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# AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
AT ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY**

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Based on research conducted for the course Anthropology 302, *Ethnography*.  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Illinois State University  
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## INSTRUCTOR'S INTRODUCTION

This project is the result of student research conducted for my Anthropology 302, Ethnography, course. The objective of Anthropology 302 is to provide students with hands-on training in ethnographic methods and writing and to help them become critical readers of ethnographic research. Ethnography refers to both a kind of qualitative research methodology and (perhaps more appropriately) to the final writing product that results from such research endeavors. Ethnographic research is the hallmark of socio-cultural anthropology, but is extensively used in many disciplines. Ethnographic fieldwork often involves participant-observation and interviews, often in some sort of local context, involving relatively small numbers of research participants. The purpose of ethnographic research is usually to learn how members of a community make sense of their own community and its relationships with other people, communities, and institutions. Ethnographers usually enter the “field” to figure out “what is going on” in some particular social environment.

Since 2006, I have affiliated this course with the Ethnography of the University Initiation (EUI, [www.eui.uiuc.edu](http://www.eui.uiuc.edu)) which is based at the University of Illinois. EUI is a research agenda and a pedagogical community that fosters student ethnographic and archival research on the university as institution. Each Fall, I ask students in my 302 course to investigate some aspect of the university for their semester projects. Assigned readings for the course introduce issues of research ethics, project design, ethnographic writing and representation, and provide examples of ethnographic research. Then we discuss a small selection of techniques (field note taking, participant observation, interviewing) that are most likely to be useful and relevant to students' semester projects. This semester our focus has been the international student experience at ISU.

This focus came about in early meetings of the organizing committee for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual International Conference at ISU, during which members expressed interest in gaining a student perspective on international students and study abroad. The idea of holding focus groups with students was considered. I was a member of the committee and knew I would be teaching Ethnography in the fall 2013. I volunteered to organize my class to examine international students and study abroad. The focus narrowed to international students early in the semester and students began to consider specific questions to consider.

Last summer, the strategic planning committee conducted a brief survey with international students and faculty. Results of that survey provided some of the questions for student inquiry. Other questions came from our readings. In true ethnographic fashion, our questions evolved throughout the study. Students recorded notes from fieldwork on the course website and periodically summarized their findings. I have pieced together elements from student writing to form the following report. Our results here preliminary. They are not conclusive and do not lead easily to neat recommendations, although we venture to suggest a few at the end. The students and I presented an abbreviated version of this to campus at the International Conference on December, 6, 2013

- *Gina Hunter*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Greater numbers of international students are coming to the U.S. (IIE 2013) and many universities have stepped up their internationalization efforts. For some this means establishing campus abroad; for others, like ISU, it means increasing the numbers of foreign students we receive and domestic students we send on study abroad. It also means emphasizing an international perspective and global issues focus in the curriculum and programming (See Illinois State University International Strategic Plan). Colleges and universities need international students as the number of college-age students in the US declines. In this context, international students are an important source of tuition dollars. More importantly, the presence of international students and study abroad opportunities help prepare American students for global citizenship and a diverse work force.

Illinois State hopes to increase both the numbers of foreign students we receive and the number of domestic students we send abroad (Illinois State University International Strategic Plan). To do this, we must become a welcoming place for students and scholars from abroad; and we must motivate more Americans to take an interest other societies and in international relations

In this report we will present our research questions, methods, and findings. We describe some of our findings about the key campus units that support international students; we describe international students' perspectives on Illinois State University; and we discuss some of the barriers to international friendships. At the end, we offer suggestions on how the university can foster better cross-cultural friendships and on it can better meet the needs of the international population.

## **SCHOLARSHIP ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

Popular and scholarly literatures cite a common problem of the relative lack of integration and meaningful dialogue among foreign and domestic students (Hawke & Vaccarino 2011). The reasons for this are complex and in the context of contemporary higher education, a fairly recent phenomena.

Much of the literature on international students focuses on issues of adjustment of the foreign student to a new environment. Zhai (2012) for example, interviewed ten graduate level international students in the U.S. and found that the three main causes of stress for international students are adjusting to academic stress, cultural differences, and language barriers. However, this study suggests that the language barrier is perhaps not as stressful as academic stress or cultural differences because students expected the language barrier and communication problems to be an issue but they did not fully expect or understand the impact of academic stress, cultural differences until they arrived in the U.S. Yet this study also showed that international students viewed social integration as not so important. This study also looked at what services the international students seek and who they turn to when dealing with problems. Zhai also found that for academic and legal issues, international grad students turned to their Office of International Education, whereas for personal issues they turned to family, friends, and other international students. The students reported that although the staff for OIE were caring and helpful, they were often very busy and the international students felt almost like a burden to

them. Finally, the international students interviewed for Zhai's study recommended that the university provide an orientation for academic and cultural differences. This study was of limited use for us; the students interviewed were graduate students (older, focused on research) rather than undergraduate. We assume that social integration may be more significant a stressor for undergraduates than for graduates who are older, focused on their scholarly specialties and perhaps accompanied to the US by their families.

In a study of International Students at Toledo University (Sherry 2012), the vulnerabilities and challenges that international students faced at their university were examined. These were language issues, understanding new cultural norms, financial troubles, friendships, and lack social support. Toledo students worked to develop solutions to these issues in order to make international students feel more comfortable and desired. These solutions included: raising the profile of international students on campus, enhancing cross cultural understanding, increasing tuition cost help and scholarship opportunities, condoning positive relationships between internal students and other students, and establish social clubs (2012:44-45). These were just some of the many recommendations they named. One value of this study is the emphasis on how the university can intervene in effective hosting of international students rather than simply focusing on the "adjustment" of international students to the campus environment.

Interestingly, another study compared how international students in Australia encountered university groups and community religious organizations—both of which had programs for international students. Examining the experience of mostly East Asian international student at a university in Melbourne, Ruth Fincher (2011) found that students encountered university and church group expectations of them. The university expectations were for the cross-cultural interaction and global cosmopolitanism; church groups expected devoutness and reinforced identification of ethnic groupings. Church groups were more effective at engaging students with their own expectations. Fincher notes, churches "offer a particular mix of social and spiritual resources that helps to relieve the mental injuries of newcomer status" (2012) universities are less directive in their methods of achieving integration. This points to the need for universities to be more directive in their integration efforts if they wish to fully engage international students on their campuses.

