Social Networking Phenomena
In The First-Year Experience

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to college is never an easy process. New freedoms and new independence provides for an exciting first year. There is no debate as to the importance of starting college off well. However, juggling these new opportunities with increased academic rigor is not an easy process. Several authors have described the importance of peer relationships and participation in social networks as key to reducing some of the stress involved in the transition process. Employing a phenomenological method of analysis, this study investigated the composition of those social networks. Having an increased understanding of who comprises these groups provides higher education administrators with more opportunities to alleviate transition difficulty. This study combines interviews and observations, conducted in various campus locations, to identify potential phenomena within these student relationships. Unique occurrences are presented in text, as well as graphic representation when possible.

Keywords: social networks; friendship; high school to college; retention; attrition; freshman success; collegial experience; qualitative research; phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

C hallenges involved in the uncertainty of the high school to college transition have led to this research. With whom do students spend their time? What activities do they do while they are together? How do they interact? How does that peer (non)acceptance influence collegiate success? Prior to college, students are often worried about gaining acceptance in the college community. "Freshmen are greatly concerned about who their roommate will be and whether they will be accepted by peers and make friends. If these concerns are not resolved satisfactorily, the possibility of academic success is greatly reduced" (Leafgren, 1989, p.161).

"When they enter college, freshmen may experience loneliness, anxiety about making new friends and succeeding in college, and stress associated with conflicts about being independent and continuing dependency on family and friends from home" (Leafgren, 1989, p. 158). If that loneliness is not overcome, it can lead to a decrease in retention (Cutrona, 1982). It is that balance between pre-college relationships and new relationships that is an integral part of student development. Logically, it would be beneficial to have close friends simultaneously experience this transitional period, providing a strong possible relationship. As Tinto (1997) found, peer groups help students "balance the many struggles they face in attending college" (p.610).

Making college friendships is not always easy and is especially difficult in the crucial first few weeks of college. The freshman year of college is often deemed one of the greatest transition periods of a student's life with minimal parental involvement, lack of curfews, and substantial opportunity for gaining independence. Having friends to share these changes and new experiences is very important. (Thielens, 1966; Pascarella, 1980; Weidman, 1989). It is important to identify the experiences of these students, as well as the meanings students ascribe to those experiences (Creswell, 1998). Successful identification of a model explaining social networks on the college campus can assist in initiating those interactions from the move-in day.

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Problem

First-year retention in college is a very complex issue. The retention process begins as students are being recruited to the university through the identification of the top students for admission. But, on the first day when students realize their independence, the retention process takes on an added vigor. This is when friends become especially important. Numerous studies have shown student-to-student interactions as a key indicator of retention. With a thorough understanding of first-year student socialization processes, higher education administrators can directly impact those 18% who are leaving. Without this social network understanding, society will be at a loss; but even worse, the student will be too.

Research Questions

Who comprises the social networks of incoming first-year college students?

1.   Is there a particular phenomenon common to social networks in college?
2.   Are there similar stories describing these relationships?

There are two assumptions in this research. First, we must assume that close friends are not negative influences on the transition process. There is always the chance through peer pressure that an incorrect path may be taken due to "friendly" influence. Secondly, this research assumes all students are interested in having a friend or someone to turn to in the transition process despite the inevitability of a few completely nonsocial students who would choose not to frequent public dining facilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Astin (1984) discusses the benefits of student involvement on campus. He mentions that the student who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 297) is the most likely to succeed. The final part of this statement is a key component: student-to-student interaction leads to student success.

Antonio (2004), Astin (1977, 1993), Feldman and Newcomb (1969), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) all agree in stating one of the principal developmental influences on students and student success is the peer group. However, despite the agreement, there have been only a few studies on peer network composition. Weidman (1989b) mentioned his student network compositions often focus around the academic major. However, first-year students who may be undecided, who may often change their major, or who may be only enrolled in general education courses would not have the opportunity to participate in his model.

Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model utilizes pre-college characteristics as indicators of student success. This would seem to agree with the data present in this study and not Weidman's. Tinto (1987) elaborated on his Student Integration Model of why students depart from a university:

College students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities… to another, that of the college….In seeking to make such transitions, (the college students) are likely to encounter problems of adjustment whose resolution may well spell the difference between continued persistence and early departure…. The "first stage of the college career, separation, requires individuals to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence….As a result, the process leading to the adoption of behaviors and norms appropriate to the life of the college necessarily requires some degree of transformation and perhaps rejection of the norms of past communities. For virtually all students, separation from the past is at least somewhat isolating and stressful, the pains of parting at least temporarily disorienting. For some it may be so difficult as to significantly interfere with persistence to college" (p. 94; 95).

While this research identifies commonalities in these type of social relationships, the researcher is hesitant to say Tinto's disassociation happens immediately. This study intends to analyze the rapidity of this transformation and identify at what point this might actually occur.

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This illustrates the gaps in the literature which this research hopes to address. Astin (1993) agreed. He said, "The major impediment to extending our knowledge of peer group effects has been the lack of measures of the characteristics of the peer group" (p. 53). With this quote, he opened a door for further investigation into peer group characteristics.

In the same vein, in 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini said, "Satisfying and rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution are presumed to lead to greater integration into those systems and thus to student retention" (p.51). This research adds qualitative, phenomenological data to assist in understanding that presumption.

Framework for Understanding Social Networks

There are four studies that provide the framework for this research. The first study is C. Cutrona's (1982) study on the loneliness often involved in the transition to college. She provided several testimonials of students who were struggling to meet new friends upon arriving at college. This caused sadness and loneliness that were difficult to balance with academic rigor. The need for friendship was viewed as a coping mechanism. Cutrona comments, "while first-year college students valued their relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners, friends were particularly important for avoiding loneliness" (1982, p.298).

The second study with a significant contribution to this research is the work of J.C. Weidman. His conceptual model of undergraduate socialization illustrates the importance of pre-college characteristics in defining social groups. His focus was on how peer groups can help socialize a student into the college environment (1989a). He stated, "Interpersonal relationships contributing to the social integration of students into the academic system are related not only to the attainment of institutional goals but also to the personal goals of individual students" (1989b, p.96).

The third study is a discussion of sociometry by Loomis and Pepinsky (1948). Sociometry has been utilized to discover social network patterns. This involves developing a target diagram (sociogram) in which "individuals are identified as frequently or rarely chosen" based on overlapping names and placement within circles on a chart (p.267). Sociometric assignment is based on questioning a group of students and asking them to rate their friends and acquaintances according to the perceived closeness of their friendship. The students who are listed by their friends are then asked the same question to view overlapping responses. The relationships are then compared, contrasted, and plotted in circles or cluster diagrams. "The downside to this method is that it is methodologically difficult to carry out given the size and complexity of many postsecondary institutions" (Antonio, 2004, p. 449). Analysis of friendship through a phenomenological approach, as this study proposes, provides a more manageable alternative.

The final study, providing a significant theoretical basis for this research, involves political science theory. Fenno (1978) drew a model made of concentric circles to describe how politicians view their constituents. This model from his classic treatise, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* is the basis for the model to be developed from this research. The social networking diagram will identify whom students are most likely to choose for accompaniment during social times. These friendship concentric circles are used to assist in identifying social network compositions.

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Basis for Research Questions

Terenzini, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo, Millar, and Rendon (1993) discussed how "we know little about which student experiences and relationships are most conducive to learning, especially in the first crucial year of college" (p.1). This qualitative analysis illustrates social network compositions providing for an increased knowledge-base in this arena. Successful understanding of social network or peer group composition allows practitioners to have more focused marketing methods in attempting to integrate students into the mainstream of campus life.

In order to gain this greater understanding, the peer groups need further investigation. "Every aspect of the student's development—cognitive and affective, psychological and behavioral—is affected in some way by peer

group characteristics, and usually by several peer characteristics. Generally, students tend to change their values, behavior, and academic plans in the direction of the dominant orientation of their peer group" (Astin, 1993, p.363).

As students enter college, they are introduced to a vast pool of potential friends. Eventually, new relationships develop, groups expand, and social groups are remodeled. Until that change occurs, though, pre-college characteristics including backgrounds and demographics are very influential. Weidman (1989b) showed these pre-college or student background characteristics as the major influence on social change.

