

With more choice, friends are more similar -- but not closer

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People prefer to make friends with others who share their beliefs, values, and interests. The more choice people have, the more their friends are alike, according to research published in *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

People aren't looking for [identical twins](#), but they seek similarity because it makes for smoother, more pleasant interaction. When people have choice—and most Americans do—they find friendships and romantic relationships with people who share their attitudes, religious beliefs, and politics. But what happens when they have less choice? Are people forced to "make do" with a less-than-perfect match, and are those friendships satisfying?

Angela Bahns of Wellesley College and Chris Crandall and Kate Pickett of the University of Kansas compared colleges in the Midwest with small enrollment (averaging about 500 students) with a college with over 25,000 students. Researchers approached pairs of students interacting in public, and asked them questions about their attitudes, beliefs, and health behaviors.

On nearly every attitude and behavior measured, the large campus friends were more similar to each other than small campus friends. This may be because people from the large campus felt they had more [choice](#), and that they could more easily switch friends than students from smaller campuses.

Although the large campus friends were more similar to each other, the small campus [students](#) rated their friendships as closer than the large campus pairs. The campuses were equal on how long the people had been friends and on how much time they spent together.

"[People](#) prefer to make friends with others who are similar to them. But one can only choose among the available alternatives—a person is far more likely to satisfy their specific grocery needs at a supermarket than a convenience store," the researchers write. "The irony of the situation is that as settings get more and more diverse, [friendships](#) become more homogeneous."

More information: The article "Social ecology of similarity: Big schools, small schools and social relationships" will appear in Group Processes and Intergroup Relations and is available free for a limited time at: gpi.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/07/05/1368430211410751.full.pdf+html

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