Most of the literature we found on international students deals with the adaptation of the international students. Much of this is written by and for Student Affairs professionals. There is relatively little qualitative research on international and American student friendships. In the U.K., anthropologist Lorraine Brown has pioneered ethnographic studies of international students on British campuses (Brown 2009).

The example of one such study that I will now discuss is titled 'The Impact of International Students on Domestic Students and Host Institutions'. In this study, international students expressed frustrations at not making friends with domestic students. They found that international students expected the domestic students to be more welcoming and interested in them while the domestic students felt it was the international student's responsibility to talk to them because they were the visitors. Also, they found that the language barrier was one of the key reasons why international and domestic students did not interact. Finally, the study also found that individuals of the same nationality (co-nationals) tend to form tight-knit groups that can exclude other people, and inhibit the formation of cross-cultural friendships.

Finally, we benefited from some research conducted at ISU on international students. Last summer at ISU, the strategic planning committee conducted a study of international student,

faculty and scholars. Some of the findings, presented to us by subcommittee chairperson and Interim Dean of Milner Library, Dane Ward.

Additional previous research at ISU in the form of a student project (Wasowicz 2008) explored the relationship between American and international students when I-House was located in the Atkin-Colby residence hall in 2008. He conducted several interviews with international students and administrators and found that on the whole, while I-House is a very tight community, Americans are rarely a part of that community. The interviews indicated that this in part can be attributed to the fact that many of the Americans expressed little interest in learning about the cultures of the international students and therefore did not try to interact with them very much.

## **OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

We started out by making our own assumptions clear. Each student wrote out his/her own assumptions about international students. Two initial assumptions stand out in hindsight.

- 1) that language barrier would be the principle obstacle to social interaction; and
- 2) that international students would be experiencing significant culture shock and homesickness and would have trouble “fitting-in.” Our findings did not substantiate these initial assumptions.

Based on our literature review and our initial data gathering efforts our research questions became:

- What are international students’ experiences of ISU and the Bloomington-Normal Community? Specifically we asked,
  - o How do students feel about support from faculty and staff;
  - o What are Students’ academic expectations and experiences;
  - o What do students say about Language barriers
  - o What are the pros and cons of living on-campus and in I-House;
  - o What are International students’ adjustments to campus dining?
- How can ISU better meet the needs of international students?
- How can ISU promote friendships/interactions between international and domestic students?

## **METHODS**

This report is based on 30 interviews of international students, three interviews with American students, and four staff members who work in the key campus units, namely: The Office of International Studies and Programs, I-House, ISU Dining Services and the English Language Institute (ELI). (See chart below).

Students also conducted several hours of participant observation by being conversation partners, ie holding weekly 1-hour session with English language learners through the English Language Institute (ELI). One student in the course has live in I-House for three years and had many observations to contribute. Other observations took place and Study Abroad and International events on the ISU campus.

<b>Interviewer</b>	<b>Interviewee Sex/Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Resides in I-House?</b>	<b>Other Info</b>
<b>Gina</b>	Female, 22	USA	Y	ISU Student and International Assistant on I-House
<b>Gina</b>	Male	USA	N, but is Director	Matt Schwab (Staff)
<b>Kayleigh</b>	Male, 26	Brazil	Y	None
<b>Kayleigh</b>	Female, 22	Japan	Y	Lived in U.S. for a few years as a child
<b>Kayleigh</b>	Female, 21	USA	N	Founder of Crossing Borders Mentorship Program
<b>Kayleigh</b>	Male, 19	USA	N	Member of C.B.
<b>Kate</b>	Female, 25	Brazil	Y	ELI Student
<b>Kate</b>	Female, 40's	Russian/American	N	Director of ELI
<b>Antony</b>	Female, 21	France	Y	Graduate Student
<b>Antony</b>	Male, 21	France	Y	Graduate Student
<b>Antony</b>	Male, 24	Brazil	Y	ELI Student
<b>Antony</b>	Female, 19	Japan	Y	Undergrad seeking actual degree
<b>Jarrett</b>	Male, 23	Brazil	Y	ELI Student
<b>Jarrett</b>	Male, 23	Brazil	Y	ELI Student
<b>Jarrett</b>	Male, 24	Brazil	Y	ELI Student
<b>Jarrett</b>	Female, Late 30's	American	N	ELI Teacher
<b>Jarrett</b>	Female, 40's	American	N	ELI Director
<b>A.J.</b>	Female, 21	Brazil	Y	None
<b>A.J.</b>	Female, 21	Japan	Y	None
<b>Natalie</b>	Male, 24	Germany	Y	None
<b>Natalie</b>	Female, 23	Brazil	Y	Completed ELI over the summer
<b>Natalie</b>	Male, 23	Brazil	Y	Completed ELI over the summer
<b>Nolan</b>	Male, 22	Brazil	Y	ELI Student
<b>Ashley</b>	Male, 21	Brazil	Y	Undergrad Student
<b>Ashley</b>	Female, 23	Japan	Y	Undergrad ELI Student
<b>Ashley</b>	Male, 40's	Sierra Leone	N	Graduate Student
<b>Adam</b>	Male, 25	Germany	Y	Undergrad Student
<b>Adam</b>	Female	USA	N	Food Services
<b>Adam</b>	Female	USA	N	International Services
<b>Adam</b>	Female, 22	Brazil	Y	Undergrad Student



Additionally, we benefitted from guest speakers who met with our class: including Dr. Dane Ward (Interim Dean of Milner Library and member of the International Strategic Planning Committee), Matt Schwab (I-House Director), and Dr Frank Beck (from the Stevenson Center) We shared our notes and findings on our ReggieNet course site.

To learn about the International student experience on campus we had to learn about the history and role some key campus units, namely The Office of International Studies and Programs, the International House, and the English Language Institute.

### **WHERE DID WE FIND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS?**

In setting out to examine the international student experience at ISU, we first had to become familiar with key campus units. In particular, we examined the Office of International Studies and Programs, the I-House, and the English Language Institute There is little written history of International students at Illinois State. University Archives has no international student collection and what primary documents do exist are housed in boxes in the I-House Office.

#### **Office of International Studies and Programs**

A student task force on internationalization at ISU in 1968 called for the establishment of an Office of International Studies and Programs to facilitate study abroad. The Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) was established in 1971. It soon incorporated the existing Office of International Student and Scholar Support and began to handle almost all international matters for the university including international and domestic students with immigration/travel, international educational programs, and cultural events. Today OISP helps international students arrive, set up an academic program, and adjust to the new culture they are experiencing. OISP is the face of ISU abroad and the first resource for international students on campus.

