International Student Discussion Series (ISDS)  
Making Friends with Americans at Penn  
Handout: Friendship U.S. Style

Friendship, American Style: Part One

Do you wonder how to get to know Americans, or feel that it is difficult to meet them? Do you wonder what to talk about with your classmates or officemates, or when you go to social gatherings? The topic of friendship is one that everyone is interested in, but can be a bit difficult to describe. In this article, we will look at the experiences of some international and American students at Cornell and see how they relate to the topic of friendship.

Friendliness and Openness

A student from Japan was visited by her sister, and when they went to a department store, a clerk came over to them. "Hi!" she said, "How are you today?" Surprised, the sister asked: "Do you know her?" A student from Germany was confused that everyone was so nice and polite to her right away.

Americans are often very friendly and helpful to people that they do not know well, and they may also be more open in what they talk about than people from many other countries. This can be confusing to someone who comes from a country where people are initially more reserved. An international student may also feel that Americans are superficial or are not good friends when this initial friendliness does not continue as friendship. A model of friendship referred to by Margaret Pusch, president of the National Association of International Educators, may help us understand some of the differences. Sometimes known as the "wall theory," it describes two patterns of friendship: one American and one found in many other countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American</th>
<th>Other Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Wall Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Wall Diagram" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The American pattern shows how Americans are initially very friendly and open: as symbolized by the first wall being very low. However, American values stress privacy and independence, and the walls become higher and higher before one reaches the stage of a good friendship (represented by the Xs in the center of the diagram). Thus, many international students are very happy when the American they meet is so friendly and open. However, when the American does not continue to act in a way that the international student expects of a friend, the international student is disappointed and confused. They may sometimes conclude that Americans are superficial and do not really know how to be friends. What the international student may not realize is that they have not yet reached the stage of being good friends with the American: they need to go over some "higher walls" before reaching the center and a good friendship. Alternatively, Americans living in a country where people are more reserved and not as initially friendly as in the US, may sometimes become discouraged about ever making friends in that country: they may feel that people in their host country are very unfriendly.
When meeting people from other countries, it may be helpful to keep this model in mind, or to think about what model might be used to describe your own country's patterns of friendship. It is also important to be aware that ways of getting to know someone may be different in different countries, and to try to avoid making judgments about the people of that country.

**Friendship, American Style: Part Two**

**Expectations**

A student from China said that her American friends got mad if she asked them to do too many things for her, so she always asked her Chinese friends. She said that in China, if your friend asked you to do something, and you had your own things to do, you did your friend's thing first. A student from Switzerland was asked if he and the American girl he was speaking to were friends. He said no, which insulted the girl, as she considered them to be friends. He told her that in Switzerland it took time to make friends, and that friendship really meant something.

Two important American values are privacy and independence. Thus, Americans may prefer to do something themselves rather than asking for help, as they do not want to impose on the other person's privacy. They may also expect others to do the same. This can create misunderstandings with people from societies with more interdependent relationships, who assume more obligation to friends.

In addition, expectations of friendship may be very different in various countries. Americans tend to use the word "friend" where people in some countries might use the word "acquaintance;" and they often have different types of friends: friends just to do activities with, close friends, and best friends. In some countries, people reserve the word "friend" for a few people who are very close.

**Topics**

What is considered an appropriate topic to talk about with friends or acquaintances can vary somewhat between countries. Many international students comment that they do not know how to start a conversation with Americans, because of a lack of shared background. When speaking to someone they do not know well, Americans tend to talk about fairly neutral topics and to look for similarities. Conversation generally begins with "small talk": people may discuss the weather, or the immediate situation (the class, professor, party, host, decorations, etc.) It might continue with questions or comments about common acquaintances, sports, movies, work or school. As they get to know someone better, Americans will gradually talk about increasingly personal topics.

**Style**

Regarding style, Americans frequently use "self-disclosure" about personal preferences or activities, and they often ask questions about someone's background or interests. They usually avoid potentially controversial topics, such as politics, religion, or opinions about certain social issues. Debate about politics tends to be less common in the US than in many countries, where people may be much more accustomed to analyzing and debating about politics or religion with both friends and acquaintances. When discussing current events, Americans may often begin with questions, rather than with strong opinions. Even between good friends, vigorous debate about controversial topics is uncommon: Americans often choose to focus on their similarities instead of their differences.
Conclusions

So, you may ask, how can I actually make friends? Here are a few suggestions:

- Don't be afraid to take the initiative: Start a conversation, show interest in others by asking questions, ask someone to go to lunch after class, or to go to a movie. Even if they can't go, once you have taken the initiative, they are much more likely to be open or to even invite you the next time.

- Be positive: Don't assume someone doesn't like you if they don't respond in a way that you expect, they may just be busy or preoccupied with school or work.

- Be informed: Read the Cornell Daily Sun, the Cornell Chronicle, the Ithaca Times, the Ithaca Journal, etc. This way you will be more aware of what is happening on campus and in the area. This may help create a more common background to start conversations and let you know what activities are going on.

- Take advantage of Cornell's international activities. Many Americans who have travelled or lived abroad particularly enjoy meeting people from other countries. Activities sponsored by the International Living Center, Language House, and various international clubs (such as the Scandinavian Club, the Japan-USA Society) are a good place to meet people who have an interest in other cultures.

- Take advantage of campus and area clubs and activities that sponsor activities that you enjoy: Sing in a chorus, take a pottery class or a dance class, participate in team sports. Sharing activities is a good way to meet people with common interests, which makes it is easier to become friends.

- Be aware that differences in expectations about making and having friends may sometimes be confusing or frustrating, and that misunderstandings or miscommunications may occur.

- Remember to be patient with yourself and others. Try to suspend your judgement, and don't take things too personally if you run into difficulties.

- Finally, relax, have fun, and realize that it takes time to make friends, no matter what country you are from!

©Alice Wu, November 1995, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY