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Comparing Two Groups of English

Schooled International

Students at Trinity College

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Professor Jack Dougherty

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My senior research project is based on two groups of international students at Trinity College. The first group comprises of South Asian students from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, while the second group consists of other international Non South Asian students, specifically from countries of South Africa, England, Bermuda and Zimbabwe. Students from both groups are familiar with the English language because they come from schools where they were primarily instructed in English.

Research Question: What are the pre college expectations and college experiences of two international student groups at Trinity College for whom language is not a barrier in a foreign country and educational institution? Do the college experiences of these students match their different pre college expectations? Additionally, how do these two groups interpret their college experiences with mainstream American and other international students?

Many researchers have investigated the lives of international students to learn more about their expectations, adjustment patterns, cultural differences and experiences in American institutions. Within small colleges, researchers have found that these students “are often very satisfied with their academic performances and well adjusted to American culture and social life.” (Walker, 2001) Since Trinity College is a small liberal arts institution, I was curious to know whether this finding is typical of the international students studying here. Additionally, the office of Institutional Research at Trinity College also did not have any data available on these students within the campus. Therefore, by investigating the pre college expectations and college experiences of the

two international student groups mentioned above, I am interested to know how they “negotiate” life in a foreign university and culture at Trinity College.

Thesis: Both international student groups have similar pre college expectations and college experiences. Additionally, they are also similar because their college experiences do not match their pre college expectations and they feel an “otherness” from American students. However, in depth, the South Asian students feel a greater sense of “otherness” from American students than the other international Non South Asian students.

Methods of Research In order to comprehensively understand the pre college expectations, and more importantly, the college experiences of these international students, I decided not to include any freshmen students due to their limited exposure to different people, resources and activities on campus. I began my research by obtaining the names and mail box numbers of the upperclassmen (sophomores, juniors and seniors in this case) international students from the International Programs Office at Trinity College. There were a total of 17 South Asian and 14 other international Non South Asian students. I distributed surveys in their separate mailboxes, which contained a brief description regarding my research, information of their rights, question asking whether they were English schooled, and a request to send back these surveys in my mailbox if they wished to participate in individual interviews. Therefore, the returned surveys informed me of the people who were willing to participate as informants for my research.

Nine South Asian and eight other international Non South Asian students responded to the survey indicating their willingness to participate in individual interviews. Based on

random selection, 5 students from each group were chosen. Interviews were conducted with all 5 South Asian and 5 other international Non South Asian students. The South Asian student population chosen included 4 males and 1 female. On the other hand, the international Non South Asian students comprised of 2 males and 3 females. These structured interviews lasted 30 minutes where their pre college expectations and college experiences were investigated. These pre college expectations were divided into academic, social and other expectations. Similarly, their college experiences were also divided into academic, social and other experiences.

I began the interviews by taking notes while the informants spoke and answered questions from the questionnaire. On realizing that such a method was inefficient in terms of time required to take notes, and citing the informants' original words, I decided to use a tape recorder for future interviews. Furthermore, the 3 informants whose interviews were recorded in writing were contacted again so as to tape record any controversial information conveyed. Most informants, with the exception of a selective few, provided detailed comments regarding their pre college expectations and college experiences. Although the female students were more in number for the other international Non South Asian group, no gender biased comments or findings were noticed. The information derived from different interviews was carefully analyzed to understand how these international students perceived their roles and functions in terms of academic and social interaction, community cohesion within themselves and others at Trinity College.

Findings: The findings from this research indicate that the academic and social experiences of both international student groups do match their initial pre college

expectations. Furthermore, they feel an “otherness” from American students at Trinity College.

Pre college expectations of South Asian Students: For the South Asian students, their academic pre college expectations are more similar than different. Eighty percent or 4 out of 5 students did not expect to be regularly assessed on their academic work. A student from India stated, “I expected to be graded on the basis of two exams throughout the semester; mid term and final”. Similarly another student from Pakistan said, “I thought I was going to be evaluated three/ four times in a semester on written papers where I could express my opinions and analyze things with independent reasoning.”

These South Asian students also held similar expectations regarding class participation, student interaction and developing good relationships with professors within the classroom. They were aware of Trinity College as a liberal arts institution, where classes were small and different students would be encouraged to form their own opinions and facilitate intellectual interactions. “The picture in my mind was that professors would be less formal, teach in class and challenge students to form their own opinions, which may or may not dissent with the professors views,” were the words of the Pakistani student.

