Immigrant families and the college experience: Perspectives of Filipina Americans

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As Filipina/o Americans comprise the largest Asian immigrant population in the United States, the experience of college-aged children of immigrants becomes an increasing concern at the university level. The purpose of this qualitative research investigation was to explore the ways Filipina American students negotiated their home environment and college experiences. Three primary themes emerged from the data: family/parent influence, home obligations/gender differences, and importance of negotiating their Filipina American identity within the context of their home and college experiences. Provided are implications, particularly for student affairs professionals, administrators, and researchers.

In 1997, the United States (U.S.) immigrant population, which includes either foreign-born or U.S.-born children of immigrants, numbered 55 million people, representing one-fifth of the U.S. population (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). As the number of immigrant families in the U.S. continues to grow, the experience of college-aged children of immigrants in colleges and universities becomes a topic of increasing concern (Chung, 2001). Because the majority of parents of immigrant children often are not familiar with the educational system in the U.S., this tends to result in conflict with their children’s experience in school (Fuligni, 1997). Despite the growing immigrant population, only a few studies exist that investigate college-aged children of immigrants and of specific ethnic groups (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

Constituting a large component of immigrant families from Asia, Filipina/o Americans represent the fastest growing population among immigrants in the U.S. (Espiritu & Wolf, 2001). Specifically, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, there were 12.5 million Asian Pacific Islanders (APAs), of which 2.3 million comprised the Filipina/o population (Yan & Ong, 2003). Since the mid 1960s, the Philippines has been the source of the second largest immigrant population next to Mexico and comprises the largest Asian immigrant group both in California and the U.S. (Espiritu & Wolf). Despite the Philippines long standing relationship as a former U.S. colony, Filipina/o Americans remain a “remarkably understudied and overlooked group in U.S. culture and academic research” (Espiritu & Wolf, p. 157). Specifically, current studies that focus on their experience in higher education have been extremely lacking (Okamura & Agbayani, 1997).

Although the APA college experience has been studied on various levels, such as psychosocial issues, academic achievement, and cultural values (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2001; Yeh, 2004), few studies have focused on subgroups that comprise the APA category. Consequently, this results in stereotyping and homogenizing the diverse experiences of APA college students (Escueta & O’Brien, 1995; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Ting, 2000). Because the

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APA category includes approximately 50 ethnic groups, capturing an accurate picture is virtually impossible (Lee, 2006). The diversity within the APA group varies with regard to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, language, and religion, as well as U.S. generational status, social class, and family characteristics (Yeh). Thus, many researchers contend that disaggregating data within the APA category is an important factor to develop a better understanding of the needs and concerns of APA college students (Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi; Nakanishi, 1989; Siu, 1996).

Further, the lack of disaggregating APA data has also further reinforced the stereotype of APA students as model minorities (Bennett, 1995; Nakanishi, 1989; Siu, 1996; Yeh, 2004). For example, the model minority stereotype assumes APA students are intellectually high achieving and are not in need of student support services. As a result, focused outreach to APAs is minimal or nonexistent. Given that very few utilize the counseling center, staff often conclude that APAs have no need for psychological services (Suzuki, 2002). This assumption oversimplifies social and intellectual achievements and ignores the variation across individuals and groups. Based on this stereotype, APA students are perceived as academically acclimated, motivated, and from well adjusted families. In turn, this may also play a role in the attention of most research to be focused on high academic achievement of APA college students and less focused on the needs of specific APAs (Hune, 2002; Nakanishi). Many researchers concur that studies on APAs in the area of college retention and persistence are often lacking or misleading (Siu; Yeh). Therefore, the need to study the distinct groups within the APA category is imperative.

Although fewer studies have focused on understanding the college experiences of women of color (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Lee, 1997; Rendon, 1992), there is a dearth of studies that have examined the academic experiences of Filipina Americans. For example, in a study conducted by Wolf (1997) about the children of Filipina/o immigrants, a proportion of the study included college-aged Filipina Americans who shared their struggles with relating to their parents, some of whom spoke of suicidal ideation or attempted suicide. Another study involving a research report disseminated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found an unusually high proportion of adolescent, high school-aged Filipina Americans who reported suicidal ideation (45.6%) and, in a prior survey, suicidal attempts (23.3%; Espiritu & Wolf, 2001). These numbers were the highest of any ethnic group studied.

