discussed having found his "academic niche," and several spoke to academic comfort versus social comfort, mentioning relationships with friends, faculty, and advisors. Although the participants agreed that they did feel comfortable at the university, they also interpreted comfort in different ways. Two students talked about safety as an integral component to feeling comfortable. One student mentioned feeling comfortable due to the university's casual attitude toward dress, while two students said they felt relaxed and thus comfortable. One student reminded the researcher of

something quite important, stating, “I feel like it only takes one or two people anyway to make you feel comfortable in a place.”

Four of the six international students expressed feelings of comfort. One student named her roommates as the most significant factor in feeling comfortable, while another mentioned safety. On the whole, safety was mentioned by three students, both international and American, as an important element of feeling comfortable. Two international students said they felt comfortable “for the most part.” As one student from Ireland explained:

Obviously being foreign and speaking differently from everyone else, and also, because I view things from my perspective of how I live back home, the way things are done here are just alien to me. I just don’t understand it, but I don’t ever feel fearful that I don’t fit in.

Another international student said expressed “up and down” feelings of comfort and even mentioned the “U-Curve” as similar to her feelings.

Second, students were asked about their feelings of acceptance into campus community as well as smaller communities within the university. This question brought forth an interesting finding that students’ communities are complex structures that are unique to each student. One student from the U.S. expressed this idea quite well. He stated, “It’s sort of these little groups that somehow all tie together in my life.” In fact, each student’s sense of belonging comes from various places, and the buddy program is but one of these places.

Participants in this study not only exemplified Astin’s (1985) assertion that involvement matters, but they really seemed to understand the idea as well. As one

student claimed, “ In order to be connected, you have to put yourself out there and get involved in things.” Another student mentioned receiving emails about campus activities, and participating in those activities helped him feel accepted into campus community. One student who studied abroad in Malta claimed, “There’s a lot of different programs you can do and organizations, and they’re all very open.”

Despite the consistent sentiment that involvement is an essential element of feeling a sense of belonging, the groups to which students belong are quite diverse. Students from the United States expressed much variation in the types of organizations in which they participate. Many felt a sense of belonging to smaller communities that possess an academic component. Two students praised the Honors Program as beneficial in creating a sense of belonging. One student who studied abroad in Switzerland had an interesting story to share about starting a group with an academic purpose on campus:

I think about the Chancellor because we have a book club, and it’s with about twelve students and he’s made a huge difference to me as far as me feeling connected to the university and valued as something I’ve done. Me and one other person just went to his office one day and asked him and said, “Can we start a book club?” and he said, “Yes, absolutely.” He got the books for us and everything, and he’s since supported us and encouraged us, so that’s been really cool and made me feel like I’ve done something but through the complete help of somebody else.

Another interviewee talked about her participation in the Freshmen Engage Program for engineers. Through that program she attended classes with the same group of students and formed a strong connection to the other participants in the program. Other students mentioned they felt a sense of belonging through their academic majors. Once students entered major courses, they formed communities with those students. As one student

shared, “In my classes now I have the same people in every class, and definitely we’ve formed a community because we’re together all the time doing work and studying.” Two other students shared this student’s perspective. In addition to the academic component, two students named their campus ministries as a place where they identify a strong sense of community and belonging. Involvement in a student publication and volunteering with the women’s rugby team also made the list of activities that promote a sense of belonging.

The importance of involvement and participation was true for both the U.S. students and the international students, although international students on the whole did not feel as strong of a sense of belonging as the other group of students. A student from Spain made an important comment that she tried to participate in as many activities as possible. She reasoned, “Last year I did an exchange program in Belgium and I think I didn’t participate enough. So now I try to say yes to everything.” One international student who did not feel particularly connected to the university noticed the phenomenon as well, stating, “I haven’t really gotten involved.” One student noted that she felt “kind of on my own.” Another answered, “Yes I feel accepted, but it’s definitely weird being the guy with the British accent in every class.” The theme of distinctiveness was prevalent for the international students. In particular the idea of having an accent or “speaking funny” was brought up by four of the six international students.

Furthermore, international students felt a stronger connection to campus community as a whole than they did to particular smaller communities. One activity that did allow two international students to feel a sense of belonging within campus

community was participating in sporting events, particularly attending football and basketball games. In terms of smaller communities, three of the students responded “not really” when asked if they identified with a smaller community within the university. Two students, though, did feel they belonged to a community of people through their place of employment. There were also disparate attitudes towards the international student community. Three students explicitly stated that they do not feel like they are a part of the international student community. As one student put it, “I don’t play for Team International.” Another student referred to the international student community as “the exchange student mafia.” She provided a bit more insight into her feelings on the matter:

I have a group of friends that I hang out with, but not really a community that does anything. I don’t hang out with international students at all. I can’t really explain that. It’s not really a conscious thing. I know when we first got here we were given a talk about being an international student. There was the cliché that they all pack around together, but I had friends that lived in Tennessee anyway. So, I wasn’t depended on a group of people who were in the same situation as me. I mean, I came here to experience American culture. I’m not here to improve my language or anything like that. I think if I hung around with only international students, I could be anywhere in the world. I just happen to be in America.

On the other hand, two students admitted that most of their friends are international students, and they did feel a strong sense of belonging within that community.

Loneliness

Participation in the buddy program also did not significantly influence students’ perceptions on feelings of loneliness. Interviewees were asked three questions regarding their feelings of loneliness at the university. Although most students have, at some point, experienced feelings of loneliness, the ways in which they interpreted loneliness as well as how they dealt with it are diverse. Five out of six U.S. students and four out of six

international students reported feeling lonely at some point during their time at the university. Several students who had returned from studying abroad mentioned the time after returning home as a time they felt particularly lonely. Coping strategies included journaling, talking with other friends who had similar experiences, and simply giving oneself time to readjust. There existed a definite difference in the ways in which students perceived loneliness. U.S. students tended to associate loneliness with boredom. As one student said, “I think sometimes I mistake loneliness for boredom.” International students on the other hand interpreted loneliness as isolation. One student shared:

It’s a weird kind of loneliness because you’re never really on your own when you have roommates. It’s not like you’re actually alone, but I do feel a little bit isolated sometimes because I am far a way from home. There isn’t anyone here who speaks like me. Even at the school I’m from back home, I’m a foreigner, so the other exchange students from my school don’t come from where I come from or speak like me. I guess I’d feel more comfortable if there was another person from the same place.

Another interesting finding in regards to international students is that in some cases technology increased feelings of loneliness. Two students stated that they felt lonely when they received emails or facebook invitations to events back home. They realized they were missing out on the party or event and felt lonely as a result.

When students felt lonely, the most common action was to seek out social interaction in some way, be it calling someone on the phone or actually spending time with other people. One student in each group preferred not to be with people when they felt lonely. Other tactics included “distracting” or “preoccupying” oneself with homework, movies, or television. One international student spoke about the importance of her relationship with her exchange student advisor. She said:

People from the CIE [Centre for International Education] are good people, and those are the ones that really make me feel at home. I know if I have a big problem, I know I can go and talk to them even though I'm not a talkative person. It's good to know that I have someone I can talk to.

Although an administrator proved helpful for this student when she felt lonely or during times of need, on the whole, students felt uncomfortable turning to faculty or administrators when they felt lonely. They named age difference and power structure as the main reasons. One student referred to her relationship with professors as "businesslike," and she felt more comfortable associating with her "colleagues," or classmates. On the other hand, all of the students in both groups identified at least one faculty member or advisor that has influenced them academically or personally. Just as the student mentioned, "it only takes one or two people to make you feel comfortable in a place." Several international students also perceived professors as some of the more "open" and "respectful" individuals they had come across in the United States.

Social Networks

Participation in the buddy program did influence students' perceptions of the formation of social networks. International students had a stronger perception of the buddy programs influence on their social networks than U.S. students possessed. In fact, four of the six international students recognized the buddy program's influence, while only one U.S. student mentioned it has having an impact on social networks. Formation of social networks was also the most significant way in which students perceived participation in the buddy program to contribute to any of the three factors, especially for

international students. Not only did they form relationships with their own buddies, they also formed relationships with other students' buddies.

My experience in the buddy program was kind of odd because I haven't actually met my buddy, but the first American I met was at the airport, like getting my luggage, and I hear this guy with a German accent talking to an American girl, so I was like, "Are you an international student at UT?" And he said, "yeah I just got here." So, Cindy, the girl was like, "Are you an international student, too? Fantastic, I'll give you a ride, too!" She was Tim's buddy, but I totally stole her as my buddy too. So, despite the fact that I never actually met MY buddy, Tim's buddy was incredibly useful and helpful and everything in every single way and went above and beyond the call of being an international buddy. I still hang out with her all the time. She cooks amazing food, so tomorrow we're getting a bunch of people together and she's going to cook dinner. So, it probably wasn't the way the buddy program was meant to work, but it totally worked, so I think the buddy program was a really good thing!