Sixty percent or 3 out of 5 students also expected the academic materials to be challenging and insightful.

“I expected to work hard because American colleges are known to be challenging in my home country. Since I expected Trinity to be academically challenging, I wanted to work hard to earn good grades,” said the student from Nepal. Although there were two South Asian students who expected the academic materials to be more work intensive than insightful, others had different expectations. “I expected some intense academic

work that would keep me thinking even outside classroom hours. I never thought there would be too much work and I expected to perform well in the classroom,” quoted the student from India.

The South Asian students also had similar social pre college expectations. These expectations mainly involved forming friendships in college and exploring the neighborhood of Hartford. Eighty percent or 4 out of 5 students anticipated developing deep friendships in college. The student from Bangladesh expected “to make very close friends who I could depend upon because of being away from parents and other friends from home. I was hoping to meet many different people in college.” Similarly, other South Asian students also expected to meet different people and relate with them personally.

Sixty percent or 3 of these 5 students expected to explore the neighborhood of Hartford so as to extend their social lives beyond the boundaries of Trinity College. Another student from Pakistan mentioned, “I was hoping that my experiences at Trinity were more of a city kind of thing. I wanted to enjoy going out into the neighborhood and the surrounding cities such as New York and Boston. In Pakistan, we always hear of the parks and shopping malls- I expected to see it all after coming here.” This expectation of exploring the surrounding neighborhood is supported in research done by Jill Smolowe on foreign students and American colleges and universities. Addressing international students, he quotes, “many are attracted not only to the academic programs at a particular U.S. college but also to the larger community, which affords the chance to soak up the surrounding culture.” (Smolowe, 1992)

College Experiences of South Asian Students: Common patterns were also noticed in the experiences of the South Asian student group. Hundred percent or 5 out of 5 students were satisfied with the relationships they formed with professors in college. However, these students were also of the opinion that the academic work was rigorous but not insightful, which is different from what they expected. The student from India claims, “The work is crazy and continuous depending on your major. With a double major I find myself doing homework all the time. It’s not exactly insightful but extremely time consuming,” which is similar to the comments of other South Asian students regarding their academic work.

Eighty percent or 4 out of 5 students were also of the opinion that students at Trinity lack the necessary respect for their professors. “Most American students don’t respect their elders in general. Would you like it as a professor if someone sat in front of class with their legs up on another chair? We would get thrown out for doing such things in Bangladesh,” said the student from Bangladesh. This attitude towards the disrespect of American professors by their students has been reported in a research done on international students in American universities. The research involved American students’ perceptions of international students and vice versa. Among international students it was found that “about a fourth disapprove of our lack of respect for the elderly, for teachers, for parents.” (Segal, 1994)

Sixty percent or 3 out of 5 students were also dissatisfied with the American system of having their work assessed repeatedly. Before arriving in college, they only expected to be assessed twice every semester. However, due to the pressure of performing well and being assessed continually, a student from Pakistan whose views

were similar to that of other South Asian students mentioned, “There may be a lot of flexibility for what you want to say but there is no such flexibility for the way in which you want to pace yourself. I know of international students who have wanted to drop out because of this continuous assessment- we feel pressured.” These students were also unhappy about the unexpected lack of student participation, which gives them a sense of alienation within their classrooms.

Contrary from what they socially expected, hundred percent or 5 out of 5 South Asian students were unhappy about their social relations with American students because of their excessive drinking habits, ignorance and individualistic nature. They were also dissatisfied with their experiences at Trinity College because of the inability to move around the dangerous neighborhood of Hartford. While addressing these social experiences with American students the second student from Pakistan mentioned, “Seventy percent of the kids here don’t appreciate diversity, are obsessed with themselves and don’t want to spend any minute of the day thinking about the other person. It’s a little depressing that people for their close knit friends only with a few people, fall into their cliques and only interact with them. Hartford as a city is also depressing.”

Pre College Expectations of other international Non South Asian Students:

Common patterns were noticed among the other International Non South Asian students regarding their academic and social pre college expectations. Hundred percent or 5 out of 5 students expected to be academically assessed only twice every semester. As mentioned by a student from South Africa, “I expected the same system as in South Africa with 2 sets of exams every semester.”