Given the existing research, the current study examines the experience of college aged children of immigrants within the APA category—Filipina Americans. This study not only addresses the need to recognize the very distinct immigrant cultures within the APA category but also explores the college experience of women of color. This study has been guided by two main research questions: (a) How do Filipina American college students experience college? and (b) What are the influences that affect Filipina American students’ experience while in college?

METHOD

This study drew from a larger study that examined the overall educational experiences of 143 Filipina/o American college students at a predominantly White, large public research university in southern California given the pseudonym West Coast University. During the course of the original study, the researcher determined that the responses by the women revealed distinctive themes about their college experience and warranted further investigation.
In the present study, particular attention was focused on the lived experiences of the Filipina American college women. Feminist researchers such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) challenged the earlier feminist research about the importance of the inclusion of women of color. In addition, feminist women of color challenged the inextricable intersection of race, class, and gender (Olesen, 2005). Further, Yen Le Espiritu (2003, as cited in Olesen, 2005) commented, “Racism affects not only people of color but organizes and shapes experiences of all women (p. 241).”

Participants
Filipina/o American students accounted for 5% of the total undergraduate population of 17,505 at the research site. Given their low representation in the undergraduate population, the selection of participants was purposeful (Patton, 2001), gathering data from student organizations, classes, referrals from students, and university staff and administrators. In this study, a total of 82 undergraduate Filipina Americans volunteered and participated. The college year of the sample population was: 18% \((n = 15)\) freshman, 20% \((n = 16)\) sophomores, 24% \((n = 20)\) juniors, and 38% \((n = 31)\) seniors. In terms of immigration status, the majority of the women \((76\%, n = 62)\) identified as second generation \(\text{(born in the U.S. to immigrant parents; 18\% \((n = 15)\) as first generation \(\text{born in the Philippines and came to the U.S. in their teens); and 6\% \((n = 3)\) as third generation (both parents and children born in the U.S.). Further, 56\% \((n = 46)\) were the first to attend college, and 40 \% \((n = 33)\) had one or both parents who had attended college.}

Qualitative Data Collection and Analytic Procedures
This research investigation was based on findings from a qualitative study on Filipina American college students. The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences for Filipina American college students at West Coast University (pseudonym) in southern California. This article seeks to capture the “essence” of an experience through the voices of the participants (Creswell, 1998).

Using a feminist perspective, this research focused on the ways in which Filipina Americans make sense of their college experience. The study utilized data collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The questions were open ended involving their specific experiences as Filipina Americans at West Coast University. Students were asked to describe some influences on their experiences as Filipina American college students including ethnic identity, family, friends, Filipino culture, and negotiation among these areas. Sample questions from the qualitative protocol included: (a) Describe the process in which you began to think about your ethnic identity, (b) What does it mean to identify as a Filipina American? and (c) Describe the influences outside of college that affect your experience in college. Follow-up questions were asked for further elaboration of responses. Attinasi (1992) emphasized the importance of using qualitative methods in higher education research that provides students with an opportunity to elucidate full, rich descriptions of their experiences and perceptions.

The interviews were conducted on campus by the researcher who identifies as Filipina American. According to Baca Zinn (1979), researchers who are members of marginalized groups have at times an “insider” advantage of obtaining more detailed, candid responses and picking up subtleties or nuances of the culture. For example, research participants may perceive a sense of trust with members from the same gender or ethnicity, thus adding a different dimension to the results of the study. Delgado Bernal (2002), in her discussion...
about insider researchers and Chicana feminist epistemology, coined the term “cultural intuition,” a perspective in which she includes not only the importance of one’s personal experience but also collective and “community memory” (p. 530).

An important aspect of feminist research is enhancing the connection between the researcher and the participants by resisting a dichotomy between self and the other (Sprague, 2005). The participant “is not just a source of information but rather a person who is constructing meaning for the researcher” (Sprague, p. 141). In the case of this study, in which the researcher identified as Filipina American and interviewed Filipina Americans, the participants may have perceived a sense of trust and willingness to share more detailed experiences. A non-Filipina American may have been perceived differently, and therefore, elicited different responses.

