

**Bridging the Social Gap: The Role of Ethnic Organizations in University  
Communities**

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**Introduction**

Each year, around eighteen million students in the United States, including those from around the world, embark on a new chapter of their academic journey, eager to enter the society they have worked tirelessly to experience. However, despite their universities' dedication to fostering an inclusive environment, social and cultural gaps often emerge between international and local students, causing a rift in the community. Local students often struggle to relate to international peers due to perceived cultural differences, leading to social fragmentation rather than integration (Huizinga, 2016). While in a broader picture it may seem like the international students' responsibility to fit into American society, integration is a mutual challenge that requires both parties to put in effort rather than only expecting one side to adapt.

While this challenge still exists, many students have taken initiative to address this divide by starting student organizations, including ethnic organizations. Among many of the organizations that have emerged and continue to be, the Thai-American Student Organization, TASA, an ethnic organization aimed to unite Thai and Thai-American students while promoting Thai heritage at UC Davis, addresses the existing social and cultural gap between international students and local students. The existence of ethnic organizations allows students to maintain their cultural identity as they adjust to new environments to feel a sense of belonging (Smart et al., 2021). Although it is true that coming into a new environment, it may be optimal to reach out and initiate connections; some people may need help doing so, and these organizations work as a great way to facilitate and allow people to practice creating connections in a new environment. While the existence of these organizations can serve as a vital support system for strengthening connections between local and international students, they also pose questions such as whether or not they are utilized as cultural communities that keep international students locked in their own comfort zones or a tool to bridge the cultural gap within the community.

## Literature Review

Ethnic organizations have emerged as a crucial support system, offering a sense of community and familiarity to international students. However, whether or not these organizations facilitate or serve as an obstacle to broader social integration remains a topic of debate (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Studies have suggested that ethnic organizations provide international students with a safe space to have cultural support as they venture into the new community (Trice, 2004). On the other hand, some researchers argue that heavily relying on ethnic organizations may create comfort zones that chain students from exploring larger communities, limiting interactions with the broader student population and reinforcing these cultural divisions that we are trying to steer away from (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). This raises concerns about whether ethnic organizations serve as bridges to social integration or serve as barriers to cross-cultural interaction.

Furthermore, recent studies have been shown to support the establishments of ethnic organizations. For example, Caligiuri demonstrates that well-structured social activities can enhance international students' sense of belonging and provide them with social support (Caliguri, 2020). This result emphasizes the importance of fostering cross-cultural relationships while also having the support of your own. A discourse community would serve as an environment that provides these structured experimental activities.

In “Understanding Discourse Communities” by Dan Melzer, he describes the criteria for what makes something a Discourse Community to include a common public goal, mechanism of intercommunication, use of these communication mechanisms to provide information and feedback, one or more genres that help further the goals of the discourse community, a specific

lexis (specialized language), and a threshold level of expert members. An ethnic organization includes a specific lexis, or at the very least, an understanding of a specific lexis. There is also a common goal. The goal is to uplift fellow students and provide a space where students can learn about their ethnicity and create strong connections, preferably their own family as they venture into a new environment.

My study aims to address and find solutions to bridge the social and cultural gap that exists between international and local students by discussing the experiences of those who are in ethnic organizations and those who are not. By gathering firsthand accounts, I can provide a strong understanding of how ethnic organizations influence students' social integration in bridging cultural divides.

## **Methods**

To measure the effectiveness of these organizations, this project will include qualitative research, interviewing two people from these following categories:

- International students who moved to the US right before college
- International students who moved to the US a couple years prior to entering college
- Thai-American students born and raised in the States
- Local students who are not in an ethnic organization
- Local students who are not in an ethnic organization

I conducted interviews with my participants, asking a series of questions that would allow them to comfortably recount their experience being in TASA but more importantly, their experience navigating a new community. Although my interviews slightly varied based on the

responses I received and the groups of participants I interviewed, some examples of the questions that I asked includes:

- Can you tell me about your experience joining TASA?
- Was it difficult to adapt and befriend people at UCD?
- If you spent some time in the States before coming to UC Davis, can you describe your experience connecting with other people?
- Do you believe TASA has helped you make more connections than before?
- Do you remember a specific occasion where you felt at home or a sense of belonging during an event?
- Have you become closer to more local students through TASA?
- Do you believe you would have a harder time connecting with local students if not for TASA?
- What about TASA allows for an easier process of making friends with the other members?

