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

*By Karin Fischer*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Although 27 percent said they had three or more close U.S. friends,

38 percent said they had no strong American friendships. Seventeen percent reported one such friend, while 18 percent said they had two.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ms. Gareis asked respondents who expressed dissatisfaction why they had difficulties in forming friendships. Forty-six percent blamed an internal factor, such as shyness or poor English-language

ability, while 54 percent said they hold American students responsible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**12009444** 7 hours ago

Perhaps we use the Western prism too much and we do these surveys because we think it is a bad thing that the foreign students have few friends. Sure, it would be nice if the students had more friends but I wonder if that isn't overrated. My own experience was that I preferred to work on my own and I found group work to add little value and I "survived" to go on and get my PhD.

8 people liked this. [Like](#)

**Socratease2** 3 hours ago in reply to 12009444

Well, life abroad is certainly more than just the academic experience and I don't think the focus of the article was a discussion about the value of group work in some class. Well, you may have survived but I would wager you did not thrive. A life without friendships is a diminished one. I agree that, at times, it is important to consider whether our expectations for foreign students are blinded by the tyranny of in-group cultural norms, values and behaviors. But if you can name a culture anywhere on this globe where close connections with others are not valued or important....I will still disagree. Orangutans are a rare "semi-solitary" primate but even our closest primate cousins need social affiliation.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)

**aaritz** 7 hours ago

I did conduct research on international students' adaptation process in American universities in 2004; I found that the definition of "friendship" among Asian students differed greatly from that of American students. Language was also a barrier to create friendships, it is difficult for international students to express what they want to convey when their fluency of the English language prevents them from expressing themselves and their ideas. From a personal perspective, I strongly believe that we do not stress enough cultural communication in our classrooms and thus our American students find it difficult to communicate intercultural. Faculty members, many of them unfortunately, also lack intercultural communication skills.

11 people liked this. [Like](#)**drrobin3** 3 hours ago in reply to aaritz

I agree that intercultural communication is extremely important, but it is often lacking on many college campuses. Many American professors and administrators mean well, but they may not know how to be culturally sensitive when they interact with international students. In my classes, I try to set a strong example, from the way I dress to the way I talk to my students. Still, depending on where my students are from, there may be some miscommunication. Some male students from some countries may mistakenly interpret American women's friendliness as a sexual invitation. That is an important issue that must be addressed among international students early on but not necessarily in the classroom. Furthermore, many American women dress in revealing clothing in the warmer months that is shocking to some international students. That's another issue to be addressed. A woman in shorts and a tank top is not issuing any kind of an invitation whatsoever, and that needs to be made clear. So it's a two-way street. To prevent uncomfortable, embarrassing misunderstandings, administrators need to step forward and play an active role. Plus, there should be plenty of social activities in which international students can interact with each other to fill any void they may feel socially. We don't want any students brooding alone and developing a case of depression or alienation.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)**fortysomethingprof** 2 hours ago in reply to drrobin3

"Furthermore, many American women dress in revealing clothing in the warmer months that is shocking to some international students."

Really? Even the ones who come from countries where they have TV and internet?

My experience is different. Often the international students are the ones who have to be told that what they're wearing isn't appropriate to an academic workplace.

[Like](#)**22178056** 7 hours ago

I have worked with international students on a variety of US and non-US campuses for many years, and I have observed a number of things that I don't think most people in the US are aware of when it comes to students from abroad. For one thing, international students tend to stick together rather than reach out to US students because most US students - still around 95% - have had very little experience of other cultures/countries other than trips with their families. They just don't understand what it's like to live in a foreign culture so they rarely know how to reach out to students from abroad. There are also many cultural differences that are subtle enough so that 18-22 year olds completely miss them (making direct eye contact with some African students, for example, when this is actually considered impolite in certain African cultures). Most internationals are far more sophisticated when it comes to cultural sensitivity. I've even come across residence hall applications that include a question for US students about whether or not they would "mind" living with an international student. There are still many small colleges in the US where global culture has not yet been fully embraced. I've even worked with colleagues (and I'm talking about faculty with PhDs mostly) who have 'selective hearing' that does not seem to work whenever someone has an accent. I still hear many a comment from students and staff about 'foreigners' that suggest either ignorance or resentment about having to 'deal' with people who are different. I feel sorry for many of the international students I've come to know and love over the years. They are usually very bright, full of interesting stories and skills, but unable to share with many people because so many domestic students and staff are focused on US culture entirely and their own little worlds. It's surprising in this day and age, but I guess the US is one of the most isolated countries on the planet.

19 people liked this. [Like](#)**aoberlin** 4 hours ago in reply to 22178056

One can't disagree with personal anecdotes, but I think it is important to highlight in this discussion the nuance behind the notion that there is the US and 'the rest of the world.' While it is true that one will find larger numbers of worldly folks in London, Paris, or Berlin, for example, than in any random college town in the US, these discussions often miss the salience of a) social/economic class and environment and b) the fact that there is no 'rest of the world.'

A good example of (a) is that American university students in, say, Europe, unsurprisingly will be surrounded by other university students, professors, and people with a great interest in culture, global issues, etc. However, even in cosmopolitan Europe there are many people in small towns and big cities alike with little education, little interest in global affairs and cultural differences, or both. As someone who has befriended many blue-collar workers in other wealthy countries, I have plenty of personal anecdotes as well to dispel the notion that America is uniquely or ubiquitously ignorant of other cultures or cultural differences in general.