Before each interview, participants were informed that pseudonyms for their names and the university would be used to ensure confidentiality. Each participant was interviewed once, and the interviews ranged in length between 1.5 to 3 hours. Some students, due to time constraints (e.g., class, meetings), returned to either complete their interview or further expand on their responses. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. In order to establish trustworthiness and credibility in the study, extensive interaction with the participants, rich thick descriptions, and triangulation were performed (Charmaz, 2000; Creswell 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss, 1987). In the larger study, triangulation was conducted using quantitative survey scales to further strengthen the qualitative findings. However, the objective of the present study was to focus on depth rather than mere reporting. As one who has extensive interaction with Filipina American students at the college level, I was able to build trust and develop a deeper understanding of their experiences, which in turn allowed for a detailed description of the participants and study setting.

This study was largely based on grounded theory strategies incorporated into the research process. According to Charmaz (2000), “grounded theory methods specify analytic strategies, not data collection” (p. 514). The impetus for this study emerged as a result of the women’s qualitative narratives. For example, based on the work of Charmaz, strategies included continuously asking questions, utilizing researcher’s notes, and exploring “hunches” (p. 514). Further, open coding was conducted, which involved analyzing the data line by line to maintain a focus on the Filipina’s lived experiences. During the course of coding, through examining narratives, I found numerous similarities associated with the emerging themes (e.g., family/parental influence and home obligations and gender differences). These statements were grouped together into “meaning units” thus “texturing” the description of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, through memo writing, I was able to refine the categories and further understand relationships among them. Finding common elements or themes were sought to provide further understanding of the participants’ college experiences. Huberman and Miles (1994) suggested conducting “counts” to see how frequently the common elements appear. It is through these strategies that the researcher can consider the various influences that participants’ experience in cultured spaces (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

RESULTS

The participant responses pointed to three main themes. The categories included: (a) family and parental influence, (b) home obligations/gender differences, and (c) the importance of maintaining and balancing their Filipina
American identity within the context of their home/family and college experiences. Although in some of their responses, these three areas posed as challenges in their lives, the participants articulated that ultimately the aforementioned areas served important roles in helping them negotiate their college and home/family environment.

Family/Parental Influence

Family and parental influence played an integral part in the participants describing themselves. All women interviewed mentioned parents as the primary influence in their decision to attend college and the specific college they would attend. The majority of the respondents’ parents encouraged them to apply to universities in close proximity to their families. In addition, many of the women described challenges that came along with their family ties. The subthemes that emerged from this section include: staying close to home, understanding parent struggles, parent/daughter relationship, and parent pressure/school stress.

Staying Close to Home. Although not all of those interviewed lived close to home, the majority were from the local area. Many of them shared that, although they were “expected” to attend college, they were highly encouraged and sometimes “forced” to apply to schools close to home, thus feeling limited in their college choices. Most of the respondents’ parents explained that attending college close to home would be less of a financial burden for the family. A number of the parents promised to buy their daughter(s) a new car should they be accepted at a local university with the expectation that they would commute to school. Still there were others, if they had an older sibling who currently attended college, whose parents wanted their daughter to attend the same school. The following students share their thoughts:

My mom actually bribed me to go here. She got me a car for my birthday/graduation gift but it was also an incentive, now that you have your car you can stay here in southern California so I was like, alright, whatever. It was kind of a deal, but I really didn’t care at that point. (Michelle, Sophomore)

I decided to go to West Coast University [pseudonym] since it was closer and cheaper. . . . My parents kind of had a say, they’re like, “Oh I hope you get in, you know because it’s closer.” They don’t want me too far away. I mean I applied to other universities and they didn’t want me to apply [there]. They didn’t want me to go. (Wendy, Junior)