Sixty percent or 3 of these 5 students thought the American education would be harder than that of their home country colleges. As stated by the student from Zimbabwe, “I expected homework assignments and interesting work. In a way I expected the academics to be harder at Trinity than at colleges in Zimbabwe.” None of these international Non South Asian students expected any classroom interaction, participation, or student professor interactions, which is explained by the student from Bermuda. “I thought we would only have big classes where the professor would lecture us and we would leave soon after he/ she finished. Participating in class or interacting with the professor did not even strike my mind before arriving.”

Hundred percent or 5 out of 5 students expected to commute regularly within Hartford. Additionally, 4 out of 5 students also expected to fit in well socially by making several American friends. “I thought Trinity would be a very friendly place where people would be collectively involved in student unions and extracurricular activities. People think of America as a friendly place, so I thought I would fit in well and bond with the people here,” said the student from England.

College Experiences of other international Non South Asian Students: The academic and social college experiences of the Non South Asian students were also different from their pre college expectations. Hundred percent or 5 out of 5 students were pleased with the communication patterns they developed with professors and enjoyed student participation within the classroom. Although these are positive experiences, they are different from what they academically expected. As stated by the student from England, “When they (professors) take time out to help us personally, it makes me feel like a person and not just a number.” These students also experienced constant work

pressure from materials that were not challenging or complicated. As a result of such work, “I cannot live my life the way I want. I realize college is about work, but way more than I expected. I don’t sleep enough, rush to get dinner, and cannot do things that may not be related to books but they are important in my life. I only get time on Friday’s to do as I please, it’s ridiculous,” said the student from Bermuda.

Eighty percent or 4 out of 5 students were unhappy about their work being assessed regularly. Similar to these academic experiences of international students at Trinity College, it has been found, “International students also experience varying levels of adjustment difficulties to the American education system, often complicated with differences in learning styles and educational objectives.”(Jacob & Greggo, 2001) As mentioned by a student from South Africa, “There is an exam or paper every second week for every class, sometimes two exams on the same day and that goes on until you graduate. One exam gets over and you have another one. I was always tense freshmen year and it still gets to my nerves,” which demonstrates their frustration and adjustment difficulties to the American education system.

The social experiences of these students also do not match their social pre college expectations. Eighty percent or 4 out of 5 Non South Asian students experienced what they called a “boring life” because they felt restricted on campus. “What I hate is the helplessness I feel for not being able to move around without worrying off campus,” explained the student from Zimbabwe. Another student from South Africa also commented on the unexpected social experiences at Trinity College. “I expected a lot more from my social life at Trinity because I thought America was the land of

opportunity and dreams. Coming to Hartford was disappointing because I came here from South Africa to get out of the dangerous environment.”

Apart from being unhappy about how immobile e they feel in Hartford, sixty percent or 3 out of 5 students also hated the social culture of American students. The student from South Africa talked of these social disappointments at Trinity College by explaining, “American people are very cliquish and don’t make an effort to meet other people. The social life is limited to fraternities and cultural differences like girls hooking up randomly is astonishing. People don’t like going out for movies because it is not considered ‘cool’. It makes me feel like I’m back in high school. My social experiences have mainly been positive with other international students.”

Do the college experiences of both international student groups match their pre college expectations?

From the interviews with South Asian students, it is clear that their academic and social college experiences do not match their respective pre college expectations. They didn’t expect their work to be regularly assessed, thought there would be a considerable amount of class participation, and expected the academic materials to be less rigorous but more challenging. However, within the academic environment their work was assessed more regularly than expected, their classes lacked student interaction and participation, and they experienced the workload to be intensive instead of insightful. Additionally, they also had unexpected experiences such as witnessing an atmosphere of disrespect for professors within the classrooms. The only academic experience that matched their academic pre college expectation was that of having positive professor student interactions.

The social experiences of South Asian students also do not match their social pre college expectations. They were unhappy about their distant interactions with American students because of their “obsessive drinking habits” (student from Bangladesh). Additionally, these students also expected to explore the surrounding areas in Hartford, which was different from what they experienced.

