The topic my group decided to do for our ethnography project was “Missed Connections Due to Technology,” where we focused on the role cell phones, tablets, or laptops played in making friendships at Parkland. For our research, we observed people in common areas of the school, handed out surveys about how comfortable students were with using their phones in different situations, and interviewed two Parkland students, a man and a woman. The common areas we observed in included the Flag Lounge, Student Union, and library. Each of our four group members sought out to get surveys from 5 people, and we all ended up with closer to 10. One of us approached students in the hallways, two of us stuck to questioning people we were already acquainted with, and one of us handed the survey out to one of her classes, so the students could respond anonymously. The interviews were conducted with two friends who were willing to speak on tape. We recorded the interviews and added clips to our podcast about the project.

When we went into the project, we all thought that technology use was a very common thing to do between classes and thought the students we talked to would feel the same.

What we found was a little different. Though if you were walking through the halls of Parkland, you would have a harder time finding someone without a phone in their hand than seeing someone walk into another student because they were so busy texting, most students responded by saying they are not comfortable walking through the halls on their phones. It is possible that this is behavior they are ashamed to truly admit when asked, but even the group that
filled out the surveys anonymously said they were not as comfortable as one would be led to believe. This made us question whether or not students were honest with themselves about how often they were using their phones and whether or not that affected how they formed friendships with other students.

There was a further disconnect when we reviewed the answers to the other questions. Most students said they felt comfortable being approached while they were on their phones. A few said they were less comfortable being approached while they were having a conversation via phone call, but that rarely happens anymore. While the students felt comfortable being approached, most were not at all comfortable approaching someone else who was using a phone. This led to a disconnect where people thought they were displaying themselves as available, but no one else read it that way. We had found our Missed Connection.

Although we now knew that there were problems creating friendships at Parkland College, did it matter? Most of the people we talked to did not seem worried about the social environment of the college. They expressed disinterest in even attempting to form relationships here. While most students live close to home, they still had ties to their friends from high school. Another factor is that a lot of students already have jobs, where they can make new friends. Having a different atmosphere than a university, where students live side by side and spend time hanging out in common areas, rather than going to work, there is not a real need to create friendships during your time at community college.

In asking for comments on the surveys and talking amongst ourselves, we concluded that many people actually use their devices as a shield, when they do not want anyone to bother them. This is interesting as it goes against the students who said they do not mind being approached on their phone. While we were observing people, we mostly found one person per table, with a
laptop and books spread out on the table. This is not a very inviting environment to create. However, if someone they considered a friend were to come up, they would invite them to sit down and start socializing.

In a way, this behavior is like the behavior of the Western Apache Culture we read about and discussed from our course book. In the ethnography, “To Give Up on Words,” by Keith H. Basso, we learn that the Apache tribe will not communicate with people outside of their group. When a member of their group goes away for a long while, they must endure a period of silence after returning. They use these silences to gauge the character of people before opening up to them (Podolefsky, 36-46). When we are unsure of the people in our new class, we will spend the time before class period on our phones. At this point, it is hard to judge the personality or character of the people around us. For all we know, the person sitting next to us could be annoying or rude. It’s best not to engage in conversation with them yet. However, as the class moves along, we interact a little as a group. Maybe we begin to identify with the people around us. After a while, the phones begin to go away at the beginning of the class period and students start to converse about how hard or easy the homework is, how they feel about the professor, or how poorly or well they did on the test. They may even progress beyond complaining about schoolwork and begin talking about their lives.

A lot of what the information that we found was contradictory, whether due to students being ashamed to admit how often they rely on their cell phones or being ignorant to the fact that they use them as often as they do. While students thought they were available to be approached while on their phones, they did not want to approach other people, potentially because they did not really want to be bothered. Though the students did not seem to prioritize making friends at Parkland, they did seem a little bit frustrated at the difficulty of doing so. In an effort to create
more friendships at Parkland, we must all look inside ourselves and focus on what kind of message we are really sending our peers, before we throw in the towel and say it’s just too hard to do. I believe that if we are honest about our expectations and the environment we are creating, we can make Parkland a more social and enjoyable place to go to school.

Works Cited