Understanding Parent Struggles. With the exception of a few, the majority of the women were daughters of immigrant parents. The majority of their parents either did not have a college degree or did not attend college in the U.S. The fact that most of the parents did not attend college in the U.S. posed some challenges for the Filipina American students. For example, because many of the parents were unfamiliar with college expectations in the U.S., the parents expected their children to graduate in four years because all they had to do was “just study.” Extracurricular activities, from the parents’ perspective, were considered a “waste of time.” Most parents also discouraged their daughters from having a job in order to concentrate on school. Conversations about school often involved their parents sharing stories about their struggles in the Philippines and the U.S. All of the women indicated that they clearly understood their parents’ struggles and sacrifices to raise their family in the U.S. It was through their parents’ storytelling that the participants’ awareness was raised about their parents’ immigrant experience. For others, it was through their grandparents’ stories that they learned of family struggles.
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For the most part, if the grandparents shared challenges in their lives, it was more than likely that the grandparents lived with them and took care of the children, therefore having a significant influence in their granddaughter’s upbringing. The grandparents of one student, who was the youngest and only daughter, often shared their stories. For her, and for many of the participants in this study, there was an unspoken expectation that she would be the one who would eventually take care of her parents, instead of her older brother. Thus, this student felt the need to finish school quickly to help her parents with family expenses and obligations. She shared the following:

My grandparents from both sides [maternal, paternal] didn’t finish school... On my mothers’ side she only finished 3rd grade. In order to care for the family, she sold things at the market. My grandfather finished the 8th grade. He was a fisherman. Everything is based on the family and how you can help out the family. [My grandparents] told me to attain a degree especially a professional degree because that’s the best way that you can help your parents. Then you can support them... then you can have your own family. (Janice, Freshman)

Many of the women further reflected on their parents’ struggle to survive as immigrants, and yet they were able to provide opportunities for their children. Having learned about their parents’ experiences gave many of the respondents reason to stay close to home or live at home to help with family expenses. In turn, this influenced the students’ decisions, not only about which college to attend but also, as will be revealed later, other decisions during their college years. The following was shared by one student:

Just knowing the stories that my parents have [told] me... about how they grew up in the Philippines and how different it was [and] how I have more opportunities here... I can relate that with my culture. Because of what my parents experienced in the Philippines, I can take that and it makes me want to just do things well. (Johnlyn, Junior)

Parent/ Daughter Relationship. Every student shared in depth experiences about her relationship with her parents. For many of the participants this was very emotional. Only a few shared that they have a “good” relationship with their parents; the majority said their relationship was often “stressful” due to home obligations and pressure to do well in school. Because a few recognized that their parents were raising their children in an environment and country that is different from where they themselves grew up, it allowed, for some, a better understanding of their parents. However, learning to communicate with their parents had been very difficult. For example, the majority of the women spoke about their strained relationship with their mother. For many, their father was less available, often because of work schedules, or seemed less approachable. Students shared the following:

So it’s been really hard because I’m the baby girl in the family and my mom, of course she didn’t grow up here, she grew up in the Philippines and that’s a big part of it. Especially her being placed in another country where she’s completely separate from everything that she had for her whole life and then to raise her kids in this culture and to have her kids being brought up differently from her... is hard. (Monica, Freshman)

In general, she’s the kind of person that doesn’t listen, she’s just really hard to talk to and she always has to be right. It’s just hard talking to her. I just don’t bother. Stuff that’s going on with my family right now... when I try to talk to my mom and try to give her my perspective on it
she still doesn’t listen. She asks me for advice on stuff but she’s expecting me to tell her what she wants to hear, to reaffirm her. (Maya, Freshman)

*Pressure to Do Well in School.* Besides describing their relationship with their parents as “a struggle,” a large part of the respondents’ lives involved the added pressure to do well in school. Coupled with understanding their parents’ struggles and sacrifices, the students felt a sense of debt to their parents. A source of motivation for getting good grades would be away of “paying them back.” This also brought more anxiety and strain to their college experience. Some parents were described as “encouraging,” but the women also felt an “unsaid pressure” to obtain “A” grades. One student shared that she received B’s and her parents were “extremely disappointed.” A few respondents shared the following:

My parents are always encouraging to me study hard. They want me to graduate because that’s the only present that I can give them. They’ve taught me a lot. They give me the essential things that I need and they work really hard for it. I don’t work. They really want me to focus on school. (Constance, Junior)