Through OISP we learned a little of the history of history of International students on our campus. According to OISP records, ISU had few international students prior to 1965 -- Less than 12 per year. These numbers increased dramatically in the 1970s, and again in 2000.

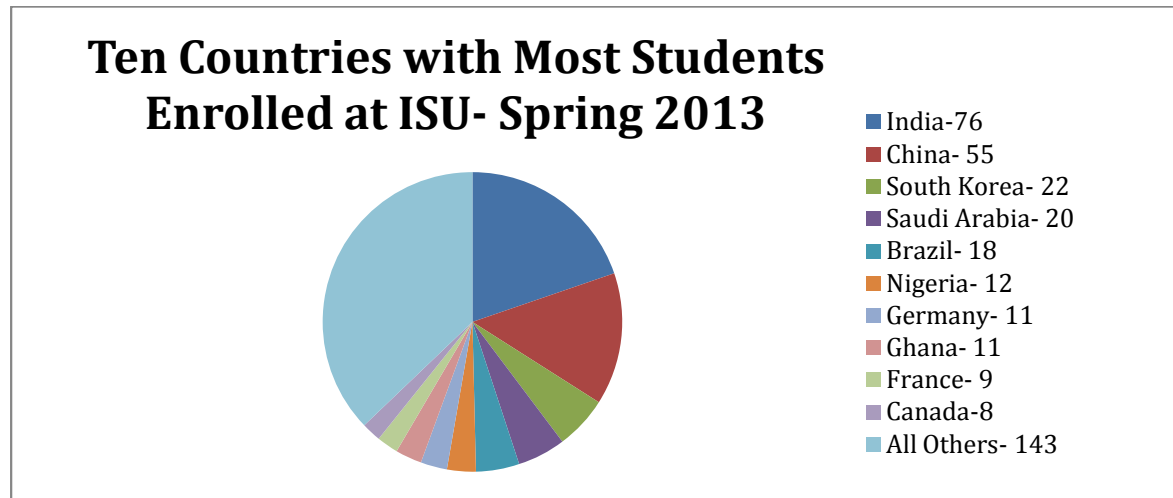
Selected Years	# Int'l Students	#Stu. Abroad
To 1962	< 12	-
1962-63	12	-
1966-67	34	-
1967-68	70	-
1969-70	123	-
1970-79	210 to 267*	215 (1978)
1979-80	317	250
1980-89	282 to 347*	158 to 363*
1990-99	329 to 395*	241 to 359*
2000-01	480	-

\* per year

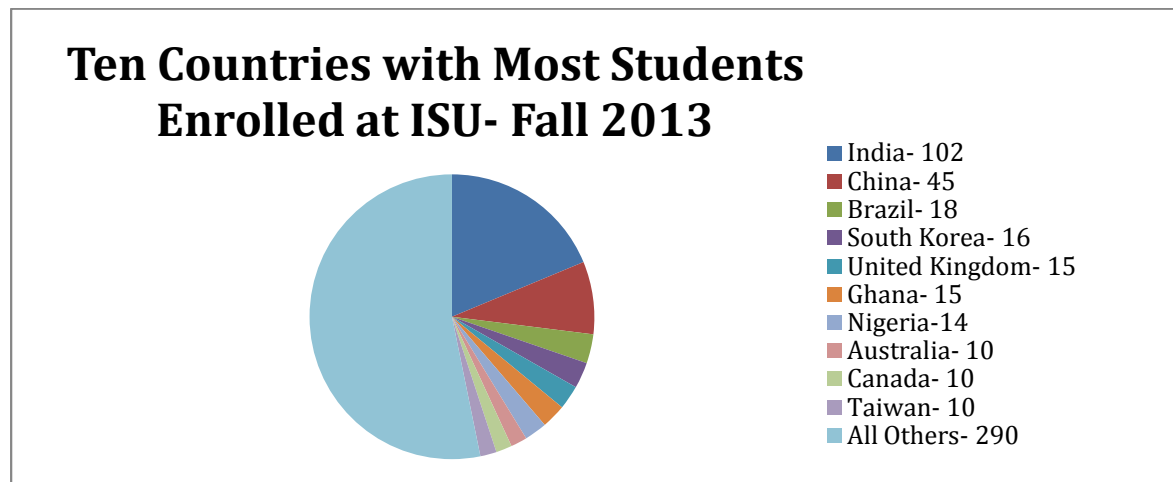
Source: Compiled from records from OISP Office.

We do not have data for years between 2001 and then present, but nationally we know that numbers of international students declined post the September 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. Numbers of international students however have increased again in recent years.

During the spring 2013 semester there were 385 students from 69 different countries.



During the fall 2013 semester there was a rise of 160 students to 545 international students from 68 different countries.



In the cases of both semesters, India and China were the two countries with the most students attending classes at ISU. The other countries with a large number of students were South Korea and Brazil. Saudi Arabia was in the top ten countries with the most students in the spring semester but had more than half of their numbers leave before the Fall semester. According to Stephanie Gonzalez, (International Student and Scholar Advisor), the countries that send the most students to ISU are usually India, China, South Korea, and Brazil. This also tends to be the national trend, putting ISU right on par with other universities in the United States.

## International House

### *A Themed Learning and Living Community*

I-House (International House) was established in 1972. It was nationally unique because it was the only university-sponsored on campus residence hall for international students (Illinois State University 1972: 48) Residence halls for international students on other colleges and universities were off campus and usually funded by a private foundation.

I-House was viewed as being a major point to the campus as it brought international students together with one another as well as with American students. Residence Director, Peter Paiton, claimed that, “these students need a situation which allows them to be in contact with other international students and American students, who will take the time and interest in helping them adjust to American customs”(1972:48) With this quote we see that I-House was clearly a major part of the campus for the university. The Residence Director did not want the international students to be living off campus in fear that they would segregate themselves or be forced into segregation. He wanted the American and international students to interact with one another. ISU already had a mission to diversify their campus and I-House was meant to play a lead role in reaching this goal happen. Paiton, thought that, ”To have international students scattered all over the campus would render them ineffective as contributors to the learning process” (1972: 48) showing that even in the beginning of I-House, international students were seen as a key contributors to the global education of our campus.

Today, I-House is being re-defined refer to the whole international student community, but the term is still most associated with the Themed Living and Learning community and lounge located now in Manchester Hall. Currently there are 95 international students and 15 American students living in I House. There are 3 International Assistants. Some international students, including international athletes, live in other dorms.

An observation of I-House from a student-researcher:

*My observations during our time in Manchester were quite different than what I anticipated seeing. I thought that there would be many more people interacting with each other, or at least being out and about. As previously stated, there were only two students in the I-House, and we only saw two students on the international floor. Yet more surprising than this to me was the environment of the international floor; when I used to have many international friends that I would visit on the same floor a little over a year ago, there would always be people out in the halls talking or joking around, perhaps cooking food in the small microwave area, or in each others' rooms playing music or just spending time together. Yet on this visit to the international floor, we saw hardly any students, there were no room doors left open, and the floor was silent. This led me to question what had caused this change, or if it was more in the timing of my visit at 4 in the afternoon on a Tuesday that made such a difference in my experience.*

I-House continues to play a very important role on campus. I-House is a crucial part of the international student experience. I-House provides International Students with a ready-made community, an American Studies curriculum, and International Assistants who can help them transition to life on campus. I-House balances academics and student affairs—making sure the

international students have opportunities to experience American things (i.e. ice skating, field trips to historical cities, etc.)

I-House also plays a role for American students who choose to live there in order to meet international students and learn about their cultures. One of the members of our class (Natalie Potts) has lived in I-House for three years. Her perspective was vital to our report:

*I-House provides a unique environment in that it takes students from completely different countries and cultures and puts them all into one living space. Not only does this establish social relationships across borders, it also benefits the students in the form of professional relationships and contacts that can benefit students upon returning to their home countries. Due to their shared experience and the proximity in which they live, many international students form very strong bonds with each other. These often occur between students who are from the same country but they also occur between students from completely different countries and cultures. Several romantic relationships have blossomed in I-House between students from different countries and in some cases those relationships become long term commitments that last even when the semester or year abroad ends*

*In the last several years, I-House has housed students from over 20 countries (England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Serbia, Montenegro, Morocco, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Senegal, Haiti, China, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Honduras) Put into the same environment these students bond over their shared experience of being strangers in a foreign country.*

*Constant turnover means a constant change in the dynamic of I-House. There are semesters where the dynamic works for the benefit of I-House and students bond very strongly. There are other semesters where cultural differences are an issue and conflict can ensue. In the semesters where the dynamic is positive, international students eat together, work out together, go to parties and bars together, and ultimately wind up spending most of their free time together. During the semesters where this type of bonding does not occur, there are still deep friendships ...formed, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale.*

As a supportive international community, I-House serves a number of ISU's international students very well. It provides a rich environment for international students to establish both personal and professional relationships. Given the original intent of I-House the larger goal of internationalizing our campus the presence of American students is vitally important.

Many international students have voiced a desire to have American roommates. They believe it is a lot easier to get to know someone if you live with them as they have found out from their roommates from other countries. During any given semester, the number of American students living in I-House varies but in recent years it has been relatively low (~10). Some live in I-House because they have a desire to have an international experience while still attending ISU; others because it will look good when written on a resume; and others because desire an exposure to other cultures. For any of these American students, I-House can be a wonderful home if they are open to it.

We wondered why more American students are not paired with international students. When speaking with Matt Schwab, the International House Coordinator, we found out that the reason it is so difficult to pair international students with American students is because the University has to guarantee spots for international students coming here through various programs. This means that it is infinitely easier for international students to be placed in an international dorm instead of trying to put aside a determined number of spots in each domestic dorm because there is no way of telling how many international students will apply or be accepted to Illinois State each year.

We believe that have more students living in I-House would be beneficial for International students as well as for the larger campus. However, in many cases, placing American students randomly in I-House, is problematic. Occasionally this happens for many reasons. There have been semesters in I-House where there are not enough international students coming to fill all the rooms that are available. When this happens, those rooms must be filled by Americans students, many of whom had no desire to be there and have no interest in learning about or learning from other cultures and countries. It serves no purpose if American students who live in I-House who do not seek to interact with international students and either keep to themselves, or only associate with other Americans.

When asked about their relationships with American students who live in I-House, several international students stated that some American students who live there to make the effort to get to know international students and establish friendships, but there are many American students who live on the very same floor who they have never even spoken to. Despite this separation, these same international students state that the most interaction that they get with American students it through the ones who live in I-House because outside of I-House, there is very little. This is one of the major problems that we turn to at the end of this report.

### **Registered Student Organizations (RSO)**

Closely related to I-House are a number of student organization meant to assist in the social life of students. These registered student organizations (RSOs) are, outside of ELI and I-House, the places where international students make friends and find people who share common interests.

United International Association is an umbrella organization for international student groups on campus. The United International Association or UIA replaced the International House Student Association in 2007. It is an RSO ran by students who make programs to share the cultures of I-House to their peers and the community around them. A challenge to the goal of international-American interaction is that UIA and other RSOs are student-run (thus semester to semester sustainability is challenged) and the student leaders are international students. With only international students creating these groups it means that there is little communication with American students who may not know these groups exist and who may not have any obvious reason to join. As researchers, we students, had little knowledge of events brought up by in interviews with our international students.

Conversation hours and interest-based clubs – such as the Capoeira Club—present opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. (Although ELI always needs conversation partners we student researchers were not aware of this opportunity until it was presented as an option in this course.) Here, we think it is important to mention one RSO, called International Talk Time, which advertises as a conversation club for international students. This RSO also has a Christian

mission - The purpose of their group is to “Share Christ’s Love with International Students”. Their constitution states that they have religious affiliations and that “An individual may be excluded from participation if he/she fails to promote the purpose of the organization.” However, this mission was not overtly advertised (during ISU FEST on the Quad) and thus the purpose of the RSO could be misleading to international students. The literature on faith-based organizations shows that they can be very powerful facilitators in international student adjustment but we think this mission should be clear.

Finally, we think that one RSO, the *Crossing Borders Mentorship Program*, holds particular promise for facilitating integration of international students on campus. Crossing Borders pairs international and domestic students based on interests and what they would like to experience or share. It is now merged with an older program through OISP and I-House called the Buddy Program. We discuss it further below.

We turn now to look at a final area where we encountered international students, the English Language Institute (ELI).

