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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 55, Number 6, September 2014, pp. 515-530 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/csd.2014.0054

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The Impact of Cultural Validation on the College Experiences of Southeast Asian American Students

Dina C. Maramba  Robert T. Palmer

The purpose of this study is to explore the critical role of culture on the success of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) college students. Specifically, we examined the saliency of cultural validation and how it shaped the educational trajectories of SEAA students. A national sample of 34 participants was analyzed across 5 public, 4-year colleges and universities. Findings suggest the need for (a) cultural knowledge, (b) cultural familiarity, (c) cultural expression, and (d) cultural advocacy. In addition, the low number of SEAA students on their respective campuses heavily influenced their college experience. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Borrowing from the work of Durkheim (1897/1951), Van Gennep (1908/1960), and Spady (1970), Tinto (1993; 1st ed. 1987) composed a theory to explain student departure from higher education. The premise of Tinto’s theory is that students must separate themselves “from past associations and traditions to become integrated into the college’s social and academic realms” (p. 452), a critical facilitator to student retention and persistence to graduation. Conversely, when academic or social integration is weak, students are at an increased likelihood of prematurely departing from the institution.

Indeed, Tinto’s (1993) theory is widely cited for providing context about student departure in higher education. While researchers have supported certain tenets of his theory, others have criticized Tinto’s theory for its assertion that students must divorce themselves from their past communities to become integrated into an institution of higher education. In particular, scholars have asserted that separating from past communities could be harmful to the academic success of minority students, because their support network may lie outside of college (A. Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Many studies have recognized the critical role that family connections have on the success of minority college students (Guiffrida, 2005; Maramba, 2008a; Maramba & Palmer, 2011; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Despite this, empirical evidence for the significance of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) maintaining connections with past associations and traditions is limited. The few studies that exist in this area include a qualitative study of 82 Filipina American students that examined how students negotiated the roles that gender, family, and home connections played in their college experiences (Maramba, 2008a). Another qualitative study of 10 undergraduate Cambodian American students at one university suggested that their prior communities were critical in adjusting successfully in college (Chhuon & Hudley, 2011).

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Although each of these studies was conducted in a single institution, they have indeed been helpful in providing information on specific ethnicities of AAPI students.

The model minority myth often associated with AAPIs presumes that they are intelligent and motivated and they possess a strong work ethic, indicating they are not in need of student services and other retention-serving programs (Maramba, 2008b; Museus, 2009; Nakanishi, 1995; Suzuki, 2002). These presumptions may suggest that the need to maintain an active relationship with past associations and traditions may not be vital to the success of AAPIs in college, thus, limiting research on this topic as it relates to this population. However, research has shown that the model minority myth is a misnomer, because an examination of within-group differences reveals that while certain AAPI ethnic groups are succeeding in higher education (Lee, 2001a; Kim, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Okamura, 2008), others experience problems accessing postsecondary education and succeeding within this context once there.

Specifically, upon closer examination of the AAPI category, data show that there are large disparities among the specific AAPI ethnic groups. Of particular attention for this study are students in AAPI ethnic groups that include Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodians, also referred to as Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs). SEAAs share similar immigration histories, having been admitted into the US through refugee and asylee status mostly between 1975 and 1990 (Teranishi, 2010). According to research (e.g., Teranishi, 2010), compared to the 12.4% national poverty rate for all racial groups, SEAAs have some of the highest poverty rates among racial and ethnic minorities. For example, the Hmong, 37.8%; Cambodians, 29.3%; Laotians, 18.5%; and Vietnamese, 16.6%. In terms of educational attainment, there are high rates of SEAAs with less than a high school education (Hmong, 59.6%; Cambodians, 53.3%; Lao, 49.6%; Vietnamese, 38.1%), compared to, for example, Chinese (23.0%), Asian Indian (13.3%), Japanese (8.9%), and the national rate of educational attainment for all racial groups of 19.6% (Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Teranishi, 2010). Moreover, SEAAs are critically underrepresented in higher education (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Lee, 2001a, 2001b; Maramba, 2011; Museus, 2009; Ngo, 2006; Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2009). In fact, compared to the national average of baccalaureate degree attainment for all racial groups (25.9%), data show that the numbers of SEAAs who have obtained a baccalaureate degree or higher is disproportionately low: Hmong, 7.5%; Cambodians, 9.2%; Lao, 7.7%; and Vietnamese, 19.4% (Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Teranishi, 2010). The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE), an influential entity that focuses on educational opportunities, research, issues, and trends related to AAPIs, reported that although SEAAs enroll in college, they are less likely than other AAPIs to graduate with a degree: Laotians, 49.2%; Cambodians, 48.2%; Hmong, 45.5%; and Vietnamese, 36.7%; moreover, SEAAs are twice as likely to transfer out of school for nonacademic reasons, which may include financial or perceptions of discrimination (National Commission, 2010). Despite the low college attainment among SEAAs, much of the extant literature on Asian American college students has all but ignored salient factors that buoy their retention and persistence (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Lee, 2001a; Ngo, 2006; Teranishi, 2010).