They only want me to succeed and my success is theirs and that’s the only thing that I can give them too and maybe later on money when I make it (laughs). But yeah, my parents have helped me a lot. They’ve provided everything for me for school. (Melania, Freshman)

The expectation of high academic achievement in school (equated with grades of A’s) was often met with unpleasant interactions with their parents. Because the participants understood their immigrant parents’ hardships, they felt more pressure get A’s in school. Through their parents’ lens, pushing their children to do well may be a way of being supportive in their children’s education. However, this was often counter to the “support,” that the Filipina Americans sought from their parents. Support for the women often meant more understanding from their parents about the challenges and demands in their courses and the difficulties of being a woman of color at West Coast University. Many of the participants found it difficult to express concerns with their parents because they did not feel their parents would understand or that it would be perceived as being ungrateful for what their parents have provided.

**Home Obligations and Gender Differences**

For this theme, a few major points of contention with the respondents and their families included home obligations and gender differences, especially with male siblings. Whether the participants were the eldest or youngest sibling, gender played a differential role. Additionally, the women often associated the gender differential with parent “strictness.” One participant described it as “lock down.” The perception of their parents being strict about school and social life put further strains on their relationship. Because the majority of the parents were not raised in the U.S., the unfamiliar environment and surroundings may have influenced the degree of strictness placed on their daughters. For example, it was often discussed that the respondents understood their parents were “just trying to protect us” but constantly struggled to understand where their parents “were coming from” because their brothers were treated differently. One respondent shared that she felt she was not allowed to give her opinion or to make a point. It frustrated her that there was a double standard as she often observed her brother “talking back” to the parents with no repercussions.

They are really strict. It’s really hard. I can’t be who I want to be or I can’t hang out with who I wanted to so I was basically
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on lock down. I think they were trying to raise me the way they were raised . . . it kind of made me and my parents really distant. (Malee, Freshman)

You have to be obedient. You can’t talk back to your parents even if they’re wrong, you can’t say anything, you can’t give your opinion. Sometimes it feels like my parents don’t respect my opinion. (Jackie, Freshman)

Gender Differential. Those participants who had male siblings shared their frustration with not being able to “go out as much” or stay out longer. Where the women in this study had curfew, it was for the most part non-existent for their brother(s). In addition, the participants were expected to continue with their regular chores they had before college. It was often a source of frustration for many when their brother(s) were not given the same expectations. The women were met with strong opposition, mostly from their mothers, when they chose to point out inequities with household chores or curfew. Explanations given were often followed by “because he’s a guy.” Although many of the students recognized the gender inequity, some tried to reason with their parents but to no avail. Although this may not be uncommon with daughters in general, the topic of gender often came up.

My mom was complaining that I’m lazy, that I don’t clean at home . . . look at my brother, look at my dad. My mom’s like, “No but he’s the breadwinner of the family, he doesn’t have to do anything.” I’m like, “I can’t believe you said that.” That totally shocked me. I didn’t know how to argue that, when I argue with my mom I don’t get anywhere. (Rhea, Senior)

As far as rules go, I can’t stay out as late as my brothers or if I do it has to be because of school. It can’t be because I’m going out with my friends and I definitely have to call or else my parents will get really pissed. For a time I wasn’t allowed to talk on the phone with guys as opposed to my brothers they could talk to whoever they want. (Jill, Junior)

Biculturalism: Maintaining and Balancing Filipina American Identity with the Home and College Environment

Overall, the women in this study spoke at length about the importance of not forgetting about their culture while balancing college student life. All of the women interviewed equated family with their Filipina American identity. Their responses indicated that family was strongly connected to their identity as Filipina Americans. Though at times family relationships were the cause of much stress, they also saw family as their greatest support in school. Often, they spoke with other Filipina Americans in college who had similar experiences with their family. These conversations provided a support system while trying to meet the demands of college life. Participants in this study also discussed the importance of having role models and support networks at the university level. Some looked to women staff members of color on campus who they felt understood their struggles. Others mentioned the importance of having Filipina American staff or faculty as a source of support in college. The following is a quote reflecting the importance of their commitment to family.