The transition process becomes easier when you have peers to assist you. Derryberry and Thoma (2000) have indicated, "Close friendships do seem to be a developmental advantage for students in college" (p.16), particularly during the first year. Students often turn to friends to assist in this process. Conversations among friends serve as a source of "different and diverse perspectives and sources of information and advice" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 136).

Social networks are also vital to encouraging satisfaction, particularly among women. Aries and Johnson (1983) found friendships among females positively affect each other's self-worth and are necessary for self-discovery and growth (p.357-358). "These college women saw their friendships as a relationship from which they could learn to navigate college terrain, and from which they could extract the information necessary to improve the chances for academic success. Their female friendships are practical and functional in that they serve as resources for effective skills: anticipating what the professor wants, setting workload priorities, and proofreading" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p.139).

A wealth of research explains why students leave college, as well as what keeps them there. In these reports, influences on students' social and academic well-being are defined. They show that student-to-student interactions are positively associated with a "number of academic outcomes: degree aspirations, college GPA, and graduating with honors" (Astin, 1993, p. 385). Additionally, Wallace (1966) clearly identified the peer groups as being influential in members' attitudes towards high grades and academic achievement.

Included in these peer group relationships are opportunities for group work and studying together. "Students point out that those who always study alone are isolating themselves from a key benefit of college—the opportunity to learn from fellow students" (Light, 2001, p.40). These academic benefits provide additional information on how peer groups can influence academic success and retention.

Despite several researchers listing the importance of peer-to-peer interaction on college student success, few have done studies on the composition of social networks. Successful identification of who comprises these networks can advance the knowledge base in the study of higher education.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a phenomenological approach to highlight individualistic ideas and offer new target areas for Student Affairs intervention. This research encompassed multiple methods of qualitative discovery and focused on information relating to the composition of the social networks. After the phenomenological method was selected, deciding on the campus locales for the study was the next major decision. Led by the research questions, this study primarily focused on two settings: the student union and the cafeteria.

In these somewhat chaotic and highly social environments it was relatively easy to blend in as a participant observer but stay close enough to accurately document the interactions. "Several (students) remarked that talking over lunch or dinner is good use of time and are hence less likely to feel as if they were taking time away from school work" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p.147). These environments provided a special selectivity with the freedom of people dining to converse with whomever they wish (Haine, 1996, p.150). These cafeteria discussions can be likened to the family dinner conversation during the high school years where families gather together for eating and conversation.

Data Collection

Interactions noted by the researcher utilized portions of Mehrabian's (1972) factors of social behavior. These included observations of body lean, speech volume, "pleasantness" of facial expressions, shoulder orientations, and head-nodding. These factors were "of major importance and serve to characterize not only actual social behavior, but also the perceptions and judgments of social events, persons, and objects" (Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1972, p.589).

Selection of seating was also important to note. "Table sharing further produces a feeling of informality as unacquainted customers are put into a situation where there are plenty of opportunities to initiate conversation" (Buckner, Laurier, and Whyte, 2001, p.10).

For this study, the researcher spent approximately fifty hours over two semesters in observation of students followed by both long and short interviews. This combination of techniques provided the data necessary for a thorough analysis.

Following these observations, a more in-depth investigation into social networking among first-year students took place through the interviews and observations of six first-semester freshmen informants. Those discussions offered several specific accounts of the networking process and will often be acknowledged in this study.

The research was performed at a public Midwestern research university, University A, with an enrollment of over 20,000 students. The incoming freshmen class each year ranges between 3,500 and 3,900 students from throughout the region and nation. It is a mostly residential campus for freshmen as they are required to live in the residence halls for their first year unless they are commuting within a 50-mile radius.

The initial data collection method was through observation. Noting the environment, observing interaction, and documenting situational response offered a wealth of additional information.

Instrumentation

As the instrument of this study, the researcher purposely allowed a maximum of two hours of consecutive observation on any given day.

Procedures- Cafeteria

The initial data collection took place in the campus cafeteria. The cafeteria customers are primarily freshmen, so it provides an interesting atmosphere for noting the often-discussed transition of the freshman year. All new freshmen who lived in the residence halls also had meal plans that allowed them access to the cafeteria. The research took place on several different nights of the week throughout the spring semester.