(B) is even simpler, in that one can't directly compare the rest of the West to Africa, the Middle East, or many parts of Asia in terms of exposure to other cultures across entire societies.

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Socratease2** 3 hours ago in reply to 22178056

I would question cause and effect in some of this. Do foreigners stick together because the people in the "host" country make no effort to befriend them or is it because they feel more safe and secure within their little bubble of "home culture?" I lived in Japan for 5 years and I had many Japanese friends and did not fear trying to "go local" and experience as much about life there as possible (ok, I drew the line at buying used ladies underwear out of vending machines....I am not joking). However I knew a variety of westerners who made little effort, only hung around with British, Australian and American ex-pats and ate at McDonald's most of the time. Final interesting trivia point, when I lived there in the mid 80s, many Japanese swore up and down that McDonald's (they say "Makudonaldo") was a Japanese invention. I tried to tell them about Ray Kroc but they dismissed me and also argued America started the Pacific War.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



**dank48** 6 hours ago

This is complementary to the article a couple weeks back about Americans studying or working in certain countries that have stricter customs regarding dress, modesty, and so on than we do. Our rather studied casualness can be offensive to people in other countries and also to people from other countries.

It's important while studying the reasons people have a hard time fitting into an unfamiliar culture to focus on the difficulties inherent in the situation, without blaming the host culture or the guest individual. A salient feature of the problem of course is that it can develop into a vicious circle: unfamiliarity with language/customary behavior leads to friction which leads to stress which leads to aversion which heads off improvement in linguistic/cultural skill, and that leads to more friction, and the circle continues.

7 people liked this. [Like](#)



**cwanyonyi** 4 hours ago

The International House on the upper west-side in New York City is an excellent example of graduate residence with an exemplary program to encourage student from other countries to interact with Americans from across the USA. As an International student from Kenya, I met and made lasting friendships with people from the USA and the rest of the world. Check out their programs.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



**drrobin3** 4 hours ago

This is a good article that I hope administrators read and take to heart. It is difficult enough for American college students who speak English as their first language to get through college and have a worthwhile and meaningful social life. Imagine going through college in a foreign country and being forced to communicate and write all of your papers in a foreign language. The least we can do is reach out to our international students, especially to those from places that are very different from the U.S. culturally, and try to make their social lives less stressful and more meaningful. We should try a variety of techniques. Perhaps on a daily basis we could always have some activity or get-together for international students. These activities and get-togethers should include film festivals, ethnic dinners, field trips, sporting events, and parties. We should reach out to our international students and try to make their college years here in the U.S. happy ones so that when

they return to their home countries, they have plenty of good stories to tell and have plenty of positive memories to cherish for the rest of their lives.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



**Socratease2** 3 hours ago

In my on-going effort to encourage 'accuracy in blog titles,' why is does the title say that "many" are friendless when 62% of student respondents reported they had at least one friend??

4 people liked this. [Like](#)



**dank48** 11 minutes ago in reply to Socratease2

It says many are friendless because the number of foreign students at US colleges and universities, as of last November in the article I just googled, is about 727,000, and 38% of that is well over a quarter million. I'd say a quarter million young folks friendless in a strange country (and please don't tell me this isn't a strange country) is "many" people by most standards.

[Like](#)



**jistudents** 3 hours ago

There are several factors for international students to have a large number of American friends. Most of international students are full time students and kinda free, and American students may not be as free as foreign students. Many times, American students may not be sure of what to talk or may not be interested. Here is another article from the Journal of International Students, First Time International College Students' Level of Anxiety in Relationship to Awareness of Their Learning-Style Preferences (written by, Arlene Shorter Young) Link: <http://jistudents.org/fall-201...>

[Like](#)



**csgirl** 1 hour ago

When I was in college, in the 80's, I went to a university with a lot of international students. They had several special dorms where international students and American students were paired as roommates. I chose to live in one of those dorms. It was fantastic for breaking down barriers. I had many close friends from many countries. At the time, Iran was a big sending country, and even to this day, I feel some familiarity with that culture because I hung out with so many Iranian kids. There were lots of romantic relationships going on too - I dated a Saudi guy for a while and then had a long relationship with an Italian guy. That was pretty typical in my dorm.

I think the model worked well because the American students were ones who were open to having foreign friends, because they chose the dorm. And we had lots of internationally focused activities. Do universities not do things like that any more?

[Like](#)



**jandam** 20 minutes ago

This research can go different ways. Do foreign students really try to be befriended or are we as a nation becoming a lot more intolerant and ethnocentric? Heck, those in the north-east can barely stand those in the southeast of the USA, even among faculty. So, I am unsure about this survey.

Using Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, I would expect Asians to be more collective in their view of society as opposed to the individualism associated with westerners. Also, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, it is possible that Asians have a long-term orientation to friendship than westerners who have a short-term orientation. So, I can see how a Chinese student with a collectivist upbringing and a long-term orientation to friendship can feel lonely and unattached in the USA, where we live our lives in individualism and a short-term orientation. In short, a culture shock is almost always the case for foreigners to the USA. Again, I am unsure of this research.

Like

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