Given the need for empirical research to focus on the college experiences of SEAAs, the purpose of this article is to discuss the influence of cultural validation on the success of SEAA college students. Similar to other
studies on racial and ethnic minority students in general (Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; A. Hurtado, 1997; S. Hurtado, 1992; Palmer & Young, 2009; Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011; Rendón, 1994; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999), and the few empirical studies specific to SEAA collegians (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008), this article presents a revision to Tinto’s (1993) theory to account for the salient role that minority students’ past communities, traditions, values, and cultural factors have on their retention and persistence in college.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The original purpose of this study was to examine success factors for SEAA college students; however, from this study emerged data that highlight the critical role of culture on the success of this population. The saliency of cultural validation on the success of SEAA students contradicts Tinto’s (1993) theory: whereas Tinto urged students to disconnect from their former communities, we found that cultural validation played an important role in their success and retention in college. Rendón (1994) defined validation as student interactions with various aspects of the institutional community (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators) that engender feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy. Rendón posited that cultural validation involves recognizing, respecting, and appreciating students as well as their families and communities. Examples of cultural validation might include faculty or administrators displaying an appreciation of students’ personal and cultural history. Research has discussed the importance of cultural validation for students in community college (Barnett, 2011) and for racial and ethnic minority students attending 4-year institutions (Kiang, 2000; Museus, 2008; Rendón, 1994; Rendón et al., 2000). Despite this finding, research has not provided context about the importance of cultural validation or its sources for SEAA students. Indeed, given the struggles of SEAA students to access and succeed in higher education, it is important that researchers be more intentional about investigating factors, strategies, and programmatic initiatives that buoy their retention and persistence. To this end, drawing from a multiple-institutional study on SEAA students, we offer insight into how higher education officials can increase the retention and success of SEAA students by discussing the relevance and sources of cultural validation on their college experience and success.

METHODOLOGY

We chose qualitative methods as the most effective approach for this study for two reasons. First, the qualitative approach allows for an exploration of a concept using detailed information; moreover, this method as the best approach to answering questions that involved How? and What? (Creswell, 1998). Thus, our epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning making through human interactions. Tenets of grounded theory strategies were also incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bound to the interview process, but occurred throughout the entire research process and included continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches (Charmaz, 2000).

Participants

We used two types of purposeful sampling techniques to acquire participants for this investigation: (a) sampling that was intentional for maximum variation and (b) snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). First, we sought potential participants with the assistance of student affairs staff and faculty within
TABLE 1.
Southeast Asian American Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiethnic:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian/Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian/Vietnamese/Thai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese/Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The university setting (e.g., Asian American Studies, Educational Opportunity Program, TRiO Program, Multicultural Resource Center) who work closely with SEAA college students. Announcements about the study were sent through e-mail LISTSERVs from these offices. It was important to have a varied sample in order to have a greater understanding and representation of SEAA students.