The college experiences of Non South Asian students also do not match their pre college expectations. Similar to the South Asian students, a majority of them didn’t expect to be assessed repeatedly on tests, and expected the academics here to be harder than that of their country’s school education. They also did not expect any student professor interaction, participation and student interaction within the classroom. Contrary to these expectations, their work was continually assessed and the academic materials were less challenging but more time consuming. However, these Non South Asian students positively experienced more student professor interaction and participation within their classrooms. Although a few of these experiences may have been positive, they do not match their academic pre college expectations.

The social experiences of these other international Non South Asian students also do not match their social pre college expectations. Similar to South Asian students, they expected to commute within Hartford to expand their social outlets and experiences. However, they were unable to do so for safety reasons and also made fewer friends with American students than expected. Overall, the college experiences of both groups of international students being investigated do not match their initial pre college expectations.

How do these international students interpret their college experiences with mainstream American and other international students?

Based on the findings of this research, students from both international groups had similar pre college expectations and college experiences at Trinity College. They expected the academic environment to be challenging and less focused on constant work pressure and assessment. Socially, they expected to commute within Hartford and make several friends. However, their college experiences, which do not match their pre college expectations, makes these groups more similar than different.

Students from both groups were dissatisfied with the repeated assessment and rigorous work in their classes that were not challenging, but were satisfied with the relationships they developed with professors. These students were also disappointed with their social experiences because they made fewer friends than expected and felt an “otherness” from American students. Most South Asian students described their American classmates as disrespectful to professors, cliquish, ignorant, individualistic and narrow minded. Similarly, the Non South Asian students defined these American students as ignorant, cliquish and two faced. However, the South Asian students felt a greater or more extreme sense of “otherness” from American students than the other international Non South Asian students.

These students felt an “otherness” from American students both in and out of the classroom. While stating reasons for this “otherness” from American students within the academic environment, a student from Pakistan stated, “I thought I’d make more American friends in the classroom, but the way it works here is you form your cliques, more so from your dorms and you stay with them. I didn’t like that.” Another student

from India mentioned, “I felt a sense of alienation in the classroom because I can’t name more than 10 –12 people in my classes. American students sit in the class, don’t discuss any matters out of class and just leave once the class is over.” Sixty percent or 3 of these 5 students felt such alienation from American students in their classrooms. There have been similar findings from research done on Asian International Students in other American Universities where it was noticed that Asian students suffered from adjustment problems in classrooms because their “cultures tend to place a high value on team efforts and collectivity whereas western cultures tend to emphasize individualism.” (Gisela & Yi, 1997)

Additionally, eighty percent or 4 out of 5 South Asian students mentioned a dislike for American students because of their disrespect for professors and elders in general. As stated by a student from Pakistan, “In Pakistan, there is a certain charisma attached in being a professor. This charisma comes from the fact that teachers are equal to parents because they educate students to be decent human beings. The respect for professors is lacking among American students, which is considered a cultural taboo in Pakistan.”

Hundred percent or 5 out of 5 South Asian students as a whole felt an “otherness” from American students socially. The student from Nepal spoke of his negative experiences with American students in college by stating, “It is very frustrating that I don’t drink. I’ve felt odd when everybody is drinking and enjoying but I’m not. Not drinking has led to a huge decline in my social life at Trinity. I hate the fact that if you don’t drink you don’t fit into the social life in college. The majority of the people I’ve met are very shallow. Back home we would do anything for a friend. Here people are

close only when you can get some benefit out of them. For example, help with homework, etc.”

The student from Bangladesh explicitly mentioned his reasons for maintaining a distance from American students. Apart from being dissatisfied with the social culture at Trinity College where drinking is the “number one thing to do”, this South Asian student is also “amazed at how ignorant American students are”. He thinks that Islam is considered a rigid and extremist religion in America because of its image portrayed in the Western media, which highlights guns, barbarity and terrorism. “I have also begun to keep a distance from some American students because of their reactions to the September 11 events. I have difficulty dealing with American students who ask me if I carry a gun, if I believe in polygamy and if I know any terrorists because my name is typically Islamic? Their questions make me uncomfortable and I keep to the people of the international community.” From this explanation it is clear that “such preconceptions towards these groups are often caused by historical relations between the two countries, as well as the media’s portrayal of current international economic and political trends and events.” (Tomich & McWhirter & King, 2000)

The student from India also explained his reasons for maintaining distances from mainstream American students. “It is very upsetting to be at Trinity socially because American students don’t want to discuss, argue and engage in intellectual conversation of some breadth. How meaningful can people be here when they are drunk, how much do they talk when they are not drunk, and how much do they talk about getting drunk when they are not drunk? Now I have reason to be scared because I feel ostracized and lost

because of the dominant social culture at Trinity. I spend most of my time away from the classroom watching movies with other international friends on campus.”

