How Students Develop Relationships at Parkland College

My group members LaRyssa, Christian, Karol, and I conducted an ethnography of Parkland student life. We studied the development of student relations within Parkland College. We chose this topic because we recognized from both personal experience and our observations that friendships are difficult to make at a commuter school. We concluded that social organizations would promote opportunities to find and make genuine friendships within Parkland because of the diversity within the school. Conversely, those who are not part of a student organization would be less likely to form strong friendships.

Initially, we were each going to gather data for our project through interviews, participant observation and, possibly, focus groups. We created a format for the types of questions we would ask people so that our data would be consistent. Examples of some of the questions we asked our interviewees are: “Are you from around the area or not? What is your definition of a friend? How would you compare the friendships you had in high school with your friends at Parkland? Do you find making friends at Parkland easy or difficult?” As we prepared for this project our group recognized that the definition of “friend” can vary greatly from person to person, so we asked the interviewees what they would consider a friend to be. This also helped us better understand what they specifically meant when they were referring to the concept of friendships in their other answers. Karol and I interviewed two individuals in the library and then interviewed a focus group that was composed of members of a social organization at Parkland.
Our group decided that we had gathered enough information with the interviews and the focus group to complement our hypothesis and own background knowledge.

As students at Parkland, each one of us naturally conducted participant observation and considered reflexivity. What enabled our data gatherings was the fact that we are all social creatures and as students, our circumstances push us to develop friendships within Parkland. I recognize that I am from Mahomet, which is around the area, and I have made friends who attend Parkland, but I did not meet them through the school. I also recognize that I am a lot more outgoing and friendly than many people, so it may be easier for me to make friends than others. For myself, I think it is most important to recognize that I am not only conducting the research but that I am a member of the group we are studying as well. Also, if I am aware of my individual differences, it can help me to be objective about other subjects’ views. In this project, all of our group members made sure to consider our own personal backgrounds and not harm our interviewees while conducting research.

Karol and I interviewed two individuals privately and a group of three individuals together. From the personal interviews, we found that people did not have very many common interests with the friends they made at Parkland. In addition, both individuals were local residents and they considered the friendships made at Parkland to be less valuable than their high school friendships. We then decided to interview the group of individuals, because the results from the two individuals were very similar. The group we interviewed was composed of members of a social fraternity organized through Parkland. Two of the individuals were from Mahomet (local) and the other was from California (nonlocal). The two locals stated how they were fortunate to be from around the area and they had maintained friendships from high school while at Parkland. The nonlocal found making friends at Parkland to be extremely difficult, and
joining a social organization was helpful towards that goal. They all agreed that friendships at Parkland have to originate through some other social construct because there is so much diversity within the school. The results of our research supported our hypothesis. It is difficult to make friends at Parkland College, unless there is a social organization to bring people together, because of the diversity within the school.

Parkland students have difficulties making friends through the school. This relates to anthropological topics such as kinship, communication, and group identity. Students at a commuting school like Parkland maintain close ties with their families. In some ways, students interact with Parkland more or less like it is a work environment. Students come to campus for specific tasks such as to attend class or complete assignments to achieve a college degree. This can interfere with developing emotional relationships like friendships. Mark Auslander observed the way our culture differentiates work and family, saying, “In our socioeconomic system, work involves productivity whereas family involves kinship and emotions like love. These two worlds are in structural opposition because they imply different ideas about the purpose of life” (Auslander 46). Students engage in close relationships away from Parkland on a daily basis, so at the school students may limit the ways they interact with each other. On the other hand, students who join social organizations through the school have an environment that is less like a workplace and more consistent with building supportive relationships or kinship.

Social organizations often have rituals which unify the group. There is much diversity in the student body at Parkland and lack of unification. Students come from very different ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and locations, both within the Parkland district and beyond. According to Sosis, “If people are linked by a common set of beliefs and a common set of ritual obligations, then they are more likely to cooperate with one another in ways that advance the
good of the collective” (Sosis 85). Parkland students do not share rituals, such as singing a school song, as students do at other schools. There are few rituals to unify all the students and with the diversity in the school, it is difficult to find or make friends. The cultural differences, diversity and lack of ritual at Parkland results in a division between the students.

After using the ethnographic method to investigate how hard it is to make friends at Parkland, we concluded that it is quite difficult to make friends because of the diversity and lack of unifying experiences in the school. We also concluded that membership in social organizations can help overcome these limitations and help students build friendships. I concluded that maintaining close connections with family and friends off campus (kinship) can interfere with relationship building on campus. I also concluded that the rituals and common goals in a student organization can help overcome these limitations. Our research could lead to future questions about student life at Parkland College including how social organizations help build friendships, what is the purpose and function of a community college versus a 4-year college, or what is it about the environment between the two types of schools that promotes or interferes with building social relationships.
Works Cited