Furthermore, the U.S. buddies introduced their international buddies to their friends, which in turn, expanded international students' social networks. One international student became quite close with her buddy's girlfriend, who then encouraged her to join the Residence Hall Committee. Through participating in this committee, she was able to meet even more people and form relationships with those individuals. These examples demonstrate a couple of the ways in which participation in the buddy program helps contribute to international students' social networks.

Four students mentioned the word "buddy" when talking about the individuals with whom "they spend most of their time." For one student, her relationship with her buddy was extremely influential in helping her form a group of friends as well as becoming involved at the university. She shared:

In the beginning, I was finding it really tough to be here, and he [buddy] like, saved me basically. But I think I just got lucky. He made a real effort to include me. He called me all the time, "Do you want to come out, do you need any help,

do you want me to take you places?" I think it was a bit of a two-way thing as well because he loved Swansea and I think he wants to move back to the UK at some point. And I'm from Ireland, but I lived in the UK for high school so we understand each other. We can talk about things from back home.

For the U.S. students, the buddy program was mentioned only once as a factor in forming social networks, and oddly enough, it was the buddy of the student who shared her experiences above. He talked about his experiences with his buddy.

The whole year I've gotten to interact with an Irish exchange student. She goes to the University of Northern Ireland, and I've been showing her around Knoxville and I took her home to Cleveland to show her a different perspective. I took her to the airport to get her on the plane for New York over Christmas and help her out because I know I had a lot of homesickness issues when I was abroad. I just missed certain foods, so my girlfriend and I we both really like to cook, and we're familiar with the cuisine, so we'll make fish and chips for her, or shepherd's pie. We'll go to World Market and buy different snack foods from the UK and Ireland just to help her out.

He went on to share why he thought it was important to really include his buddy and bring her into his social circle.

I think it's really important because not only does it help you communicate with people from different backgrounds, but it helps them also. It's better to give than to receive, and you're helping someone else. Hopefully they'll take their experience and pass it on, and I'll take my experience and pass it on and hopefully spread. They'll be in class and spread the idea. Maybe they're talking about democracies in Western Europe and they'll hear what I have to say about Kate [name changed] with the Irish government, because she helped me with my report on the Irish government. They'll hear first hand from a politics major in Ireland and that will hopefully help them understand and help them in other classes of international relations.

For this student, the buddy program served as a way to expand his social network as well, but he proved to be the exception in regards to the U.S. students interviewed.

Although international students perceived the buddy program as a way to form social networks, they also formed relationships through other means. As significant as

the buddy program's influence was that of roommates, who were mentioned by four students as people they spend most of their time with. Three international students mentioned classmates as part of their social networks, but one student added that those relationships were "superficial." A student from France brought up her perception that Americans have a different view of friendship than she expected. There was the sense that perhaps they do not take it as seriously. She stated, "You can make friends one day and then the next day you can see those people again and they might not even look at you."

Both groups mentioned the same three types of social networks, but they were rated in a different order of significance. The most significant means of forming social networks for U.S. students in this study were through classes. Four of the six students interviewed said they spent the majority of their time with classmates. In addition, two named roommates as the basis of their social group. Again, complexities emerged as one student discussed how her friend group has expanded over the years and included people from various places. The ways in which each student forms relationships is intricate and unique to that individual, but one subtle theme that surfaced is the importance of time in creating complex social groups. For international exchange students who are only here for one semester or year, time is limited and they must therefore depend on programs like the buddy program, whereas U.S. students with already established social networks do not.

Despite differences in the ways in which students form social networks, the types of social activities in which they participate are similar. Among the activities that

students in both groups enjoy include going to the movies, hanging out at houses or apartments with friends, going to clubs or bars, cooking dinner, and going on road trips. One activity that was a bit unexpected was eating lunch together. Several students mentioned meeting friends for lunch on campus, and one student even said that she wished there was a common lunch hour at the university.