While the South Asian students felt this “otherness” from American students both within the academic and social environment, the other international Non South Asian students had different experiences. Within the academic structure, although forty percent or 2 out of 5 students thought there was a lack of discipline in classrooms, they did not feel that American students were disrespectful to professors. These students also did not feel alienated from American students within their classrooms and all 5 enjoyed participating in classroom discussions. “My classes have been discussion based and I’ve made many friends in the classroom environment,” said a student from South Africa. Hence, the Non South Asian students did not feel an “otherness” from American students within the academic environment.

Their “otherness” from American students mainly resulted from the negative social relations they developed with these students. In a rather emotional tone, the student from Zimbabwe said, “I don’t get along with Americans. They ask me questions such as, “do monkeys play in your garden,” “how far are the animals from your house.” I think a major reason why American schools admit international students is for people from different communities and cultures to interact and come together. Instead of reading sociological texts that enable them to learn about people from different cultural backgrounds, face-to-face interaction with us will facilitate cross-cultural learning for American students and us. However, by neglecting our different social needs and being consumed in their daily activities of getting drunk, most American students have not only deprived us of the opportunity to learn from them, but have also forced us to socially

categorize them as one community.” This student’s comments are supported by research on American students in different universities where it was “discovered that important issues for international students were a lack of respect and a general lack of awareness on the part of Americans about the culture, history, and geography of their countries.”

(Peterson & Briggs & Dreasher & Horner & Nelson, 1999)

Additionally, both students from South Africa had different reasons for feeling an “otherness” from American students socially. “At Trinity especially, there are a lot of two faced people. People want to get something out of their interaction with others. I heard from my father that life starts at college and the friends formed during this phase of life are friends forever. I was apprehensive about making such friends because my first impression after coming to college was that Americans were arrogant and snobbish. From knowing them I have realized they are also selfish and obsessed with making money,” were the comments of one South African student. The other student described Americans as ‘cliquish’ and was dissatisfied about the domination of fraternities and sororities as the main social outlet on weekends. This student was also of the opinion that being social at Trinity College was defined in terms of the narrow criteria of drinking by most American students, which is disappointing (page 10). Hence, students from the Non South Asian group felt an “otherness” from American students because of their negative social relations with these students.

It must be noted that although the remaining two students (from England and Bermuda) were also disappointed with their social experiences at Trinity College, they try and assimilate with American students by accepting the cultural differences that arise from living in a foreign country. While elaborating on these experiences with American

students, the student from England stated “They (American students) hide their true personalities to get into their cliques. They try very hard to impress everyone because they are thrown out of their comfort zones. To cope with this they try to be the coolest people.” However, in spite of having formed such negative impressions, this student also had positive things to say about American students.

“I think it’s a matter of taking an interest and really getting to know them. After the first semester I decided to let go of my impressions and interact with them. Now I enjoy their company because we have lots of fun together. Sometimes, I think they are just like my mates and me in England and sometimes I don’t. They’re still fun to be with and I feel slightly American. The “wicked mate” has changed to “awesome”, “it sucks”, “dude”, etc, etc and my friends at home also complain that I have been “Americanized”. Therefore, the experiences of this student demonstrate the findings of past research on international students where it was noticed that, “developing meaningful interpersonal relationships with members of the host society is key to a successful transition.” (Tomich & McWhirter & King, 2000)

The student from Bermuda also stated, “I have made many American friends, but I don’t know if they are ‘true friends’? They seem self-absorbed and the world doesn’t matter to them. The world revolves around their own people and I feel left out at times.” In spite of these apprehensions, he is still optimistic about his ability to make friends with them. “I interact with American students on a personal level. There wouldn’t be any purpose of traveling to another country if I piously held on to my beliefs and didn’t learn from others? If we cannot accept differences and understand that people in every country are different, we should stay home and avoid traveling. If I’m making American friends

in the bar instead of the Cave or Mather, I'm making friends in the bar. I want to make these friends from different backgrounds by understanding that people are individually and culturally different in every country no matter where you go.”