The cafeteria was a large building in the middle of the residence halls with two major entrances. Inside the sports grill were several rows of long tables connected end-to-end. Around the outer area were booths that would hold about four or five students. Surrounding these tables were televisions mounted on the walls. The middle seating area will be termed the General Area (GA). Here, a majority of the students congregate since it is in the middle of all the food choices. In the other end of the cafeteria, a more international flavor was portrayed through decorations and will be termed the World's Fair (WF). Both areas had similar seating setups—long end-to-end tables, individual tables for up to eight, and booths along the wall.

The time for observations was selected with the expectation of finding the largest number of students in attendance in the cafeteria. With dinner being the busiest time in the cafeteria, most of the research was conducted between 5:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. The routine was quite simple: the researcher checked in and selected a meal. Occasionally, the researcher would join students at their table but often ate alone at a booth facing the large, populated area. While eating, the researcher took note of the surroundings, interactions, discussions, body language, and seating arrangements. After three weeks of observations, the researcher approached many of the subjects and allowed them to validate or discount the researcher's notations.

Procedures- Food Court

The next step in this investigation included a process of observing the freshmen in a setting of mixed classifications. This expanded the study to a new locale for data collection. It needed to be a place where the researcher could fit in as a participant observer and where simple interviews could be easily conducted. A setting where people spent time eating also helped in keeping the two studies related.

One of the main meeting points at University A is the food court in the student union. The student union is the hub of student life. It is a place to eat, study, and relax. Students of all ages roam the halls and eat in the food court. The food court is divided into four areas divided by large aisles.

In the food court, students of all ages could be observed interacting, socializing, eating, and relaxing. Also, questions could be asked about why they are sitting with the others in their group, why they decided to meet at the Union, and what their relationships were to one another. The food court was an appropriate location to see if there would be many variations in peer networking from the data in the cafeteria.

Once again, the desire to observe during times of the greatest concentration of people led to the researcher's observation itinerary. This time, lunch was chosen as the best time. After observing the students in this section of the food court for several days, the researcher began brief, informal, group interviews. Responses were not audio-taped, but were hand-written into the notes. Most interviews lasted about 1-2 minutes. There was no intention to interrupt their meals and/or discuss more than necessary, but to more thoroughly identify the composition of their groups. Each group member was asked how he/she knew the other group members, did you come here together or meet here, what is your classification, and what were your intentions when arriving here. These questions were designed to provide a brief background of the respondents. The total observation time in the food court was approximately twenty hours.

Method of Analysis

To begin the data analysis, the researcher reviewed all of the collected information to gain a sense of the overall data (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1990). Throughout this intensive examination of the data, there were three major aspects of analysis. First, the researcher's interpretations and biases were recorded to help avoid jading respondent information. Second, the participants' responses were categorized. Finally, the interplay between the two were noted for later categorization (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.58).

Then, a method of classification will occur. "Classifying pertains to taking the text or qualitative information apart, looking for categories, themes, or dimensions of information" (Creswell, 1998, p. 144). This then involved a division of the categories into subgroups. These subgroups were broken into areas like friendship influences, network composition, and reasons for convening. From these categories, the researcher began "scanning the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among the categories" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p. 57). Any reoccurring themes that developed were also noted and interpreted by the researcher.

Finally, the researcher synthesized the overall essence of the data and reported it in a thorough description. As this report was drafted, sections were given to informants to determine their reactions to the interpretation. This provided an additional method of triangulation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Pre-Study Analysis

In identifying who comprises the social networks of incoming first-year college students, it is important to first note potential related models to what the researcher might find. One method of grouping social networks is the idea of concentric circles which was popularized in the field of political science by Richard Fenno in his classic treatise, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, first published in 1978. Fenno's *Home Style* adds to political science research statements about the methods of representation and how the actual representatives see the