Interviews would be the best form of research to fully understand each person's experience and perspective on social integration, allowing the interviewees to extensively elaborate on their feelings in ways that a survey would not allow them to completely do. Through open-ended questions, I gathered qualitative data on how TASA influences their ability to form cross-cultural friendships. I began with interviewing Thai-Americans who grew up here, then those who grew up in Thailand but came to America a couple years before entering college, and finally those who grew up in Thailand. I then interviewed international students and local students who are not in an ethnic organization to compare their experiences to the results I received from those who are participating in one. Afterwards, I coded and organized my

interview responses to identify recurring patterns with key words and the effectiveness of TASA events in fostering those cross-cultural connections. This method allows me to examine the answers discussed with those who are experiencing it themselves. My participants are solely students from UC Davis and are mainly those who partake in activities of TASA, as they would be more open about their real experience in college to someone they are familiar with.

## **Results**

Going through my results and organizing them showed a collection of ideas that seemed to appear often throughout my interviews. While most of the interview results leaned towards supporting my hypothesis, I also received some that showed a differing perspective.

### ***Barriers in Understanding***

Based on my first two interview answers from international students who moved to the US a couple years prior to entering college, my hypothesis has been correct so far, as I observe a trend in TASA being helpful as a bridge to connect international and local students. They claimed that they understood American culture and values from consumption of western media, so it was not difficult to adapt.

***Jane:** I had already spent some time in the States before coming to UC Davis so I was kinda familiar with American culture even though I still had a lot to learn and adapt to, but making close friends that could truly understand me and my values was still challenging. People already had their social circles, and it felt hard to break in at times.*

However, understanding and following values are different, so there was still a social and cultural divide between them and local students as both sides understood that there was a difference in their lifestyles. That mindset looming in the back of their head made it difficult to fully interact with new people, however, their time in TASA has allowed for that mindset to disappear.

***Plum:** Talking in TASA makes me forget that although we have the same blood we grew up differently with different morals and ideals. I've been able to apply that to talking with [local students] outside of TASA".*

Interviewing local students has shined light on the experience of communicating to international students and if they have similar experiences with international students.

***Lena:** TASA encouraged me to talk to foreign students because I wouldn't be worried about them not wanting to talk to me. If they were here then I know that they're looking for friends, but it's too intimidating to go up to an international student out in public.*

The presence of students at a general meeting for these organizations would usually infer that they want to expand their social circles and get to know people, which erases the anxiety of whether or not someone wants to talk to you. With this initial barrier out of the way, local students find it easier to approach international students and create new bonds.

### ***Feeling a Sense of Belonging***

Furthermore, many students who are not a part of TASA—those who are from America, international students, and international students who stayed a couple years prior to college—have stated that they regret not joining an ethnic organization in the beginning of their first-year, as they could have made many connections and found more extracurricular activities to participate in around the area. Ben, a Sophomore student who decided to join VSA, the Vietnamese Student Association, a couple months ago, described the feeling of joining as “feeling a sense of belonging” and that he wished he would have gotten over his anxiety of talking to people through joining VSA rather than not doing so based on his anxiety. Many other newcomers of TASA expressed the same feeling, wishing that they had joined sooner as they believe they have found many more connections through TASA.

Beyond the prospects of making connections, another local student who I interviewed elaborated on her experience not being in an ethnic organization.

**Katelyn:** I truly believe that if I joined [Hong Kong Student Association] I would get the chance to practice my Cantonese and get to be in touch with my culture more, ‘cause my parents don’t speak it with me. I always imagined me having a lot of Chinese friends in college, especially international students. Unfortunately I do not have the time to balance another org’ on my plate so I just look at updates on Instagram instead.

Not only does she believe that joining an ethnic organization would allow her to build on her connections, but she also believes that it could allow her to connect with her culture more. She also wishes to join and regrets not doing so, which resonates with the fact that she believes she feels a sense of belonging in the Hong Kong Student Association, even though she cannot join.

### ***Discrimination***

Another barrier besides cultural differences is discrimination. My other interviewee from the local student group also described being at the receiving end of a joke about not being an international in a group full of international students.

