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International Community At I-House

Why Did I Begin This Study?

As long as I could remember I have had an interest in the world outside of my own. When I lived abroad in Europe I jumped head first into meeting people and trying to learn what the locals did and how they lived, I discussed international politics in the Post-9/11 world to better understand how people outside of my own culture saw the actions of my country. When I worked in jewelry, I spent hours speaking with my coworker who had grown up in Palestinian Israel about Palestinian culture, and drew on my experiences to try to understand how the cultures differ and how individuals from American culture and Palestinian culture perceived each other and the current conflict in the Middle East.

I have always had an interest in not only analyzing my own culture but also in understanding other cultures. Thus I became curious in the clash of cultures that I had read about in regards to International students studying in American. Previous research suggested that International Students were building community at I-House, but that Americans were not involved. This Ethnographic report tries to investigate how American and international students might be brought together to encourage diversity.

International House

International House, or I-House for short, is a residence block located within the Atkin-Colby residence halls at ISU. I-House is a residence area set aside for International students and American students wishing to experience other cultures, in a
safe, comfortable space.

Early interviews that I conducted with Officials at the Office of International Studies and Programs suggested that, in comparison with earlier decades, I-House was lacking a sense community. Administrators at the Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) suggested that the common spaces available to I-House were not conducive to social interaction. Administrators believe this is because the areas are designates "Quiet Lifestyle" areas.

The Research

My research consisted of five interviews; Two OISP administrators, and three International students. Through these interview I learned that there is a schism between how administrators see Community at I-House and how Students see it. As a researcher I would agree with previous research which suggests that there is a strong community at I-House, but that Americans are seldom part of that community. Personally I have noticed that the International students of I-House not only live together in close proximity, but are socially close. Trips to Chicago and St. Louis, which I initially thought to be organized field trips of loosely acquainted individuals, turned out to be organized not by my administration but by host families and groups of tightly knit international student. This suggests personal preferences on who will be associated with, suggesting a social connectedness to each other. As one interviewee mentioned, "Me and some of the other (International students) decided to go to Las Vegas."

Also I found that International students paid attention to who else I knew. On initial meetings they would seem suspicious of me, but on second meetings they would
mention, at far greater comfort, that they noticed we had a common acquaintance on "Facebook." This new found comfort might suggest that they had in fact asked our mutual acquaintances about me and that they trusted enough each other to in turn feel comfortable with me, Although this point would have to be further investigated.

These things together suggest a great deal of connectedness and social trust which, as a researcher, I feel is indicative of community.

Although there we can say that community dose exist for international students at I-House we are still left with the problem of there being few or no American students who are active members of the community.

While I-House's aim is to encourage diversity by housing International and American students together, Interviews with International students suggest that although Americans and Internationals live in close proximity, they are not developing connectedness. Why Americans are not involved is slightly beyond the scope of this report, and must be further researched. I however, I will offer a suggestion later.

By interviewing Three international students I learned that this is perceived as a problem. Outside of a few incidents, the international students that I interviewed expressed frustrations with American's lack of interest in including them in the culture.

One student mentioned that she was confused at first in that Americans would tell her that they would talk to her later, but never follow through. Another Students mentioned that he had gone to an American's party but he and the other international students quickly left when few people spoke to them.

One interviewee thought it was strange that the American Students living in I-House seemed very disinterested in socializing, or rather where never around, even
though they had to apply to live at I-House. It was not until One American I-House resident came back from a night of drinking that he seemed interesting in speaking to a group of international students.

Of the resources meant to help diversification, International students seemed to enjoy events such as "Gala Night" and "International Fair" along with many of the orientation activities, but there seemed to be a desire for more. As one interviewee said, "I would like more social things."

Although administrators feel that The "quiet" areas are a hindrance to building community, interviewee's have told me that it is in these "quiet" study areas that much of the community building happens. During these study times students study together, watch movies, hang out, and help each other with homework, and with English. The openness of the area seems to be beneficial for bringing everyone together.

The common spaces, I learned are very effective in bringing international students together but still American students are stand offish. I do not feel that this is because of a lack of interest though. Instead I feel that American students Living in I-House lack the time necessary to become active community members in I-House, at least some of them.

This possibility is suggested by the fact that American students must apply to gain housing at I-House. The simple act of application tells us that they were at least interested at one time. Also the events described by an interviewee, of the American Students showing interest in his housing mates after a night of drinking, suggests that not only was he not disinterested, but that there is, deep down, a genuine interest.

I feel that to, understand why so many American students suddenly seem to lose
interest, we must look at what events may have influenced all of them, and how this is
different from ten to twenty years ago when I-House community, according to OISP
administrators, was very active and diverse.

We must remember that although applications for I-House are available to any
student, it is likely that an American student will not be fully aware of the program until
after they have been on campus long enough to have heard about it or until it is
important to them and their studies. This means a student could have spent anywhere
from one semester to a number of years before the student moves into I-House. Within
that time the student will have made any number of social connection. the time needed
to maintain the previous connection may infringe on a student’s ability to make new
ones.

While this may not have been as problematic twenty or ten years ago,
advancements in communication technology would have made it much easier to keep in
contact with previous connections into summers and into later semesters. Consider how
easy it is to schedule lunch with a friend for fifteen minutes into the future it is; no worry
that they won’t be near the phone. Then consider the effort that it would take to meet
new people. This is something that I have experience as have many of my friends,
however a more comprehensive investigation would be necessary to obtain a clear
Picture.

**Conclusion**

While interviewing International students I came to the conclusion that American
students where not necessarily unwelcoming of internationals. Rather, American
students may just have other social responsibilities. Considering this I asked the
international students how they felt about I-House cosponsoring event with student RSO's. When I suggested this the interviewees seemed quite responsive to the idea.

I therefore would recommend that I-House should approach a few RSO's, because it would be difficult to involve all international I-House residents with just one RSO, about cosponsoring a few events. This may give International students a chance to meet and interact with American students, while at the same time getting them involved in something that the American students will already be a part of, removing the need for American students to have to choose whether they will spend time with an international student who they don't know or with long time friends. Ideally, this will offer a chance for diversity. Events should be active and encourage interaction, teamwork, and cooperative learning.

In this way I feel that I-House administrators can better aid in the diversification of both International students and American students.