### **English Language Institute**

ELI is an institute on campus that is dedicated to teaching English and meeting the language needs of international students at Illinois State University. There is not a lot of historical information regarding the ELI, but one student was able to gather some from an interview with current ELI Director, Kasia Stadnik. ELI began when, in 1987, a large grant was provided to develop the English Language Institute (ELI). The first group of international students who came to the English Language Institute were from Costa Rica. These students came on money from a government federal grant.

There is a common misconception regarding the international students who study at the ELI as not being Illinois State University students. The fact of the matter is that the students who study at the ELI are Illinois State University students, but they are different from traditional ISU students in the sense that they are not in a degree program while they are at the ELI. The international students who study at the ELI cannot study at in degree programs at ISU because their English is not good enough and that is why they are at the ELI. The ELI wants for the students to have the English proficiency necessary to be ready and able to study at ISU in a way that is successful. They do not want the students “being tossed into the deep waters”, as the director of the ELI phrased it.

According to the ELI director, students study at the ELI for three reasons: one is that most students are typically interested in academic career of some sort; the second are those who come and improve their English because they own a business and they need to improve relationships with customers; and the third are those who want to learn English for their own satisfaction. In order for students to study at any university in the country the students must be proficient in the English Language. They reach this goal through the Intensive English Program. Students take 20 hours of classes per week. All of the classes are class based on English as a second language. There are three ways that programs divide up their classes: skill, themes, or tasks. The ELI divides their classes into skill areas. The students perform 5 hours of reading and writing, 5 hours of speaking and listening, 2 hours of grammar, 2 hours of vocabulary, 2 hours of current events, 1 hour of academic lecture class where a professor from the university comes and speak without modifying their speak and the students have to practice taking notes, 1 hour of topics in English where students/department workers from the campus come and share what all

students need to know about campus. This really stood out to me because you can see one of the ways that the ELI is trying to get the international students integrated before they move on to studying at the university. The final skill they perform is 2 hours of tutorials where the groups are in sizes of 2-4 students where they practice more speaking. The ELI director pointed out that is very difficult to teach and learn English in large groups so they give them this hour to be in small groups and really converse with one another.

The ELI is seen as an extremely beneficial element of the international student experience at ISU. As the student quoted here states:

*I love the ELI! I love the ELI... Love it. Yes, they are a very good people to work with. Yes, the teachers at ELI are very caring! They are always asking if you are ok, if you are sick, if you are homesick, if you are having problems.... They just care about us. The way they teach is good, too, because they have different methods for different students. They see that we do not all learn the same way, ya know? They want for us to learn to speak English so that we can stay here and go over to the ISU and study classes there."*

ELI is a doorway into ISU for some students. As stated previously, most of the students come here with an academic goal, which is to study in a degree program at ISU. In order to do this, the students have to be able to speak English at a proficient level, and that is what the ELI helps them accomplish. Through the Intensive English Program, the ELI provides reading, writing, speaking, and grammar tools. to prepare the students for being at ISU One student said that "[ELI teachers] emphasize to us how important it is that we learn these English. They give you lots of work because they know that practices is the best way to improve our speaking" The ELI is the key to the lock, which opens the door to that true, full degree program experience at ISU.

The ELI director and an international student interviewee both emphasized that language is a fundamental goal for life-long learning of many students. There are many students who intend to take the English that they learn here and continue to use it later on. As the student put it: "I want to learn the English because I know it will stay with me and it will open many doors for me away from the ELI or the ISU. Once I learn this English good enough, the world is open to me. I can go anywhere" For this student, Language is a gateway to the rest of their life: the remainder of their education, their career they hope to have, where they want to live.

For many students, ELI is also the major way that they learn about American culture. Since international/domestic friendships seem to be lacking, it would be difficult for international students to get this knowledge about America without ELI as a source of information. Despite this commitment of IS to learn English fluently, many claim that they usually speak their native language most of the time (in I-House, etc.) because they are with other students from their culture and English is more frustrating or awkward for them to speak. One of my Brazilian interviewees explained it to me like this: "when the Brazilians spend time together they speak in Portuguese because it does not make sense to speak Portuguese when everyone is Brazilian and we speak Portuguese, so why are we talking in English?"

The Conversation Hour is a prime example of how the ELI is developing relationships among students. The conversation hour during the school day is what my ELI partner has identified as being a key player in many of her friendships. She claims that being at the ELI has helped her to form friendships that she may not have other developed. She would have thought to have mainly stuck with her Brazilian co-nationals.

Off-campus, in grocery stores, malls, and movies theaters there are many opportunities to practice English. These conversations can be difficult. Some interviewees expressed that

Americans do not want to talk to them because they look “foreign” and Americans assume they either don’t speak English well, or that even if they do, they would not be able to fully communicate (joke around, etc.) without feeling awkward.

When describing the relationship with their ELI instructors, international students spoke highly of them. The students really love their instructors, they shared a friendly bond with their teachers, certain chemistry they have not fulfilled with domestic students on campus. One researcher’s informants bragged how helpful and reliable their instructors are during this process of adapting to American culture. Their instructors helped international students with classes, interviews, even assisted in organizing resumes and business cards. Their instructors would take them on fieldtrips to Chicago, Aurora, and Springfield to visit the sites and learn about American history. Additionally, ELI faculty explain American customs such as Halloween to those who have never experience this holiday. An IS student explain their interpretation of the Saturday Night Live skit they were introduced to. “When watching about Californians, we learned the different accents, it’s so incredible. We have a lot of different accents in Brazil like this. To me it’s difficult to understand the Californians. The talks like ‘Aaaa! We from California Aaaaa!’” to me their accent is so soft, totally different from here.”

When Kate began her research, she was interested in the problems of language barriers and learning English. Talking to one of an interviewee about ELI however, she realized that she should not be only thinking about language barriers and struggle. The interviewee did not really talk about her struggles so much as her hopes for learning the English language and what it is going to bring for her. Thus Kate focused on ELI and how they shape the international student experience through their English language program.

This also led her to think about how ELI is often *front door* to the univeristy for some international students into ISU. We are happy to see in the International Strategic Plan that the important role of ELI in Internationalization is recognized. We agree that ELI, which is now in the Hudleson Building, could be given a more central place and role on campus.