To gain a varied sample, we intentionally sought a sample that represented multiple SEAA ethnic backgrounds (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese), years in college (first through fifth), academic majors (social sciences, hard sciences, and applied fields), institutional types (e.g., commuter and residential), and US geographic regions (e.g., West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast). Additionally, participants were selected using snowball sampling (i.e., asking those who joined the study to recommend others who might meet our criteria). Our final sample was made up of 34 undergraduate SEAA students from five public 4-year colleges and universities across the US: 19 were located on the West Coast, 3 were in the Midwest, and 12 were enrolled in institutions in the East Coast. The participants included 9 Cambodian, 5 Hmong, 3 Laotian, 13 Vietnamese, and 4 multiethnic Southeast Asian American students (2 Cambodian/Chinese, 1 Cambodian/Vietnamese/Thai, and 1 Vietnamese/Thai). The sample was composed of 26 women and 8 men (see Table 1). Of these 25 were second-generation, 8 were 1.5-generation, and 1 did not indicate immigrant generational status.

Data Collection

We collected data in two ways. First, we asked each student to complete a consent form and a brief demographic questionnaire, and to participate in a one-on-one interview. Participants were told that this study involved understanding the college experiences of SEAA students. They were also told that they had the opportunity to ask any questions before, during, and after the study. The demographic questionnaire included inquiries regarding ethnicity, class level, college major, gender, generational status, and parents' educational background. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality of each participant. The individual interviews were up to 90 minutes in length, during which students were asked questions about their precollege characteristics, academic background, experiences in college, and factors that promote or hinder their success at the collegiate level. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Example questions include: (a) What cultural factors promote educational success among Southeast Asian American students? (b) What cultural factors hinder the educational success of Southeast Asian American undergraduates? (c) How do Southeast Asian American college students experience those factors? and (d) How would you describe your community on campus?

Data Analysis Procedures

Tenets of grounded theory were incorporated into the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2000). We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview...
transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at “all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification of codes” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio 2006, p. 44). In grounded theory, “data collection and analysis are tightly interwoven, and must occur alternately because the analysis directs the sampling of data,” and analysis occurs throughout the data collection process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 59). Our procedures included open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used open coding, which involved analyzing the data line by line to identify initial concepts and categories related to each phenomenon. The line-by-line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then performed axial coding procedures to further develop themes and categories. Selective coding was then used to understand the relationships among the various themes and categories. We utilized NVivo Qualitative Software (version 10 for Windows) to help manage the data.

RESEARCHERS’ POSITIONALITY

For any qualitative study it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones et al., 2006). Two researchers conducted this study: one woman who identifies as Filipina American and one man who identifies as African American. All researchers have a vested interest in increasing opportunities of access and success for populations of color in higher education. Collectively, all of the researchers engaged in this topic to address the discrepancy in the literature about students of color, more specifically SEAA college students. By conducting this study, we hoped to learn from the participants’ lived experiences and to offer critical strategies for those involved in higher education institutions.

CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

We used several techniques to ensure credibility of the study (Merriam, 1998). First, we provided thick description so those who are interested in the study can apply it to their respective institutions. We conducted member checks by asking participants to review their transcribed interviews for accuracy and clarity (Jones et al., 2006). Lastly, we used feedback from debriefers who were active researchers and well versed in topics of the success of college students of color. These debriefers engaged the researchers in ongoing discussions regarding meanings made by the participants (Jones et al., 2006).

FINDINGS

From our data emerged four themes based on the importance of cultural validation for meeting students’ needs for each: (a) cultural knowledge, that is, opportunities to acquire knowledge relevant to SEAA students’ cultural backgrounds; (b) cultural familiarity, opportunities for SEAA students to maintain connection with those who share or are familiar with their cultural backgrounds; (c) cultural expression, opportunities for SEAAs to express their cultural identities on campus; and (d) cultural advocacy, opportunities to advocate for and give back to SEAA students’ racial and ethnic communities. A common thread throughout the themes is all of the students indicated that there was a low number of SEAA students on their respective campuses, which in turn influenced the ways in which they spoke of cultural knowledge, cultural familiarity, cultural expression, and cultural advocacy.
Cultural Knowledge