I would drop everything when it’s for family, I would drop everything regardless of finals, regardless of anything else going on in my life. I would set that aside just for my family and I think that’s different between my brother and I because he can say, “No,” like he can resist family for studying but [it’s different for me]. (Verna, Freshman)

Although many of the women also con-
nected their Filipina American identity with food, family traditions, and customs, they also related and complicated their identity with the politics of using “P” or “F” in their spelling of (F)(P)ilipina American. Many continue to grapple with this issue. Exploring their ethnic identity, for the majority of the women, did not happen until they entered college. Others brought up topics of sexuality and the difficulty that comes along with identifying with the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) community and the fear of coming out to their parents and friends. Still others felt that because they were the only one of their friends from back home who went to college, there was a sense of not feeling that they belonged with their “old” circle of friends. As a result, many of the women articulated that at times, they did not have a sense of place “at home.”

Further, participants felt their “old” friends did not understand what they were experiencing in college. This also held true with the interaction with their parents. The majority of the parents did not see the importance of their daughters getting involved in extracurricular activities and believed that the students should concentrate only on studying for their courses. Talking with parents and noncollege friends about their college experiences proved to be challenging for all of the women. It is at this juncture that the Filipina Americans found it challenging for them to negotiate these parts of their lives. Understanding their various identities, locations, and situations as a college student and as a Filipina American continued to challenge them. The following was shared by the respondents.

I was the only one out of all my friends that went to college. Coming back [home] every single time was like moving back and forth. It was always this shift between worlds. And then I started saying some things and I think my parents were like, “We didn’t think we were sending her to school to be all militant or whatever.” (Eileen, Junior)

I associate me being Filipino American through my culture, through traditional values and morals that my parents and my family have instilled in me. I’m still trying to build that identity side of me. I don’t know the foundation, the real deep rootedness of it. I try to know through my family and try to ask them questions and how they lived. (Janelle, Senior)

Similar to most college students, many of the women, at the time of this study, were still exploring “who they are.” Although there may be similarities in some Asian American identity models, the Filipino American identity model (Nadal, 2004) emphasizes placing historical, sociocultural, and acculturation level in context. It is equally important, however, to incorporate the gender dimension as it adds complexity to how Filipina Americans negotiate their lives especially within the context of the university and their home environment. For many, this experience continues to be an ongoing component of their development.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this research investigation was to explore the experiences of Filipina American college students. The three themes that emerged from the study included: (a) family/parental influence, (b) home obligations and gender difference, and (c) maintaining and balancing Filipina American identity with the home and college environment. The data demonstrated significant influences and ways their college life was affected. Although literature addressing the lives of Filipina American college students is virtually nonexistent, there exists literature about children of immigrant families and women of color that help support their experience and merit further investigation. Further, topics such as biculturalism (Darder, 1991), gender differences and
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negotiating the home environment (Delgado Bernal, 2001), and others that address the balancing of multiple worlds (Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998) support the current study.

The participants described their experience of negotiating gender, ethnic identity, family, and college. In other words, these students were continuing to negotiate their multiple worlds (Cooper et al., 1998). The concept of biculturalism is generally defined as a process by which individuals learn to live in two different environments, the dominant culture and their ethnic minority culture (Darder, 1991; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). This is helpful in understanding the Filipina Americans experience in this study. Darder’s spheres of biculturalism addresses in depth the various processes by which bicultural persons may experience their environment. The spheres of biculturalism emphasize an axis relationship in which the structures of power (domination and resistance) interact with the dominant and subordinate culture simultaneously. The women in this study continually negotiated and renegotiated their identities as college students and as Filipina Americans.

The Filipina Americans who shared their experiences about their home environment and how that has influenced their college experience coincided with a similar study conducted by Delgado Bernal (2001) on Chicana students. Chicanas and what she labels as their “pedagogies of the home” have helped with their skills to survive in the educational system. These “pedagogies” are what Delgado Bernal (2001) described as the “communication, practices and learning that occur in the home and community” (p. 624) that help Chicana students negotiate their educational experiences. Chicana students’ biculturalism and commitment to their communities are examples of what has helped them negotiate their educational experience.