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people they serve and the job they perform. The concentric circles shown in Graph A-1 relate well to the methods of how students choose whom to dine with in the cafeteria. Each circle represents the likelihood of who is included in the group composition. A pre-study expectation of the sketch of circles looked like this:
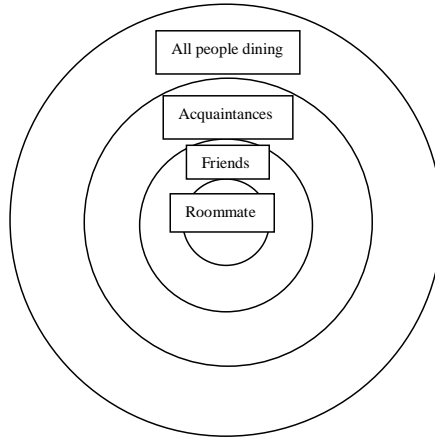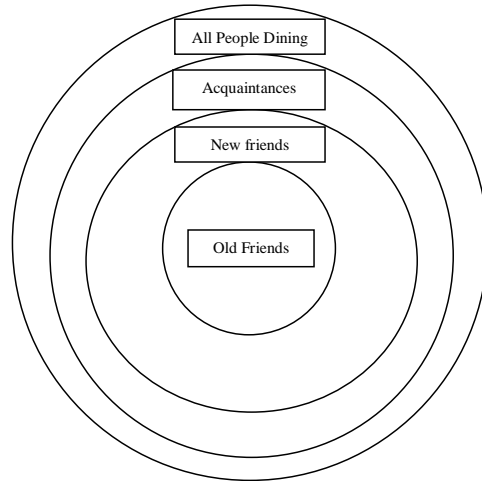

Graph A-1

It would seem that the most common person to go to dinner with would be your roommate, as you would see them the most, and they would be right there when going to dinner. The next circle in would be comprised of your friends. This would include people from your floor, fraternity, sorority, or friends from high school. The next region would be acquaintances. This might be people you see while walking to dinner, whom you know and invite to join you, or it could be someone you recognize in the cafeteria and ask to join. The outermost circle would include anyone that might be eating in the cafeteria at any given time.

The Cafeteria Analysis

To test this diagram, the researcher initiated his research in the cafeteria. The researcher asked a few brief questions of several groups of students while they were dining. Of the 104 students interviewed, 48 were friends from high school, 39 were friends from their residence hall, 11 were in the same Greek House, and six were roommates or suitemates (shared a bathroom). Eighty-six of the students came with the people they were eating with, and only eighteen met that person in the cafeteria.

These results were somewhat disturbing. The Student Affairs practitioner must wonder why we spend so much effort trying to provide opportunities to meet new people, if almost one-half of them are just "hanging out" with their friends from high school. With the second highest total, friends who lived on the same residence hall still make up a large percentage. There are ample opportunities for community building on these floors, so it does seem logical that they may eat together. The third highest total would be for the Greek community who dines together. This would be anyone in a fraternity or sorority that chose to eat together and became friends from that connection.

With this information, a few alterations were made in the initial circles diagram (Graph A-2):

Graph A-2

Old Friends Circle

The inside circle, Old Friends, identifies the most probable group to choose from in selecting whom to go with to dinner. The key factor is the relationship began before moving into the residence halls. At University A, students are allowed to pick their roommates. Since students who do pick roommates pick people they already know, roommates will also fit in this category. The New Friends Circle represents the non-roommates who live on the same residence floor. New Friends also includes members of the same fraternities or sororities. The Acquaintances Circle is made up of people who may have classes together or know each other from a campus activity in addition to the two groups, above. The Acquaintances Circle would also include those students who would be walking together from class and an offer and acceptance to dine together is made. They could also be students already dining that may join together. The All People Dining Circle includes everyone eating.

Food Court

With the concentric circles chart noted from the cafeteria, an interest was developed in investigating the value of the new circles in other environments. This took the research into the student union food court. Here, the researcher observed a similar length as in the cafeteria and followed it up with similar short interviews. Due to the more diverse crowd by age groups, data were differentiated by classification.

Several lunchtimes were spent in the food court observing the surroundings and interactions. The ebbs and flows of the crowds were very predictable as they followed class breaks. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays the crowds arrived at 11:25a.m. and 12:25p.m. On Tuesdays and Thursdays they arrived at 11:50a.m. Each of these times is five minutes after the scheduled completion of normal class times. During peak times an estimated 400-500 students were in the food court area.