The first theme, cultural knowledge, entails the opportunities to acquire knowledge relevant to SEAA students’ cultural backgrounds, which were manifested through the availability of Asian American studies courses or other courses that involved heavy discussion about race and social justice issues. For example, many of the students mentioned their experiences taking Asian American studies courses and how this sparked their desire to learn more about their own cultural heritage. Although a number of the students mentioned that they learned their cultural history through their parents’ personal stories (e.g., living in and leaving their native country, challenges and struggles living in the US), many participants shared that this information was either limited or they took their parents’ stories for granted. A number of students mentioned that they did not necessarily make connections between their parents’ life stories about war, difficult living, and the struggles they have endured in their native country and the US in historical and present contexts. For instance, Phuong, who is Cambodian, shared, “I feel like I’ve always been grounded by my parents and my culture, and my heritage, so I knew the history and all of that stuff before I took classes. . . . But I guess if I was observing it, I think it’s something real great that we’re actually bringing to light these experiences [in class].” May, a Hmong student, appreciated that her professor showed a movie about the Hmong experience in America and held an in-depth discussion about it in class. “It was very big,” she described, “I’m just like, wow, I didn’t know that people didn’t know about me [nor] how they saw me.” She went on to say, “Learning about my heritage and others’ heritage really opened my eyes to see what’s ‘happening’ and that there’s more to that ‘happening.’”

For others, who were not as familiar with their family cultural history, having taken a course that discussed Southeast Asians proved to be extremely helpful in their own personal development. For example, Ken, a Cambodian student maintained:

I took a course called Southeast Asians in the US, and that kind of just started the wildfire. I can’t think of a better metaphor, but that’s when everything took off. I started thinking more critically about race issues, ethnicity, and how that plays a role on campus and in society—how that has affected how I grew up. I just started thinking about all of this other stuff on another level.

Mike echoed Ken’s experience, explaining that his participation in particular class assignments in his ethnic studies course helped him have a stronger bond with his parents and his Vietnamese background:

That class, it required me to do a project on immigration, my family’s immigration history. Just doing that and talking with my parents and interviewing them—it just really clicked for me, because suddenly ethnic studies was really personal, and it was enjoyable for me. It helped me get to know my parents more.

Further, Mike made the connection that learning about his own ethnic community allowed him to see the importance of learning about other Asian American communities who shared similar experiences. This gave him a deeper understanding of the similarities among various Asian American ethnicities. He described bridging the connections he learned between Filipinos and Vietnamese in the US:

It jumped at me at first, because I worked primarily in the Filipino community and I’m Vietnamese. So it was bridging those two aspects of my life. It was just for some reason that [ethnic studies] class stood out to me. Being able to draw comparisons between two different people and their history and just seeing the connections and everything—that just started clicking
Culture and Southeast Asian American Students

for me—like, wow, we’re so different, [but] we have a lot of similar stories to share, and we have a lot of similar experiences.

These examples reflect how opportunities to either maintain or develop cultural knowledge about their SEAA cultural backgrounds were pivotal in their success in college. These mostly took the form of taking Asian American courses that served as a foundation or a reinforcement of their knowledge of their cultural background.

Cultural Familiarity

The second theme, cultural familiarity, involved the importance of opportunities to maintain connections with those who share and/or are familiar with their cultural background. For example, in addition to participating in Asian American and ethnic studies courses, students described strong validation they received from their professors who taught these courses, who were, for the most part, Asian American or professors of color. These particular professors validated the students’ ethnic identities as Cambodian, Vietnamese, Hmong, or Lao, which helped the participants feel that they could be themselves in class. Many also shared their comfort level in these courses when they talked about issues, such as stereotypes and racial microaggressions that they had experienced as Asian Americans. Thus, for these participants, their sense of cultural familiarity was heightened through feeling comfortable and acknowledged by those familiar with, or who shared, their cultural backgrounds.

Eva, a Cambodian student, shared that taking a class on Asian American psychology helped her learn and validate her struggles of being shy and not speaking in classes:

I learned a lot more about myself and why people are the way they are—Asian Americans, why they are like that. We were reading something on stereotypes and [I thought] “Oh, yeah, I am like that.” I’m very hesitant to raise my hand, and I’m not really loud, depending on who’s around me. I am shy and I don’t talk back. It’s sort of like a culture thing, and I thought it was just me, but I guess it’s a culture thing. I learned a lot about myself from that class.