Rendon (1992) articulated a powerful narrative that reinforces the notion that students should not disconnect from their “past” or the familial connections because it plays an important role in their identity. She added that academic institutions, unfortunately, are set up so students of color should forget their past to be successful.

The students in the current study constantly referred to family as most important in their lives and a strong reflection of themselves. Some would “drop everything for family.” Although Wolf’s (1997) study examined Filipino students in general, some of her findings were specific to Filipina Americans. Some findings, such as the idea of family as the center and gender double standards, further reinforce the findings of the current study. In addition, participants in the present study expressed a strong commitment to family and, for some, the need to provide support and assistance to their parents after college. Existing research shows that ethnic minority and immigrant families in the U.S. focus on family responsibility and connection (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). This in turn, influences a sense of duty and obligation for the family that continues into the future. For example, research has shown that this connection with family also influences important life decisions of Latin and Asian adolescents (Hardway & Fuligni).

The participants in this study described that parents often shared their hardships in the Philippines and living in the U.S. The women in the study were conscious of the opportunities created for them by their parents. These stories were often translated by the respondents as a strong reminder and motivation to do well in school, hence the pressure to get As. Research conducted by Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1991) and Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) showed similar findings in which children of immigrant families are often made
aware of the adversities and difficulties of their parents.

Further, the women in this study were under much pressure to do well in school while expected simultaneously to maintain their duties at home (e.g. chores, helping parents), which reflects a theme of gender differentiation. There was a clear delineation between them and their brothers or other males in the household. Another important point of discussion is the “strictness” described by the Filipina American students. This involved not being able to socialize as much as their brothers or strict curfew times, which left the participants not feeling trusted by their parents. This finding is in agreement with the study by Espiritu and Wolf (2001) confirming that gender inequity continues to exist whereby the males in Filipino families are less restricted and are treated with more leniency.

Further, a few research studies on Filipino families (Agbayani Siewert, 1994; Agbayani-Siewert & Revilla, 1995) explained this as generational conflict in which parents tend toward “traditional hierarchical authority and demand respect and obedience from their children” (p. 163).” Wolf (1997) suggested the need to have less “gender neutral theoretical approaches” for a better understanding of Filipina Americans challenges within the family structure. Grappling with these challenges, coupled with college demands, brought further complexities to the participants’ situation. Thus, the participants continually negotiated how they understood themselves within their multidimensional environments.

Along similar lines, Wolf (1997), who did not argue for a “monocausal explanation . . . nor to demonize Filipino parents” (p. 474), explained that immigrant parents, especially those with the unique experience of Filipino parents, deal with their struggles to survive and raise a family in an environment entirely different from their own. The importance of ethnic identity with second generation Filipinos is further confirmed by Espiritu’s (1994) research, in which she stated that Filipino Americans used different strategies to construct their identity, emphasizing flux and multilinearity.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS**

This study explored the experience of Filipina American college students at a large, selective research university in southern California. The majority of the students were second generation whose parents either did not attend college or did not attend college in the U.S. Immigrant parents who have not experienced college in the U.S. will have different ways of understanding their children's educational experiences. As this population increases and becomes more diverse, specific issues need to be addressed regarding the experiences of Filipina American college students. Given that Filipinas/os are the largest Asian immigrant group, it is crucial that more research be conducted on this population (Espiritu & Wolf, 2001).

The study highlighted the voices of Filipina American college women and how they negotiate their experience between home and college environment. The overall findings suggest different ways of working with Filipina American students to improve their college experience. At the university level, practitioners need to address and recognize the vital link between family and college. It is important to understand that the dynamics of family does not involve only parent relationships but also those of siblings and in some cases extended family such as grandparents. The findings point to the need to link parents with their children’s college experience. Instead of “cutting the cord,” the findings show that
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separating from one’s family is not a viable option. Family and the college experience are inextricably linked. The challenge becomes how the university can help address these issues.

