

“My Buddy Makes Me Uncomfortable”: Ethical and Cross-Cultural Considerations of Matching International Buddies Program Participants

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; International Student and Scholar Services; Internationalization and Global Learning; Program Design; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case occurs within the context of a large R1 university in the United States. The university has a population of over 2,500 international students on a campus of nearly 40,000 total students. Three-quarters of the total population of international students are graduate students. One of the programs that supports international students and aims to build intercultural relationships on campus is the International Buddies program. Each semester, applicants apply to participate in the program and are matched with a buddy to make a friend from another part of the world and to share about their cultures. In a given semester, there are typically between 100-200 participants in the program (including both domestic and international students). Undergraduate students, graduate students, and university faculty/staff members are all welcome to apply. Domestic students are defined as students that self-identify as from the U.S., and international students are defined as those that self-identify as not from the U.S., and typically hold J-1 or F-1 visas.

Case

The application window for International Buddies opened prior to the start of classes and closed a couple of weeks into the semester. The application asked for students to categorize themselves as undergraduate students, graduate students, or faculty/staff members, in addition to asking for contact information, insight into interests outside of class, and preferences in a buddy.

The current program matching process involves entering all of the program applicants into a computer algorithm that weighs the different questions of the application according to their pre-determined importance. It then generates a list of partners. This computer program was built to streamline and facilitate the matching process in a sustainable fashion as the International Buddies program grew in scope. After the students were matched with their buddies, they received an email with their partners' contact information and instructions to reach out and engage with their buddy for the semester.

Once the pairings had been communicated, a few students shared with the International Buddies program coordinator that they were uncomfortable with their matching. They each independently asked if it would be a possibility to be matched with a different buddy or to drop out of the program. Most students communicated their discomfort via email, but another student approached the program coordinator in person to discuss what she should do about the situation. All of the students that expressed concern about their buddies were domestic undergraduate female students that had been paired with international graduate male students through the matching process.

Upon further investigation, it was discovered that:

- There was an imbalance in program participants (there were many international male graduate student applicants and not many domestic male graduate students; similarly, there were many domestic female undergraduate student applicants and not as many international undergraduate student applicants).
- Some international graduate male students had specifically requested to be matched with domestic undergraduate female students.
- The algorithm weighted the "Academic Preference" for a buddy heavily because it was assumed that people would want to connect with people similar to them in academic level. Because some international graduate students specifically requested undergraduate level students, the algorithm paired them this way.
- Even though some female domestic undergraduate students had requested buddies that were also undergraduates, there were more graduate students that applied, so the program overrode the undergraduate female students' preferences in order to match them with a graduate buddy to maximize the number of students in the program.

After looking more into the situation and the factors that resulted in these unexpected matches, the International Buddies program coordinator shuffled pairings around so that as many of the domestic undergraduate female students and international graduate male students could be matched with buddies closer to them in age and academic level. There was one case where there were no more pairings to move around and a domestic female undergraduate student was taken out of the program and told that she would be matched again the following semester.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- If you were the International Buddies program coordinator, how would you respond to the students' requests to switch buddies or to drop out of the program?
- What factors should or should not be collected via the program application? (Ex. gender, academic level, interests, etc.) How should these factors be weighted while matching buddies?
- How might an applicant's cultural background influence their preferences in a match or their perception of the match?
- Should programmatic or structural changes be made to avoid situations like this in the future? If so, how?
- Should artificial intelligence computer programs be used for matching buddies in situations such as this? What are the advantages and disadvantages to using technology for this purpose?