The first thing to determine was what students were doing while sitting there. An initial guess would be that considering it was lunchtime and the location was a food court, most people would be eating. This was not always the case. It seemed most students were doing a combination of several activities: eating, relaxing, killing time between classes, socializing, studying, and/or people watching. It was rare for students to have only come to the union for one reason.

One particularly interesting activity that appeared was what some students called "social studying." There are often books on tables all around; but, there did not appear to be a great deal of learning. Students would open books, spread out papers, get out their pens and paper, and then look around the room until finding an appropriate distraction.

The final observation was to identify how the students eating at the same table were related. Individuals would hold tables until their friends would join them. Certain groups often came back on particular days of the week. Unlike the cafeteria last year, students seem to be on more of a regular schedule when arriving. The informal interviews allowed for a more thorough understanding of previous observations and confirmation of many assumptions. The researcher spoke with 69 students over the course of the study. From these interviews, it was noted that about half of the students came together and the other half met in the food court. Of those that met there, it was a normal routine for most of them.

Concentric Circles in the Food Court

The focus of this portion of the study, though, was to determine if the concentric circles diagram proposed in this paper held up with freshmen even when dining in an area of a mixed group of students. To do this, the researcher questioned several groups about how the individual group members were acquainted and documented their responses. Out of the 69 students, 20 were freshmen, 23 were sophomores, seven were juniors, nine were seniors, one was a "fifth year," four were graduate law students, and the other five were classified as international exchange students. As shown in Table 1, the circles were upheld among freshmen and even continued throughout upperclassmen years.

Table 1: Continuity and Permanency of Friendship

	All	Acquaintances	New friends	Old friends
Freshmen	1	4	5	10
Others	1	14	15	19
Totals	**2**	**18**	**20**	**29**

The main theory that students are still hanging out with their friends they formed prior to college is substantiated in the food court results. However, according to Terenzini et al. (1993), "old friends perform this 'bridge function' only for a limited time. As friendship networks extend beyond the set of high school acquaintances, students develop closer relationships with their new college friends, and precollege friends slowly fade in importance" (p.5).

Unfortunately, Terenzini's "limited time" was not defined. This research does show students are beginning to transition into a more diversified peer network, but the timeline is difficult to determine. Moffatt (1991) offered this explanation: "After a month at Rutgers, the average freshman already considered half a dozen new college acquaintances to be friends or close friends. Within two months, the average dorm resident named almost one-third of the other sixty residents on her or his dorm floor as friends or as close friends. In one longitudinal sample, freshmen and sophomores indicated that almost half of their five best friends in the world were friends they had made since they had come to college. The percentage of best college friends then rose to about three in five for juniors and seniors" (p.42).

Literature emphasizes the transition of friends early in the first-year. This study, however, illustrates the continued role old friends play throughout the first-year. These peer networks can assist in the transition from high school as well as provide a connection to the past and comfort in the newness of the present. Transitioning into a new environment takes more than a few weeks. Fortunately, this research shows you have "old friends" with you throughout the process.

Circle Limitations

There are still a few students that were difficult to account for in these concentric circles. Through observation, it was easy to see that not every member of the dining group played the same role as the others. Many would sit quietly, occasionally smile at a joke or nod their heads in agreement, but they really were not part of the conversation. They may have not felt like talking, but it seemed more likely that they were perhaps inviting themselves into the group and were not as readily accepted into the group.

All of these issues about friendships and interactions have left out one more important group. There is a group that does not go to flirt with others. They do not go and interact with their friends. They do not go with others at all. This group is those who dine alone. There are two obvious sub-categories under this group: those who choose to dine alone and those who do not.

There are several students that need to get away. They have a lot on their minds or just want time alone. The length of time of their meals is often quite lengthy. It may include bringing a book to read or just relaxing in their own little world. They almost always tend to eat on the back row at the booths, and seem to block out everyone else in the room.