The data collected have important implications for the university at many levels: parent support/facilitation, campus-wide programming, residential life, career/academic advisors, and counseling psychologists. The implementation of these programs will take a great deal of collaboration among student affairs professionals, deans, department chairs, and faculty. The most important component is that university professionals must have an understanding of Filipina/o Americans’ college student experience. A starting point may be for professional development workshops in which this population is included in discussions. This however, must continue as ongoing training and discussion. The majority of the participants in this study have parents who are not completely familiar with the U.S. college system. Programs involving parents in the college process must be carefully planned and facilitated and recognize the racial, cultural, and gender concerns that parents may have. This can be implemented through various means in the university. For example, parent orientations must involve more than just information dissemination but also consider smaller discussion forums to allow for a comfortable environment where parents can express their concerns and expectations regarding their children, especially their daughters. In addition, at the programming level, developing campus-wide programs, mainly reaching out to women, that address school pressures and those that are specific to immigrant families will be an important source of support. This should not be just at the freshman level but continue throughout all class levels.

At both the counseling and residence life levels, staff need to have an understanding of the pressures that Filipina Americans may face while transitioning to college. Topics of discussion and training must include areas such as the high suicide ideation rate statistics of adolescent and college-aged Filipina Americans. Family obligations and expectations play a significant role in the decision-making process for these students. In addition, the continued gender double standards cause great distress for Filipina Americans. The ability for staff to facilitate these issues, providing support groups and suicide ideation management strategies, may be beneficial. Academic/career advisors and psychologists need to have an understanding of the gender dimension of Filipino American identity. For example, instead of perceiving family obligations and expectations as a liability, they must take great care when addressing these issues by not creating dissonance between the student and their parents but rather helping to find constructive and positive ways where both feel respected. These examples have major implications on Filipina Americans’ ability to cope and negotiate their experience and pressures from both the college and home environment.

In addition to the above, deans, department heads, and faculty can play a pivotal role by understanding the diversity and the complexity of the APA category. It will be helpful to find out students’ needs by initiating focus groups and asking participants about helpful interventions and how to implement them in order to achieve success with this population. More importantly, finding ways in which student affairs professionals can collaborate with deans/department heads/faculty on these issues will be beneficial. It is vital to continue discussing the importance of linking academic and nonacademic offices so that supporting students becomes a seamless process. Filipina American students often mentioned the
importance of having advocates and staff/faculty role models with whom they can relate; for example, hiring APA staff/faculty who have an understanding of APA college experiences will be critical.

Conclusion/Future Research
This study was conducted in a specific geographical location in the U.S. where large numbers of immigrant Filipino families continue to reside. In addition, the distribution of participants in terms of college year, immigration status, and level of education of parents may also have affected the results of the study. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the context in which this study was conducted. The same study in a different part of the U.S. may yield different findings. However, this study still provides helpful and important data that merit further examination in this area.

This study explored some ways Filipina American college students understand their multidimensional worlds. This research further reinforces the need for more studies about children of immigrant families and the many unique challenges and issues they face. The data collected provide a clearer picture of the challenges and negotiations that Filipina Americans face at the university level. Though some research has indicated women of color in college face similar challenges, Filipina Americans continue to battle not only the challenges faced within immigrant families and gender differentiation but also the model minority stereotype and the increased pressure to do well in school. These added pressures unfortunately have manifested in the form of, for example, increased depression and, hence, reports of such things as high suicide ideation rates for adolescent and college-aged Filipina Americans. Future studies should include focus groups where Filipina Americans are able to discuss issues among themselves. Ongoing focus groups may provide support for the participants and encourage fruitful discussion and additional knowledge about Filipina Americans. Further studies need to take into account the interconnections among race, gender, class, sexuality, and immigration status. On one hand, practitioners need to continue to explore their understanding of Filipina American college women in order to create a more inclusive college environment and meaningful college experience. On the other hand, researchers must continue to explore “unpacking” categorical concepts such as culture, ethnicity, gender, and family while being cognizant of the research designs for understanding “multiple cultural communities, and collaboration among stakeholders for strengthening links among researchers, youth, families and institutions” (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 2). The current study indicates that the link between practitioners and researchers in this area is an imperative to effectively address the needs of and future research on immigrant families and their college-aged children.

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