Even with such similarities, several international students still found it difficult to forge meaningful relationships with Americans. Five of the international students perceived many Americans as disinterested in getting to know them. One student shared:

The biggest thing that shocked me here is that the Programs Abroad Office makes such an effort to get us in here, and American students really aren't that interested, unless you speak a foreign language and you can help them. So, I guess they're just not as interested in learning the culture or learning your way of life.

When asked how it made her feel that American students did not seem as interested in getting to know her, a student from Australia responded:

Yeah, a bit cut! We're interesting! People should want to learn about us! When I hear people back home who are by themselves and talking with an accent, I go and talk to them because it's really valuable to have international friends and I really value it. And I would've thought that in Knoxville, where it's not a big interesting city, it's not New York, it's not very multicultural, so I thought people would have had a more active interest in wanting to learn, especially, maybe not about me, but just about Australia in general. Most people say, "That's really interesting. I want to go there someday." But that's it. So yeah, it makes you feel a bit...disappointed. That I thought people would be more interested. Maybe it's just me, maybe I give off a bad vibe. Sometimes the girls go straight to the guys with the Australian accent...they hit it off pretty quick!

International students, for the most part, did find American students who have studied abroad to be more interested in getting to know them and their culture, perhaps due to their global perspective as McCabe (1994) suggests.

After presenting the findings, the answers to the research questions become clear. In short, participation in the buddy program does not significantly influence students who have studied abroad and international students' perceptions of a sense of belonging, lack of loneliness, and formation of social networks. Participating in the program had the greatest influence on international students' social networks, and in fact, the influence for several students was crucial to their integration into the university. Although Cheng (2004) suggests that all three aspects are related, students in this study did not connect the three elements of community. A sense of belonging was associated with formal organizations that exist on campus as well as academics. Social networks, on the other hand were interpreted as much more informal groups, and students did not suggest that informal social networks directly created a sense of belonging. Feelings of loneliness had a subtle tie to social networks. Some students felt lonely when they were physically alone, although other students attributed loneliness to something else. Some students felt lonely, or bored, when they had to study, and others approached the feeling as natural, yet somewhat indescribable. The majority of students did recognize that when they felt lonely, they often sought the company of friends.

Therefore, the ways in which the buddy program contributed to the three factors is limited to social networks, and for some students, feelings of loneliness. International students in particular claimed to enhance their social networks through their own buddy, their buddy's friends, and on occasion through other international students' buddies. One student's entire social network was built through her buddy, and thus, participating in the buddy program was incredibly influential for her.

Although they were participants in the same program, students who had studied abroad and international students had different perspectives on the program's influence. U.S. students associated a sense of belonging with academics more than international students. Since U.S. students have had the opportunity to take numerous classes within a specific major, they felt a stronger sense of belonging through their major and academic pursuits. All students, though, did recognize the importance of involvement in feeling accepted within the campus community. Another difference in perception has to do with way in which students interpreted feelings of loneliness. U.S. students who had studied abroad associated loneliness with feeling bored, while international students labeled loneliness as feeling isolated. Isolation is clearly a stronger negative feeling than boredom, and thus, one can infer that international students in this study have stronger feelings of loneliness. Lastly, international students perceived a much stronger influence on their social networks as a result of participating in the buddy program than did U.S. students, although both groups of students perceived social networks as informal groups.

In Chapter Five, the researcher will provide discussion, conclusions and further suggestions regarding the results.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Although Chapter Four answered the research questions proposed, the findings also brought forth several important implications that must be discussed. Since students did not seem to perceive that participation in the buddy program influenced their sense of belonging, feelings of loneliness, and social networks, it can be inferred that they also did not perceive the buddy program to influence their sense of community. Students instead perceived communities as having formal, academic ties to the university, two components that the buddy program lacked. Students also perceived a disconnect between social and academic aspects of the university. Overcoming this perception is important in helping students create stronger communities. The researcher will provide recommendations for the buddy program as well as future research studies.

Students viewed communities as formal, academic entities. In order to feel a sense of belonging, students suggested a need to connect to academics. U.S. students felt a stronger sense of belonging because they connected to academic organizations, and they also formed close groups with other students in their majors. International students lacked the time necessary to build strong academic ties, and thus, felt less accepted into the university. International students, therefore, felt a weaker sense of belonging because that crucial academic element was missing for many of them. Despite the buddy program's influence on international students' social networks, that in itself was not enough for international students to feel a part of a community. In order to truly feel connected, they sought something deeper. For some students it was involvement in an

academic organization, or for others they desired a more clear and visible connection between social and academic, informal and formal communities. They also sought a greater interest from U.S. students.