Throughout the entire observation period, only a couple of students were obviously alone. However, this does not account for those students sitting alone up in their rooms that these observations would never note. It is especially difficult when accounting for the students who come from out of state or are the only ones from their hometown. Despite having other circles, this researcher still recognizes that the transition is likely more difficult for them. They may not attend activities designed to help in their transition since they will not know anyone. They may also be less inclined to leave their room and comfort zone.

The main problem is that if the study notes students in a social setting like the food court, what happens to all of the students that are not in the food court? There are many students who just go to class and go home. Who are they hanging out with? Additional studies would be helpful in this arena.

Through the usage of several qualitative techniques, this research focused on the identification of campus social network composition through usage of concentric circles. With this graphic representation, a more elaborate understanding of the relationship between new freshmen is offered to assist Student Affairs professionals in targeted marketing of their programs. As students become more involved in these activities and organizations, satisfaction (which is best defined by the students) is also enhanced.

CONCLUSION

Gaining a better understanding about these groups can only help sociologists and educators in their roles with the college students. Based on the concentric circles presented in this research, a new trend in higher education may need to be emphasized. Brownell (1959) said, "On entering college, the student must be born anew as it were. He must cross the River Jordan. It is time, not to look back, but to cast off the garments of his past and go with a new vision and a different accent into the better world (473)."

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It appears that Brownell's study, while perhaps accurate at that time, may be out of date. At least, it does not appear to be descriptive of University A. However, additional studies will be necessary to effectively confirm the appropriate usage of the proposed concentric circles. Until then, it appears to be important to target groups of long-time friends for programming and not necessarily expect every student's social transition to be that magnificent.

This research graphically highlights a set of concentric circles that illustrates the most common social networks for first-year students. Effective utilization of those circles can provide numerous opportunities for student affairs professionals. The importance of connecting students to previous friendships is also shown. "Institutions can help new students identify and locate already-enrolled students from their high school or community. They may also want to establish a peer counselor or mentor system that would match new students with other students who know

something about the schools from which the new students come (Terenzini et al., 1993, p. 9).

Additionally, the circles highlight an additional at-risk group of students who may be the only one coming from their school. "An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life" (Tinto, 1987, p. 180). Those students would have a more difficult time integrating into the social environment and therefore face a more difficult route to gaining satisfaction on campus and persisting to the second year.

Friendship effects are vast. Antrobus, Dobbelaer, and Salzinger (1988), propose that "college friendships provide a student with information that supports college achievement, and perhaps postcollege success." "College friends can provide information about how to successfully navigate the college environment as well as, on occasion, specific course-related information (p.227). Practitioners must find a way for students to make these connections.

One possible solution is, "Institutions can consider such issues as the availability of private space for after dinner conversations in the dining halls or in the student pay cafeteria" (Martinez Aleman, 1997, p. 147). These are obvious locales where students are comfortable spending time and conversing with others.

These are just a few of the possible recommendations that can be inferred from the research. An additional individual review of the research questions can also provide more recommendations. The initial question was who comprises the social networks of incoming first-year college students. Primarily, this research question can be answered at University A by first identifying roommates and friends known prior to college who are also attending that institution. This group represents the most common chances for social network composition, especially during the crucial first few weeks of the first year. This "old friends" group indicates the importance of orientation activities by geographic region.

The next greatest chance for connection to students includes friends from the residence hall floor, social organizations, and campus activities. These social networks identify the importance of residence hall programming and provide additional value to student activities and programming.

The last two circles of who comprises social networks are acquaintances and everyone else at the institution. These circles represent the opportunity for the greatest growth as a student. They indicate opportunities for intercultural communication as well as a sharing of various backgrounds and cultures. These groups become more important as the first-year experience comes to a close and students begin to more deeply explore their major.

Cunningham (1993) suggests that qualitative research must be read not to discover "a demonstration of absolute 'law-like certainty' as is obtained in a laboratory experiment in the physical sciences," but instead to unveil a "moral certainty, which is the degree of proof which produces a conviction in an unprejudiced mind" (p.181). "Each person has a unique set of experiences which are treated as truth and which determine that individual's behavior. In this sense, truth is totally unique to each individual" (Eichelberger, 1989, p.6). As a long-term goal, it would be noteworthy to follow these students throughout their college careers and repeat several of the interviews.

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