## **THROUGH THEIR EYES: FOOD, ACADEMICS, AND FRIENDS**

Having reviewed three campus spaces that were important for our investigation we now turn to some of our findings about how international students experience other aspects of our campus, namely: their perceptions of food and dining, academics and faculty, and other ISU students. We pay particular attention at the end to the complex issues of friendship and discrimination

### **Food and Dining**

Last summer, in the brief survey conducted by Strategic Planning committee, results indicated that international students and scholars are quite satisfied with services, programs, and academic experiences. Overall it seems that ISU performs very well. The one area where ISU scored lower was in opinions about foods. This is interesting because, according to director of Dining Services, ISU performs well. We learned from the associate director of food service, Dianne Feasley, that ISU ranks very high in the nation for food service quality as compared to other universities. Feasley said occasionally there are students that have a hard time with the food at ISU but it is not very often. In fact, ISU ranks very high in the nation with food service quality as compared to other universities. There are also about 9000 students on the meal plans



at ISU --not everyone is going to be happy all of the time but overall everyone can find something that they like.

So, we asked international students about their food and dining experiences. The students we interviewed seemed to like the dining centers and noted that they are clean and comfortable. Many students claimed that, perhaps like American students, they were at first happy with the food options, but became tired of those foods as the semester wore on. International students living in the dorms eat mostly at the dining centers rather than being able to cook for themselves or go to restaurants often.

A South American male student, and a European male student, interviewed for this project, said that ISU did well for them. There were a few different things that they would change but that was for their own personal tastes. For example, the South American student thought the food was a bit spicier than he was used to. On the other side, the European student wished the food could be a bit spicier. The South American ate at both dining halls on ISU while the European student only at the dining center at Watterson. Both of these students, from different parts of the globe did think that the food at ISU was very good. Another aspect that was brought up by international students was not only the food, but the beverage selection and availability of the drinks. When inquired about the beverages here at ISU, it was found out that it is quite repetitive and that some new foreign drinks should be included in the university menu. A lot of drinks here contain a lot of sugar and more healthy and new options are wanted by our international visitors.

Food Services does take into account nationality, religion, and nutrition when designing the menu which has a lot of variety. A few years ago Dining Services held an Australian Food Day and served many types of foods from Australia giving the Australian students a chance to share their cuisine with the students at ISU. Although the event went over well, Dining Services has not been able to have a similar event since, although they would like to again.

Overall, we found few agreements about food at ISU—for some it's too spicy, for others it's not spicy enough. The one agreement was the perception that Americans eat and serve too many sandwiches and pizzas; and a desire for more fresh foods: *"You guys only have like sandwiches and hamburgers; you don't have real food here. When you go out, it's all the same. I, I really don't know. I'm loving everything here, except the food."*

Scholarly studies on this subject have shown some interesting things. Ruetzler (2012) found that students who have been in American universities, like ISU, for less than a year tend to like the food better. Those that have been in the U.S. for more than a year are the ones that seem to like American food less.

Another study, by Lorraine Brown (2010), found that graduate students at a university in the UK adapted to British food by bringing their own cooking spices and ingredients with them or had them sent in by family members. Such adaptation is not pertinent to international students who live in the dorms, where cooking is not impossible but also not convenient. ISU's residence halls do have kitchens in the buildings for student use but it is a hassle to get the key, cook, and then clean up.

Comparing ISU with another university in our region, Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, showed that both schools offer a wide variety of foods for their respective student populations. Western Michigan University has more dining centers than ISU, approximately six to ISU's two, but the menu at WMU is just as diverse as the menu at ISU. There are things that WMU does that ISU does not. For example, a couple of the dining centers

have a carry out option. As it is understood, one can call ahead, order a meal, and then pick it up and return wherever they may choose.

Overall, ISU does very well with the international students and their dietary needs. For the most part, the international student body seems very happy and content with the foods offered at ISU and in the Bloomington/Normal, Illinois area. It hasn't seemed to negatively affect the international students in any way, but could be improved. More frequency in international cuisine and more authentic or unique choices seem to be the thing lacking in the international students' culinary experience. The quality, originality, and type of beverages and foods served could improve, but overall has been fulfilling and helpful for international students visiting ISU.

International students' food and dining expectations is a question that requires further exploration. In particular we wonder, about the larger significance of food. Perhaps homesickness is especially felt at mealtime, and foods from home are especially missed. This could be expressed as dissatisfaction and a desire of food from home.

## **Academic Experience**

We asked international students about their academic expectations and experiences. Overall, students were very satisfied with their academic experiences. Many commented that coursework and classroom structure is different here than at their home institutions and requires adjustment. Most students highly valued their education here and appreciated faculty and institutional support. Some said that compared to other schools they knew about ISU is more helpful. International students with friends attending universities in Champaign and in Missouri reportedly do not receive the same opportunities or attention as students do here. According to one student "maybe this because ISU is not a really a big university, you [teachers/staff] can pay more attention to the students, and it's really good." One student commented:

*African curriculum is much harder than here. In my country, they don't give you study guides, no access to books to everything. Their structure is based in the classrooms. It's up to you to find a book which correlates with the instructors' book. ...Plus there are no office hours, you can ask questions in the classrooms. In America, you guys have office hours and understudies [T.A.s], we don't have this.*

Another student commented:

*Professors here they are more, um, rigid and they are, people really respect them which is really good. In Brazil sometimes students are like not so cool with professors and stuff like that. And, like, the atmosphere of the class is different. When you come to classes here you want to be quiet and you want to pay attention and study.*

And another reported:

*ISU pays more attention to students than my university in back at home. The size here offers more attention, more passion it's really good. Especially towards international students, I think we need more attention because just the language to us and the culture are all different.*

We did, however, hear of a few incidents that we dubbed "faculty fails." These incidents revealed insensitivity to non-native English speakers. One international informant asked her teacher for extra time and extra help with her assignments since she had to work more slowly in English. The teacher told her just to drop the class. Another student, shy of her accent and English abilities, attempted to ask a question directly of professor by approaching him at the

front of the classroom– the teacher told her to return to her seat and ask her question in front of whole class. We do not know whether these are frequent or infrequent occurrences, but greater flexibility and sensitivity to difficulties of non-native English speakers on the part of faculty members could contribute to a more welcoming environment for our students.