It seems positive that students sought academic ties in feeling a sense of community on campus. Universities are, after all, places where learning should take place, but the grave distinction between academic and social pursuits on campus suggests a problematic lack of cohesion as well. In fact, it goes against what student affairs administrators are trying to achieve. As was outlined in *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, student affairs as a profession has called for “transformative education,” or the “holistic process of learning that placed the student at the center of the learning experience” (2004, p. 1). Students’ tendency to divide social and academic aspects of belonging represents the divide that occurs in learning as well. *Learning Reconsidered* discusses the integration of academic learning and student development, something that students did not perceive occurred at this university.

As *Learning Reconsidered* (2004) suggests, “Both members of the academic faculty and student affairs educators must be prepared to assess and change their work” (p.13). If greater collaboration existed between academic and student affairs, two results would occur. First, more students, including international students, would have the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging to communities with academic components, and thus to the university as a whole. Second, students would be less likely to make internal distinctions between the academic and the social and would therefore feel a stronger sense of community.

In order to make the buddy program more effective in helping students form communities, several changes should take place. Academic ties must be strengthened, but at the same time, opportunities must exist for students to connect social and academic learning. Determining and assessing clear student learning outcomes in the buddy program is one way to encourage integration of social and academic and to create stronger communities. Students may have the opportunity to learn through “action, contemplation, reflection, and emotional engagement” by participating in the buddy program, but they need more guidance to be able to do so (*Learning Reconsidered*, 2004, p. 11). Both groups of students would benefit from having more guidance in the program. By providing U.S. students with sample questions to ask their buddy or examples of activities in which they can participate, U.S. students would demonstrate a greater interest in international students while also having the opportunity to learn. Although the students were given a clear statement of what was expected from them, there was not much opportunity to follow up on these expectations. Furthermore, it is important to ask the students, “What do *you* expect out of the program?”

The second challenge to tackle is determining ways in which academic ties could be strengthened in the program. As the students in this study suggested, increasing learning opportunities would allow them to feel a greater connection to the university and thus feel a stronger sense of community. As several students mentioned, eating lunch together is one social activity they wish they had more time to enjoy. One suggestion for the buddy program is to facilitate small lunch groups to occur on a regular basis. The groups would be formed based on academic interest, so students would have the

opportunity to discuss academic issues that are important to them. The regular lunch meetings would bring some formality to the program as well. Student affairs administrators cannot simply assume that the desired learning is taking place in the programs they design and facilitate. Instead, administrators must make an intentional effort to incorporate learning exercises into programs.

For internationalization to occur, it becomes particularly important for social and academic cohesion to exist. One student in this study seemed to “get it” in terms of connecting social and academic learning. He formed a relationship with his buddy and utilized the relationship in order to achieve greater understanding, not only of her, but also about her home country. In addition, he intended to share what he learned from his buddy with other students in the classroom. This particular student and his buddy also felt a stronger sense of community than any of the other participants in this study. Hopefully, by strengthening the buddy program with more academic and social integration, more students will “get it.”

Based on the results of this study, several ideas for future studies have emerged. Of course, any changes in the buddy program would require further studies to determine their effectiveness. It would also be useful to further explore the concept of students’ perceptions of community in order to determine other factors that may be missing. Cheng’s (2001) framework provided a good starting point, but his three factors are not exhaustive. Although much literature exists on learning communities, international learning communities are one area where more studies could take place. Furthermore,

the link between students' perceptions of learning and communities should be studied in more depth.

Although the study did not necessarily bring forth the anticipated results regarding communities on campus, the results it did produce were no less useful or important. Students' perceived disconnectedness between social and academic interests on campus suggests the grave need for student affairs administrators and faculty alike to work even harder to integrate the two areas. Programs like the buddy program and others like it can be effective in helping students form communities, but students must be able to make the connection between academic and social learning in order to form meaningful communities. It is up to administrators and faculty to change students' perceptions and ensure that holistic learning is taking place.

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APPENDIX

Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Do you feel comfortable at this institution?
2. Do you feel accepted as part of the campus community? Is there a smaller community of which you feel a part?
3. Have you ever felt lonely at this institution?
4. When you feel lonely, what do you do?
5. Would you feel comfortable turning to faculty? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. Whom do you spend time with?
7. What do you do?

VITA

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