Eva felt that taking an Asian American Studies class allowed her to be more outgoing because of the level of familiarity and comfort with her professor and people in her class. She conveyed, “I can be—I don’t know how to explain it—I can sort of be myself here. I can talk to [the people in class]. I act differently towards [the students in my Asian American Studies class] than my other friends on campus.” Furthermore, Prema, who is Cambodian, appreciated her Asian American Studies professor who “just made me into the person that I am today and how that would help me out.” After taking her class, Prema continued, “I just kind of felt more comfortable being around the idea of what [the course] was doing for me—to guide me through college.”

Valerie, a Hmong student, reinforced Prema’s words by describing her experience in a class she called a “perspectives class.” She explained that this class covered issues on race, sex, gender, and the working class. She learned that her culture was something that she should not be ashamed of or made to feel that something is wrong with her culture:

I know my Hmong culture, but there are certain things . . . I used to be embarrassed and ashamed to talk about. This course made me realize I shouldn’t say, “That’s just how it is,” but it is understanding the time frame, the period, the way the lifestyle was. Some stuff I just carry on . . . generation after generation. So this course made me feel like it was not a problem. There’s nothing wrong in talking about being different.
A number of the students believed that their comfort level in these classes was attributed to students being able to share their ethnic identities and discuss stereotypes they often encountered as Asian American students, more specifically as SEAA students. Additionally, students shared experiences in other classes that have helped them and non-Asians with their knowledge about Asian American stereotypes and other misperceptions, namely the model minority stereotype. For example, Tuan, a Vietnamese student, shared that non-Asian students often tell him that he is supposed to be good at math and get good grades because he is Asian. Similarly, Dayna, a Lao student, shared her concern with another misperception: “I feel like sometimes people look down on people from Southeast Asia. They view Southeast Asians as poor, lower class, and ghetto.” Moreover, Shaun, a Vietnamese student, explained that a social justice education class that covered Asian American issues gave him the chance to understand his identity and Asian American stereotypes on a deeper level:

Professor Villa just got me to open my eyes and kind of think about the issues that are out there. I . . . never thought that Asians [were stereotyped] and not getting into universities, but there’s a lot of discrimination out here still. I think that really helped me on how I approached my education. I feel like I have to prove myself.

Examples such as these allowed both SEAA students and non-Asian students to discuss issues of stereotypes and disparities among Asian Americans in higher education at a deeper level than other classes they had taken.

Cultural Expression

Our third theme, cultural expression, involved opportunities for SEAA students to express their cultural identities on campus. This theme was supported through students’ discussion of the valuable role that ethnic organizations played in the development of their cultural and social identities as well as finding community on campus. A number of participants took on leadership roles in ethnic organizations, which in turn allowed them to plan and produce cultural programs for the members of their organizations and for the larger campus community.

Participants described their campuses as having a large number of Asian students but a small number of SEAA students. The small numbers were of extreme concern for the participants. Many of the students mentioned that as soon as they first stepped foot onto their campus, they quickly realized that it was important to find a community that helped them feel comfortable on campus. As a result, they saw the importance of becoming involved in ethnic organizations or even forming new organizations and taking leadership roles in those organizations, which then allowed them to feel a sense of belonging.

Alison, a Lao student, explained: “There is a lot of Asian American representation, but it kind of warps the whole breakdown of the other Asian American ethnic groups. There’s a lot of underrepresentation of Southeast Asians, so it doesn't get recognized, because we see so many Asian faces around here.” Mike, a Vietnamese student, reinforced Alison’s sentiments: “There’s this Asian hyper-visibility. Everyone always says there’s a lot of Asians, and you look at the charts and it says 40% Asian. But it doesn’t take into consideration that’s every single Asian, and most of [them are] Chinese or East Asian.” Phuong, a Cambodian student, further explained: “I don’t want us to come off all whiny, because we’re not. . . . One of the important [misconceptions] is people look at us and think we don’t have struggles, but we actually do have struggles.”

