

## Assignment 3 - Ethnography

### Introduction

In the Northeastern Curry Student Center many people purchase food and eat that food in the dining area. When dining at peak hours, generally around 12pm and 5pm, it can be busy and extremely difficult to find a seat. This is a small problem, but if it was easier to pick a seat there could be less congestion in during peak hours, making it easier to get food and/or walk through. Also, making it easier to find a seat could reduce a person's stress level during this busy time they are trying to take a break. I believe technology could potentially improve the experience of finding a seat, so I spent an hour in Curry at 5pm watching people attempting to find seating.



### Observations

In Curry, most of the people that I saw were students, but there were also staff members and faculty members there as well. Generally, I found no difference between the behaviors of students and faculty/staff. The most common behavior I found was that when people came into Curry, or had just gotten food and were now looking for a seat, they would slow down or stop near the entrance of the seating area. They would then scan the area looking for a place to sit. If they identified a seat immediately, they would go sit there. Though in many cases they would not immediately see a seat. In this case they would then walk up through the aisles looking for seating until they came upon a place to sit. In some instances they would not find a seat and I saw them leave Curry, presumably to find another place to sit. Though some variations to this

behavior did occur. Single people vary from groups. In Curry there are long tables where individuals tend to sit. There are also round tables and smaller square tables that are meant for a small group. Groups generally search for a single where they can take up the whole space. Singles will sit at either a single table, or a long communal table. Though at a long table, people generally look for bigger empty spaces. So if there is a single free seat next to someone else, people will most likely not sit there. They will continue searching and scanning for somewhere with more space. This often causes a sort of zig-zag formation on the long tables. And individuals will be on the end. Then two or three seats down another person will sit on the opposite side of the table, then again and again. This behavior may be because it is not socially acceptable to go sit that close to someone you do not know. Though the more crowded it is, the more people will sit close to each other. There are also cases where people are looking for someone they know that already has a seat. The person sitting down will usually motion in some way so that the other person can see them. Waving their hand in the air is common. One pair was on the phone, presumably trying to describe where the table was.

### **Interviews**

My first interview was with a college age female that sat down to eat by herself. A few things she said:

- She did not want to sit at a group table by herself because she did not want to take up an entire table by herself since it was busy (she was sitting at a long table).
- She tries not to sit right next to someone if there is space because it is weird to sit next to someone you don't know.
- I asked if she tries to eat during non-busy hours, and she said yes, but because of her schedule on that day she had to eat at that time.

My second interview was with a group of college age males eating together. Some things they said:

- When looking for a table, they usually try to sit in the back at the group tables so they walked to that section first and found a table.
- Sometimes if they can't find a group table or a good space they will leave Curry and go somewhere else like upper level of Curry or the library.
- I asked if they would ever split up to sit down, but they said no, they would just go to another location to find seats.

### **Conclusions**

After doing this ethnographic study, I believe the pain point of finding a seat has to do with knowing where to look. If someone is looking in a small section it is easy enough to locate a free seat. But in a big space like Curry, people do not always know where to look, which means walking around and scanning for empty sections. If there were signifiers of the most empty sections, like a scale of LED lights that represented the amount of free seating in the area, it would help people quickly identify the sections with the most seats and get them moving to a section quickly. This would remove the unnecessary time of walking around and scanning for seats. From far away, where people generally begin their search, it is not easy to see where

there are empty seats/table. These indicators would inform people of which sections are the best to head towards. To be able to detect empty seats, there could either be sensors in chairs, or some sort of image recognition that detects the number of people in each defined section.