

Highlights

from the College Adjustment Study

Peer Relations Study Group
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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<https://website.education.wisc.edu/prsg>

In 2011/2012 we interviewed a small but diverse set of U.W.-Madison undergrads. Here are some of the things we learned from that information that these students provided.



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Social Life vs. Academics: What Matters Freshman Year?

Picture this: It's Friday afternoon. You just got invited to a house party. The folks on your floor are planning a crazy day tomorrow as part of the home football game. And you have three midterms next week. And you're way behind on your reading of class assignments. What do you do?



It's a common dilemma for first-year students at U.W.-Madison, a school known for academic rigor and hard-core partying. How do you keep up with social demands and still find time for class work that is way harder than high school?

Two things emerged from our conversations with first-year students. First, most students acknowledge the academic and social pressures, but they handle them differently. Especially when it comes to social life, students work their way around the dominant house party culture in a variety of ways. Some become true "party animals"; others opt to concentrate on school work. Still others are very social, but not necessarily involving the house party scene.

Second, most students seem to emphasize social over academic demands their first semester on campus. Maybe it's the excitement of having so many opportunities to make new friends. Maybe it's the realization that they have to figure out living arrangements for next year just about 8 or 10 weeks after arriving on campus. But most students put a high priority on making friends. Those who don't can express regrets because it seems more difficult to make friends second semester.

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By the middle of spring semester, students seem to figure out a way to balance academic and social demands. Having made friends, they find more time to concentrate on academics. And they have found more efficient and effective ways of meeting the demands of their classes.

With high expectations on both academic and social fronts, the University is a challenging environment for first-year students. But as students often commented, “There’s always tons of things to do here” and “There are lots of people to meet.” These factors help students find a way to meet the challenges of college life.



Facebook Goes to College

Our study participants were part of the first generation of college students growing up using social media. Although several of today’s most popular media were just getting started as our students entered college—few of our participants had Twitter accounts and no one mentioned SnapChat or Instagram—almost everyone had a Facebook

account before they arrived at college.

One common use of Facebook was to scope out a college roommate or fellow members of a residence hall. Students also found Facebook useful in looking up someone they’d just met at a party or in class or a campus activities. They could judge what potential the person had as a friend or possible romantic partner—or just to figure out what to talk about they next time they saw the person. This type of “creeping” was regarded as perfectly acceptable.

But students’ biggest use of Facebook was to keep tabs on former associates who were not at U.W.-Madison. When asked how college would be different if he didn’t have Facebook, one student responded, “It would probably be more lonely, I guess, ‘cause I’d probably only talk to a few of my friends, rather than being able to see, like, a ton of my friends and what they were up to”

Most students said they didn’t change the content of their Facebook page very much when they came to college, but many used the occasion to do some “house cleaning.” They deleted Facebook friends who were little more than distant associates in high school. Some changed their privacy settings to restrict access. A few were especially concerned about what parents, younger siblings, or other relatives were able to see. Most said their main use of Facebook was to keep up with friends “from back home” and learn about events on campus.

Asked how they would manage if they couldn’t use Facebook anymore, most students thought that they could handle it, except that they might lose touch with some close high school friends. But taking away their cell phone would be a social disaster. “That would be so weird!” one person responded. “Like, I don’t even know how people would make friends even ‘cause how would you, like, get in contact with someone?”

Social media are seen as a vital tool in meeting social demands and opportunities at college.

One way or another, social media played a critical role in students’ adjustment to college. Students admitted that Facebook was often a “time sink,” a way to put off the course work they really should be doing. Still, they saw it as a vital tool in meeting the social demands and opportunities at college.

Making Friends

How students find meaningful social connections



Most students agree: Friends are a top priority at college. But making new friends, or keeping old ones, can be a challenge!

Facebook can be of some help (see the previous story), but social media generally are just a supplement to face-to-face interaction. With so many students on campus there's bound to be a bunch of people whose background and interests make them great candidates for friendship. But how do you find them? It's a critical issue, since having strong friendships is the best predictor of students' satisfaction with college.

Our study participants agree that the most likely place to find friends is in your residence hall, especially among people living close by. Even midway through first semester, many students have developed tight relationships with their roommate—pretty remarkable when one considers that roommates are often assigned randomly. “Overall,” one student said, “my roommate is, like, exactly the same personality as me: laid back and chill. So, when we're rooming together it's, like, a perfect match. There's no type of awkwardness or, you know, any hatred or something like that. So, it's pretty cool.”

Classes, on the other hand, are not regarded as a great place to make friends. As one student noted, in large lecture classes that are common among freshman, “the guy you sit next to and have a great conversation one day, you may never see them again.” FIGs seem to be an exception. Their small size and more intense level of interaction make it easier to form friendships with fellow participants.

A second-best source (beyond people living nearby) is friends of friends. “You know other people who came to UW from your high school, and you go visit them in their residence hall, and they have friends that you meet,” one participant explained. “And you can become friends with those people.” Indeed, some high school classmates whom students didn't hang out with very much before college turn into close friends when they run into each other on campus. Participants who were the only student from their high school attending UW seemed to take a little longer to make friends.

Neither classes nor house parties were ideal places to find friends.

That was also true for individuals whose background was markedly different from that of most UW students.

Students from under-represented ethnic groups as well as international students tended to regard the task of finding friends as more challenging. Often, they were assisted by

student orgs that drew members from similar backgrounds, or organizations such as POSSE or PEOPLE that work to create connections before students arrive on campus, then offer activities to nurture these relationships early in freshman year.

One surprise was that house parties generally were not regarded as a good venue for meeting and making friends. Rather, they worked well for nurturing existing relationships, as students often attended these parties with people “you already sort of know.”

Students spoke of a “getting to know you” ethos the first few weeks on campus when everyone's door was open in the residence hall and people routinely introduced themselves in classes or in activities or in the dining halls. “If you miss that opportunity, then people aren't quite as open and it can be harder to break into existing friend groups,” one student explained.

Do friendships made freshman year tend to last? It's an important question we hope to address in future research.



About our study.....

In Fall, 2011 and again in Spring, 2012, we interviewed a group of 33 first-year students about their experiences at U.W.-Madison. Although small in number, our participants formed a very diverse group. Like the campus as a whole, most were from Wisconsin, but we also had participants from nearby states and both coasts of the US, along with several foreign countries. Students' expected majors ran the gamut from engineering to accounting to communicative disorders. They lived in a variety of different resident halls or apartment situations, sometimes with a randomly paired roommate, sometimes with a life-long friend. Despite this diversity, they all shared a willingness to speak candidly about their expectations and experiences at Madison. We appreciate the insights that they shared and hope to be able to speak with them again as they near the end of their college career.

For more information, see: <https://website.education.wisc.edu/prsg>