Students had strong feelings about the
low numbers of SEAA students. For example, Veata, a Cambodian student, shared that she would tell prospective Southeast Asian students the honest truth: “You are not going to be with ‘your people’ anymore; you’re not going to feel at home”; but she would tell them to get involved with ethnic organizations, because she felt that there was a common collective among these organizations and resource centers such as the multicultural student center. Ken suggested one way to find community is through ethnic organizations. “But if you’re not involved,” he warned, “you’re not going to find any home to go to. You’re not going to have a sense of belonging.”

With these concerns in mind and feeling that they needed their voices to be heard, many of the participants got involved in organizations. The majority of the students had specific SEAA student organizations which provided an automatic sense of community for many of them. Madeline, a Hmong student, reinforced this: “Since I got into the Hmong student club here, [I learned] all different kinds of people will help you with resources.” Because there were no specific SEAA student organizations on their particular campus, some joined other ethnic student organizations (e.g., Filipino Americans, general or pan-Asian American groups) or became involved with the multicultural centers (e.g., cross-cultural centers, Asian American centers) on their campuses. In addition to their involvement with other ethnic organizations, others formed specific Southeast Asian American student organizations. For example, Ken, a Cambodian student, was inspired to form a Cambodian club on campus after being highly involved in the Filipino American club:

I felt like my participation with the Filipino club gave me a reason to start up my club, which is the Cambodian Student Club, and have people learn about our culture as well. . . . I decided to because of the lack of a face or a voice for the Cambodian students on campus.

In addition to spreading cultural awareness about SEAA cultures for members and their university populations, many of the participants mentioned that their organizations provided them an opportunity to become mentors for younger SEAA students. As Shaun, a Vietnamese student who also enjoyed helping first-year students, expressed it: “[It] creates that encouragement that I got and [provides me a way I can] pass it down to other people.”

Overall, the Southeast Asian student organizations in which the participants were engaged had a strong component of connection to their communities outside of the university.

**Cultural Advocacy**

The fourth theme, cultural advocacy, is the opportunity to advocate and give back to SEAA communities beyond the college campus. The majority of the participants discussed their ongoing connections with their racial and ethnic communities outside of the university. Many of them shared their passion for helping give back to their home communities. Some who lived within an hour or two from school would travel home to keep themselves involved in their communities via their church, religious activities, family, and local community gatherings. Other participants also shared the importance of keeping close connections with their high schools and middle schools to help the younger generation with college preparation and to discuss the significance of higher education. For many of the participants, staying connected to their communities was a critical part of their college lives. For example, May, the president of a Hmong student organization, distinguished her community as two different communities, one within and one outside of the university:
Within [my] university I would say there's a community, because you make your own ties and have your own group to do things with. But besides that, you have another community which helps you too: I would say it's my Hmong community [outside the university]. . . . We go help out Hmong families, so we help them with events, or we participate and support them. When we support them, it's like we're supporting ourselves, and they come out and support us, too.

Shaun echoed this sentiment: “I like going to [the local Vietnamese community] and having our club host events down there and eating at the Vietnamese restaurants. I feel like there's a good Asian community there.” Active in the Vietnamese Student Association, Hung shared that the number one priority for his group was to organize high school conferences to bring students from “disadvantaged areas and let them see [the university] for what college is like. We're trying to reach out to them.”

A majority of the participants spoke of their strong connections with their home communities. For those who lived a few hours away, they often drove home to stay active with their home communities. For example, Stanley, who lives three hours away from home, goes back every week to volunteer as a youth group leader to help his Vietnamese church youth group. He explained, “I just kind of guide the kids to become model citizens and [I] talk to high school students. . . . I'm going to do a seminar on how to apply to college, how to apply for financial aid [to share] all the resources that they need to know.” Stanley believed that it is important to help high school students who, like him, have parents who did not go college and lack information about the process of applying to college.

DISCUSSION

We can draw a number of conclusions from this study about the influence of cultural validation on the success of SEAA college students. First, findings address an aspect of Tinto’s (1993) theory, which states that students should separate themselves from their former communities, traditions, and cultures
to successfully integrate into the higher education environment. Similar to other studies, we questioned its applicability to the experiences of college students of color (e.g., Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; A. Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011; Rendón et al., 2000; Rendón et al., 2011). Specifically, we assert that separating SEAA students from their home communities could be harmful to their successful integration, because their main support network lies outside of the college environment. Indeed, many people and institutions continue to associate AAPIs with the model minority myth, which often assumes that they may not be in need of college support, nor are they a population of concern. It is important to note that because of this ongoing misperception and stereotype, understanding the nuances of particular cultural experiences and needs of AAPIs can be virtually ignored. As discussed earlier, the grouping of diverse ethnic AAPI groups without closely examining the aggregated statistics can cause further cultural misunderstanding; therefore, our findings indicate that maintaining connections with traditions and cultural communities through cultural validation is critical to college success for SEAA students.

Further, these findings reveal one of the ways SEAA students experienced a sense of cultural validation was through taking particular academic courses that focused on ethnic minority issues. In particular, these courses—Asian American studies, ethnic studies, or social justice–oriented courses—helped SEAA students gain cultural knowledge and increased their familiarity with their backgrounds. Most of the students explained that knowledge about their ethnic backgrounds comprised mainly of their parents’ stories about war, immigration, and as refugees; however, students were able to gain more knowledge about their ethnic backgrounds via Asian American Studies courses and some courses that involved in-depth discussions about race, class, and gender. It was clear that these classes had a profound influence on understanding their racial experiences as SEAA both within their school environment and in the larger historical and current societal contexts, thereby raising their confidence. Research conducted by Kiang (2000) explains the impact that Asian American studies courses had on the lives of alumni over time at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. They argued that Asian American students felt a stronger sense of personal identity after taking such courses. On the other hand, students who did not have an opportunity to take Asian American–related courses sought other ways of gaining cultural knowledge and finding opportunities for cultural expression, such as joining ethnic cultural organizations. Cultural knowledge and cultural expression were similar for these students, because they were still able to gain them through the interactions they had with their peers in the ethnic organizations.

Furthermore, our data reveal that students experienced cultural validation and expression of their cultural identities by forming or participating in ethnic organizations. Students either joined existing ethnic support groups or, if a SEAA organization did not exist, they created one on their campus. These SEAA students were very involved in ethnic organizations and with particular resource centers on campus, such as multicultural centers. All of them shared the need to be involved on campus to feel a sense of belonging, support, and making “a home away from home.” It is clear from the research that students of color benefit from ethnic support groups and services on campus (Harper & Quaye, 2007; S. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Inkelas, 2004; Maramba, 2008b; Maramba & Museus, 2012; Museus, 2008; Smith, 2009; Tatum,
1997; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995; Treviño, 1994). For example, Museus (2008) asserted that ethnic organizations served as a way for students to educate each other about their cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, S. Hurtado et al. (1999) found that students of color joined ethnic student clubs for sources of support and to learn more about their ethnic identity. These studies on students of color have reinforced the importance of SEAA students’ involvement in ethnic organizations and how they validate their opportunity for cultural expression.

Moreover, our findings emphasize the importance of cultural advocacy and SEAA students’ connection with ethnic communities outside of the university. Students in this study were very active with ethnic communities outside of their college environment, which included either local surrounding ethnic communities close to the university and their home communities. Several studies reinforce the importance of students of color and connections to communities outside of their university (Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; Kiang, 2000; Maramba, 2008a; Maramba & Palmer, 2011; Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011). For example, Kiang (2000) found that students who involved themselves in their ethnic communities were more likely to engage in social justice activities that impact their communities and society at large. This study reinforces Kiang’s findings in that SEAA students who participated in their ethnic communities outside of the university setting experienced a sense of cultural validation.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations for this study. First, our findings are context-bound to 34 SEAA students who participated in the study. Nevertheless, we provided thick descriptions so readers can decide the transferability of this study to their respective institutions. Another limitation is that the original intent of this study explored factors of academic success for SEAA students in higher education. One of the salient themes that emerged was the influence of culture on the success of this population. Nevertheless, had exploring the role of culture been the original intent of this study, it is quite possible we would have collected more detailed and nuanced data on the role of culture in the college experience for SEAA students. Moreover, although effective, our use of snowball sampling, in which participants refer others to participate in the study, has its limitations. For example, snowball sampling led to the recruitment of students who may be predisposed to think about culture due to either their prior or current knowledge of Asian Americans via courses or involvement in cultural and ethnic organizations.