## **Making Friends with American Students**

Many of our interviews focused on international students perceptions of domestic students and American culture broadly. In particular they described their disappointment at not having more American friends at ISU. We explore here some of the barriers to friendship including: Americans lack of knowledge about the rest of the world, American students' perceived lack of sociality,

### *Lack of Global Awareness*

Many of our interviews focused on international students perceptions of domestic students and American culture broadly. Some cite the general American students' lack of knowledge regarding their countries geographical location, culture, and customs etc. Many IS have been disappointed or even angry at the fact that many American's are not interested in where they came from or what they are doing at ISU. For example one of the informants gave this testimony,

*In France, many people are aware of current events both domestically and internationally, but here that is not the case. Many Americans' are just interested in sports or movies but not what is happening in the world. Americans feel that they do not need to know what is going on in the world because their country has 'everything'. I feel that America is cut off from the world.*

This ethnocentric ignorance most likely plays a large role in domestic, international student friendship formation or lack thereof, but this is not the whole story. For example, many have noticed that the Illinois State University newspaper, *The Vidette*, does not offer any world news at all or that the many TV's on campus do not have any "real" information on them, further deepening the notion of limited global awareness in the United States. Many come to the United States excited and ready for a unique experience. Most of the international students that were interviewed mentioned many things about America/Americans that they learned in their countries and/or the preconceptions they have about the United States. It is obvious that for many of these students have come from places where it was typical to have knowledge about global events and cultural customs of foreign countries, especially regarding the United States. To be sure, stereotypes about Americans abound. One student commented that: "*American's are all fat! They eat lots of fast food, watch a lot of television, never walk anywhere, they are noisy, violent, polite, and ignorant to the world*"

We think that the main detractor from positive experiences at ISU has little to do with fast-food or obnoxious behavior, rather more-so the ethnocentric paradigm that permeates American ideology. This American-wide ethnocentrism creates a level of cultural intolerance.

For instance, one student described how she was invited to speak about Brazil for a general education class, she described her home country in very positive terms. When she finished a student asked: "*if Brazil is all good things, like, 'why are you here?'*" The Brazilian student was taken aback by this rather hostile reaction to her presentation.

This is not particular to ISU. Rebecca Nathan (2004), in her study American college life, noted international students' surprise at American students' lack of curiosity about life in other

parts of the world. This disconnect was a barrier to meaningful cultural exchange and speaks to the need for greater curricular focus on global engagement as identified in ISU's International Strategic plan.

### *Politeness, not Friendliness*

There is limited scholarly research regarding friendship formation between international and domestic students, especially in the American context. Universities continue to strive to understand why there may be resistance to friendship formation between international and domestic students at various stages of development. Some scholars conclude that low interaction between international and domestic students comes from socio-cultural factors as well as a lack of institutional initiative (Hawke and Vaccarino 2011).

As a class, we spent considerable time discussing the complex notion of friendship. Too often, we wanted to resort to saying that socio-cultural factors explain the disconnect between students from any two cultures in the educational setting—which does not explain why international students appear to more easily make friends with other international students than with American students. So, what are these socio-cultural factors? We wondered: How do students from Europe or Latin America or Asia define “friendship”—is it the same as American definitions? Why is it important to acquire these friendships, and how do these newly formed cross-cultural friendships benefit either party? These questions have yet to be fully explored. Examining international students' perceptions of American students was revealing. American students are perceived as polite but distant. Politeness was contrasted with true friendliness. International students said American students are very nice—they hold doors open, say hello, but this does not seem to develop into real interaction or interest. It is just formality. They noted that American students seem to lack an interest in friendship when it comes to interacting with international students.

Many international students believe that their interactions with domestic students are not genuine because the language barrier plays a key role in Americans not wanting to interact with them. *“At social events like the fairs, especially in the quad, I want to talk to other people. I like to talk to people, I approach them first, and I approach them before they approach me.”* Many American students try to avoid the awkwardness in knowing an international student by just being polite for that moment and off to the next destination.

*I think a lot of Americans are polite, maybe someone here don't like exchange students. Maybe, to me, we can't understand things real well, talk, the way we think or the passion. The ISU instructors are friendlier than the students. But not all students, depends on the person, but almost all 'oh this guy don't talk in English, not good.' My friends, my instructors give us an opportunity to talk and have the passion to understand us.*

International students come with the hope that Americans are friendly and that making friends will be easy. This thinking often has shown to lead to disappointment. Many international students mention the shallow friendships that Americans create which exacerbates the perceived distance between Americans and International students. International students noted that even American classmates are not necessarily friends:

*I have American friends that I made in my dormitory. But, I hang out with international students a lot. ... I still could not ..really [make] friends in my classes because everybody is just cold. They don't even know each other! They don't even know their American friends ... How could they know me?*

A student from Brazil, said, *“In Brazil, everyone is very friendly, like give hugs to one another. But when I first get here I hug my resident assistant for the floor I live on in I-House and he is like so surprised. So yea, things are very different in America.”*

As mentioned here, I- House and ELI came up again as an important place for making friends (although these friendships are with other international students, not American students). On the quad and the more busy areas of campus it was more difficult to make friends. The students quoted above and others explained that it was hard to make friends with American students.

Certainly friendship involves considerable psycho-social factors. Patterns of sociality and the penetration of technology into daily life (with the consequent alteration of communication strategies) influence how friendships are made and maintains. International students have pointed out that American’s communicate often through cell phone and internet social media. This lack of actual, physical interaction between people greatly exaggerates the cultural isolation international students experience while on campus and around the community. For example, a French student noted:

*“We live with each other and we are never on our cell phone. People don’t know how to interact anymore because everyone is on your phone. Being polite is universal I thought. But people don’t do that. There is a difference in politeness. Politeness is fake here. A socio economic difference in how people express politeness. Being here has made me feel more nationalistic and made me more aware of what we have in France and what we don’t. I was thinking about getting rid of France and being in America. I miss things from back home and it has made me rethink were I want to be.”*

This is just one example, and we must attest that this quote is latent with its own ethnocentric undertones. However, if this international student notices such a degree of non-verbal cues given off by so many, than this perspective offers insight into how individuals make sense of their surroundings.

This lack of eye contact and verbal interaction undermines the initial stages of friendship development. Social networking via internet is another barrier that foreign students must overcome to break into social lives of the American students. Again, more research will need to be conducted if we are to attribute technological availability to decreased physical communication.