This student's view of traveling to another country, accepting differences and learning from distinct cultures is defined as international education. It is “an understanding and tolerance, respect for other cultures, this includes interaction with different people who have different beliefs, lifestyles and principles. It means having the same respect for other cultures as you have for your own. Being open-minded to fit in different cultures and try to understand they “why” to certain traditions, customs and values.” (Garavalia, 1997)

Conclusion: Based on the findings of this research, it is evident that the college experiences of both international student groups do not match their pre college expectations and they feel an “otherness” from American students. From carefully interpreting their experiences, I am inclined to believe that a narrow definition cannot be used to define both groups. The South Asian students feel a greater sense of “otherness” from American students because they are suffering from the cultural differences that arise by living in a foreign university. This “otherness” is felt within the academic and social culture at Trinity College, which makes them interact more closely with other international students who share similar lifestyles. Thus, these students are more likely to suffer from “both a culture shock and a sense of alienation in classrooms and dormitories that last through their senior year.” (Dodge, 1990)

Conversely, although the other international Non South Asian students also feel an “otherness” from American students, these feelings are mainly caused because they dislike how ignorant, two faced and cliquish Americans are socially. Additionally, and in

depth, they do not feel this “otherness” within the academic environment and as a whole socially unlike the South Asian students. While three students from South Africa, and Zimbabwe interact more with other international students, the 2 others from England and Bermuda assimilate well with American students on a personal level.

Thus, the South Asian students feel a greater sense of “otherness” from American students than the other international Non South Asian students.

Goals from Future Research on International Students at Trinity College

The findings of this research are based on the interviews I conducted with 5 informants from both groups of international students: South Asian and other international Non South Asian students. While it would be fair to say that the research findings are justified for the population studied, broad generalizations cannot be made on the basis of these findings for the entire South Asian and other international Non South Asian student population at Trinity College. Therefore, if provided with adequate time and resources, I would like to further investigate the experiences of a greater number of international students from both groups to confirm or reject the presented findings. In the future project, I would like to research the culture of these different international countries, which determines their students’ assimilation with people of distinct nationalities. It has been found that, “the nature of the relationship indicated that when foreign students are from cultures that are similar to the host culture, they experienced lower levels of social difficulty.” (Olaniran, 1996) I would like to investigate whether the culture in countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, but in particular, England and

Bermuda, are more closely related to the American culture than the South Asian culture, which makes their students more successful at assimilating with others?

A future project will also allow me to research how American students initiate contact with international students at Trinity College. As past research suggests, “one of the most frequently overlooked dimensions of assimilation is the extent to which it depends more on the behavior of natives than of immigrants. Most conventional definitions and analyses of the subject assume that assimilation involves affirmative acts or choices that immigrants alone must make. But the real secret of American assimilation is that the native-born Americans- not the immigrants- have made it work.” (Salins, 1997) Therefore, my close observations and personal interactions with American students will reveal how open they are to initiating or reciprocating assimilation with foreign-born students.

Understanding that Trinity’s study abroad program encourages many American students to go abroad and explore different cultures, I would like to research the most popular foreign destination for these students. My common questions from this part of the research would be: Where do most American students go abroad to study? It has been found that “The most powerful intercultural learning often takes place overseas, when Americans experience other cultures around the clock, which profoundly affects their attitudes and knowledge of other countries.” (Peterson & Briggs & Dreasher & Horner & Nelson, 1999) Therefore, I would research whether American students are more receptive of international students after they have studied abroad, and if so, why? Or do American students initiate more contact with international students whose countries they previously visited? Is there any difference between freshmen and senior American students (who

have studied abroad) in terms of the way they assimilate with international students? The findings from this part of the research would inform me of the biases American students might have in assimilating with students from certain countries.

Lastly, since the current research has suggested that both groups of international students already feel an “otherness” from American students on campus, I am interested to know what measures the college is taking to create a sense of unity among them? For example, “At Denison University, foreign students eat dinner once a week with American students, professors, and a foreign student advisor to talk about issues that concern international students” (Dodge, 1990). I would like to know how Trinity College is promoting positive interactions and creating a sense of community among its diverse student population.

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