Implications for Institutional Research and Practice

Our study makes at least two significant contributions to the profession and higher education research. First, this study fills a void in research on SEAA students within the area of student affairs and higher education. As one of the first nationally conducted qualitative study on SEAA students, it also emphasizes the importance of disaggregating the Asian American category and studying specific ethnic groups to provide a clearer understanding about their educational attainment. Indeed, a few researchers have asserted that examining the distinct Asian American subgroups is imperative (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Hune, 2002; Maramba, 2008a; Museus & Kiang, 2009). For instance, Hune (2002) emphasized that studying the ethnic groups within the Asian American category reveals major differences such as language, immigration, and socioeconomic status. Maramba (2008a), in her study of Filipina Americans, underscored
the imperative of examining the relationship between family and college experiences. To this end, it is important to continue research on the diverse ethnic groups within the Asian American category. Second, this study strongly speaks to the continued study for the retention and persistence of students of color at the collegiate level. It is critical that institutions pay close attention to what it means to culturally validate students in higher education institutions. In addition, further research should continue to examine how constructs such as cultural validation and academic disposition mediate students’ progression toward success in college. Taken together, more investigation is needed to fully understand these complex relationships. Thus, expanding the notion of what variables facilitate college success must be given further consideration. We also encourage researchers to consider the importance of disaggregating the AAPI racial category. Third, although our study shows that all of the students interviewed were active in ethnic organizations in various capacities (e.g., holding leadership positions or being a member), their participation was a result of snowball sampling. Future studies may involve interviewing SEAA students who are not involved in ethnic organizations to understand how they negotiate maintaining an active connection with their culture and being successful in college. Moreover, future studies should examine Braxton’s (2000) and Guiffrida’s (2006) expansions of Tinto’s theory and its applicability to SEAAs and other ethnicities within the AAPI community.

These findings may aid university administrators, staff, and faculty in their effort to ensure success of SEAA students in college by suggesting initiatives, programs, and activities for these and similar populations. Some of the students in the study expressed that they did not have the opportunity to take such classes as Asian American and other ethnic studies for two main reasons: (a) because the courses were not offered, or (b) their demanding major course requirements did not allow them to take additional classes. Though some students did not have an opportunity to take classes on Asian Americans to learn about their cultural heritage, they sought involvement in ethnic organizations in which they hoped to gain cultural knowledge and have an opportunity for cultural expression. Faculty and administrators who are involved with developing curricula and academic major requirements may consider (a) offering courses that discuss social justice issues that incorporate topics about race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and (b) incorporating these courses or topics as part of curricula for majors that do not normally discuss these areas. In addition, universities can consider offering more courses that address ethnic and social identity and incorporating pedagogical strategies that encourage self-exploration, ethnic identity, and community engagement.

Though most of the students had existing SEAA organizations on their campuses, there were universities that did not. In cases where SEAA organizations did not exist, students in this study created their own specific SEAA student group, conveying a message that particular ethnic populations are not well recognized on campus. Student affairs administrators and practitioners involved in student activities may want to continue to find ways to encourage student participation, even so far as to form new organizations if they do not exist. For example, student participation in ethnic organizations can be further emphasized during freshman orientation. Also, practitioners and faculty involved in areas such as residential life, counseling, and advising can continue to provide additional information about ethnic student organizations for the student body beyond the first year. This is especially helpful for students who may have
concerns about finding a sense of belonging on their campus in their sophomore, junior, and senior years. Lastly, the findings of this study also point to the importance of students’ strong ties to their communities before they entered college. Student affairs practitioners may also want to consider more effective ways for students to be validated in continuing to engage with their communities outside of the university. For example, this can take place during orientation and continue with other student affairs offices such as student activities, residential life, and counseling services where conversations, discussions, and planned activities can incorporate communities outside of the university environment. Validation of engagement with prior communities should be an ongoing process throughout students’ college experience to further enhance their potential for success.

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