Even parties, however, were spoken of as a limited space for real dialogue and friendship to develop. More than one student noted that college parties are “strange” events that involve lots of alcohol. A student from Mexico described them:

*Parties here are so weird and I just don't get them; I think that they are really boring. Because everyone – I don't know, you don't have put this [down]—to enjoy a party you actually have to have some alcohol in you because if not they are like really, really, really boring. And people just, I don't know, they just stand up and they don't even talk... I don't know, they are just drinking. And then there's a point when everyone's just too drunk and if you are not, you don't have a good time. And I don't know; its just really weird.*

Alcohol is another point of disconnect and was related to a serious altercation between an American and international student this semester.

### *Language Barriers*

Although language barriers were important, our initial assumption was not entirely accurate. Friendships were not restricted to English language fluency per se. Those international students that have been interviewed have noted that American students do not openly discriminate but become uncomfortable when they hear an accent or broken English. Encountering a non-native English speaker seems to “switch off” the friendly interaction process. This is perhaps attributed to the fact that Americans may not want to make the effort to establish a connection with someone from a country they have never heard of, or as mentioned before, some Americans may not see the benefit of getting to know an international student because their cultures are so different.

Most of relationships developed between international students and Americans have to be instigated on behalf of the international students with the slight exception of those living in I-House. American students that were interviewed for this study noted that befriending an international student can be burdensome. Americans are very timely, Brazilians are often late. For someone who does not understand this, it can be very frustrating.

As a consequence of the difficulty meeting and befriending American students, we noted that many international students make friends among themselves—a pattern noted in many other countries and institutions (Brown 2009). Friendships between non-native speakers were simply easier as foreign students were “all in the same boat.” Cliques begin to form early on in the semester. One division we noted was between individuals from non-English speaking countries versus those from Western European countries with higher contact with American culture or English literacy.

International do not necessarily blame the institution. Some of the students stated that the institution is doing all it can to foster domestic relationships but that friendships cannot be forced. Even if you place domestic and international students in close proximity, there is no evidence that this will lead to immersion into the foreign culture or that lasting friendships will develop (Sherry, Thomas & Hong, 2010), as the experience of I-House has shown.

However, our discussions with students about making friends and language barriers led to an uncomfortable realization in our study—some student experience discrimination in the university and in the community.

### *Discrimination*

Contrary to our early expectations, we found that language barriers matter but are not the only, or even primary, barrier – nor are cultural parameters for engaging strangers. We encountered several examples of subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination on campus and in the community.

The international students we spoke with felt that they were more likely to be discriminated because of their accent than the way they looked. Students who looked “white” and spoke English seemed to gain considerably more and easier contact with domestic students than those who appear “ethnic” and sound foreign. Language and nationality were sometimes the basis of discrimination: As one student noted: *“before I tell them where I am from they usually treat me very good because I am foreigner. But when I tell them I’m Mexican their image changes and they treat me a different way, more distant.”*

Lee and Rice (2007) use the term “neo-racism” to express how “discrimination becomes, seemingly, justified by cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone” often language or other characteristics are the basis for exclusion. These

examples reinforce a point Lee and Rice's point that: "Not all of the issue international students face can be problematized as matters of adjustment...some of the more serious challenges are due to inadequacies within the host society" (281). Several studies we read focus on adjustment and note that responsibility is often left to the student to 'adjust' or 'adapt' to the host culture (Bevis 2002). Although the problems they face are often larger than the institution, institutions must attempt to understand and accommodate International students' unique needs. Researchers in the U.K have found (Li and Kaye 1998) that students from Asia and other developing countries experienced much greater difficulty than students from Western Europe "in the areas of language, teaching and tutoring, finances, housing accommodation, making friends, and homesickness." We found this to be the case with friendships here.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The limitations of this study are apparent in the characteristics and number of our participants. Obviously time and schedule conflicts affected the quantity of interviews we could conduct. Most of our interviewees live in I-House. These represent only 17% of the international students on campus. This is one limitation of our study. The majority of international students do NOT live in I-House—and we have little to say about their living experiences here. On the other hand, I-House is THE place where Illinois State can best fulfill its goals and mission of global learning and cross-cultural interaction. If it does not happen in I-House, there is little chance of it happening elsewhere on campus. The group of international students we interviewed offers a unique perspective on Illinois State.

Given more time, access to the contact information of every international student, and subsequent participation in the study would greatly increase our insight. Future studies might examine the complex socio-cultural factors that affect cross-cultural development is the interpretation of meaning for domestic and international individuals.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, although some of the barriers to meaningful international experiences on our campus are complex and stem from issues far beyond campus, there must be an institutional response. Some of the recommendations here have been made before or are in the strategic plan. As Ward (2001) suggests, the mere presence of international students on campus is not enough to create intercultural relationships: the institution has to take a special responsibility to foster this interaction. It is interesting that the exact strategies the study suggests to fix the problem are essentially the same as those proposed by some of our informants. First, Ward suggests that residential programs, both international - domestic roommates as well as intercultural activities sponsored by housing, can help create these friendships. Second, peer-pairing or buddy systems in classes force students to interact and would thus lead to a better learning experience for both students and create an opportunity for them to talk while relieving certain social pressures. Finally, putting international and domestic students in groups in classes or in clubs provides an opportunity for all of the students to bring new ideas and perhaps learn about each others' cultures.

In addition we can American students who do choose to interact and become friends with international students to figure out why they choose this and why other American students do not. For domestic students, we recommend increasing emphasis on intercultural competence and

communication. Encountering differences and communication barriers is sometimes awkward and uncomfortable. Faculty can encourage collaboration in courses through group work and problem solving. We can expand the focus on global issues in course curriculum and university programming. We think that the opportunities for and benefits of involvement with international students in I House and in RSOs should be expanded and promoted.

For international students, we suggest providing more comprehensive cultural information pre-arrival, and ongoing orientation sessions during the semester. There seems to be little to no cultural orientation that occurs for incoming international students. During their mandatory orientation, the international students learn about safety in the U.S., have a picnic, go ice skating, register for classes, learn about the campus, receive an I.D., and open an email and bank account. While these aspects are essential, but we think the university can take a more direct role in helping students adjust to and understand American culture so that they can feel more comfortable and perhaps have an easier time making friends with American students. The programs for international students at ISU seem to be focused at creating relationships between international students, but not so much on building relationships between international and domestic students. This goes against ISU's mission about internationalization and creating more global students. We suggest expanding the Buddy Program to pair American students with international students upon arrival to preempt co-national cliques. Finally, we can further integrate international students into courses by inviting them to share language and culture skills in foreign language and other courses.

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