**Colin:** I understand that it might have been their love language or maybe just their humor or a method they found to strengthen their pride while being in a different country, but being considered the “token white friend,” also didn’t encourage me to continue talking to people who weren’t from here as well.



Experiencing microaggression or sometimes blatant racism that has discouraged them from reaching out to people or continuing to grow their understanding of other cultures.

### ***Navigating the Broader Community***

One of my interviewees, a local student who is not in any organization, explained his thoughts about being in college without the responsibility of attending meetings.

**Yixing:** I love not having to take the time out to go to meetings. It makes my academic schedule that much more flexible. I'd rather find friends in classes or through studying at the library than be forced to discuss my life with people out of obligation.

His perspective on ethnic organizations would discourage my hypothesis, as he finds the environment of an ethnic organization suffocating to be finding friends.

### **Discussion**

As I had anticipated, the findings of my study align with existing research that I have cited previously, reinforcing my interpretations of certain results on the role of ethnic organizations in the integration of international and local students.

### ***Difference in Cultural Values***

The concept of cultural differences being an obstacle for conversations between local and international students was also observed in Huizinga's research where he states, "[Local] students, being aware of cultural differences and mindful of language difficulties, often grew tired of worrying about offending or saying the wrong thing when working with diverse peers." He listed this acknowledgement as an obstacle for communication between local and international students. However, my interviewee was able to overcome that obstacle, as she

eased into communication in a new environment by communicating with someone who she knew had similar ideals but a different upbringing than her. This process helped ease her into talking with someone who could be completely different from her, which shows that ethnic organizations serve as a positive impact in bridging the gap between international and local students.

### ***Feelings of Belonging***

A key aspect of student integration is the sense of belonging. Regardless of whether or not my interviewees were international or local students, they all craved the feeling of belonging within the community. The Glass & Westmont research in 2014 emphasizes that "the sense of belonging is a crucial determinant of [students'] academic success and cross-cultural interactions," which supports my belief that ethnic organizations are a necessity for connection building and a sense of unity among students. Similarly, Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune (2011) found that "international students who establish strong friendship networks experience lower levels of homesickness and higher satisfaction with their university experience," reinforcing the importance of social connections beyond ethnic organizations.

In addition to confirming previous research, the findings provide deeper insight into the varying experiences of students who do not participate in ethnic organizations. Consistent with the work of Caligiuri et al. (2020), structured social activities and institutional support programs appear to play a significant role in fostering successful integration for those outside ethnic organizations. This highlights the importance of inclusive initiatives that encourage intercultural dialogue and engagement beyond ethnic boundaries.

### ***Discrimination***

Huizinga also acknowledges the occurrences of discrimination, as he states, “Humor can produce an “us ” versus “them ” mentality in both groups (Carroll, 2005)” (2016). My interviewee understood that the joke being said had truths to it, but it made him less confident to befriend international students. However, his time in TASA has made him more confident to talk to international students, and it got rid of the “us versus them mentality,” as everyone was seen as the same when it came to events and gatherings.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight the role of ethnic organizations in shaping the students’ community. While these organizations provide essential social support, they may also unintentionally limit broader cross-cultural interactions. Finding a strong balance between its support and limits and the impact of ethnic organizations is crucial for the community, as it could impact the students’ academic success and more importantly their mental health living in a new community. By recognizing the advantages of ethnic organizations, institutions and the students can navigate ways to prevent a cultural gap or close it.

Institutional efforts, such as structured social programs, like ethnic organizations, have been shown to foster meaningful relationships between international and local students based on the evidence provided in the study. These initiatives, whether student-led or institution-led, can serve as bridges, encouraging collaboration and interaction beyond ethnic divisions by easing students into the broader community. Through implementations of these programs that promote

inclusivity, universities can help students develop strong connections within the broader student community while still maintaining the cultural support they need.

Based on the results gathered, we should implement and encourage the establishment of more ethnic organizations to allow for easier communication between local and international students. Society is always changing, shaped by the community members within it. With these findings, we should take initiative and encourage the establishment of more ethnic organizations, and we should continue research to continue exploring strategies enhancing student integration, considering the evolving society within higher education.

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