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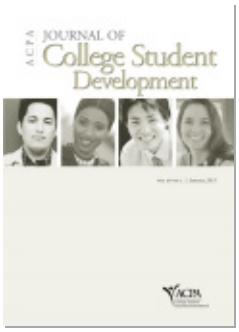

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The Impact of Social Capital on the Access, Adjustment, and Success of Southeast Asian American College Students

Robert T. Palmer Dina C. Maramba

Given that Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students are severely underrepresented in higher education and less likely to persistence to graduation compared to other ethnic groups in the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, this study explored critical factors to their college success. Indeed, several themes emerged from this national sample of 34 participants from five public, four year colleges and universities. In this present article, we discuss one of the salient themes—the role of social capital as facilitators of college access and success. This article concludes with implications for research and practice.

The myth of the "model minority" is a common thread across the literature on Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs; e.g., Suzuki, 1989, 2002; Wong, 2011). The model minority myth characterizes the AAPI community as hard-working, well-educated, and successful citizens who strongly value educational achievements and economic success, compared to other racial minority groups (e.g., Maramba, 2008a; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus & Maramba, 2011;Teranishi, 2010; Wong, 2011). While seemingly positive, this model perpetuates stereotypes about AAPIs and masks serious issues and concerns that they may be experiencing (Lagdameo et al., 2002; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Wong, 2011). Further, the model minority myth may hinder AAPI students from receiving critical support as they progress through the educational pipeline (Maramba, 2008b; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Suzuki, 1989, 2002; Teranishi, 2010).

Instead of viewing AAPIs as a model minority, researchers have advocated that more understanding be placed on examining the diversity that exists within the AAPI community (Hune, 2002; Lee, 2006; Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Specifically, research illustrates that the AAPI community encompasses diverse ethnic groups, consisting of more than 50 different ethnic subpopulations that vary in characteristics, including national origins, immigration patterns, language, and socioeconomic status (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Teranishi, 2010; Wong, 2011). Interestingly, the participants in Wong's (2011) study of the racial identity of Asian Americans, who were Chinese and Filipino, viewed the term "Asian American" as one imposed on them by the U.S. government. Nevertheless, while they understood how this term afforded them political power as a group, they lamented that it fails to underscore the ethnic diversity of the AAPI community.

Educational attainment is another marker of diversity within the AAPI population. Indeed, while some ethnic groups are doing well academically (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans), Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs; e.g., Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese) are struggling

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(National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). Despite the educational struggles of SEAAs, few studies have provided insight into the college experience of these students or offered ways that institutional officials could support their success (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Han & Lee, 2011; Maramba & Palmer, 2014). With this in mind, the original guiding question of this study was to examine what characteristics proved to be critical to the college success of SEAA students. However, from this study emerged data that offer information about the impact of social capital on the participants' college access, adjustment, and success. The next section of this article will provide salient background information on SEAAs before reviewing literature on social capital.

BACKGROUND OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

According to recent reports by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (2008, 2010, 2011), economic status and achievement outcomes vary greatly among AAPI sub-populations. For example, SEAAs have some of the highest poverty rates within the AAPI communities compared to other ethnic groups (e.g., Japanese, 9.7%; Asian Indian, 9.8%): 37.8% of Hmong, 29.3% of Cambodians, 18.5% of Laotians, and 16.6% of Vietnamese live in poverty (National Commission, 2008). In terms of educational attainment, a large proportion of people in the SEAA community have less than a high school education (Hmong, 59.6%; Cambodian, 53.3%; Lao, 49.6%; Vietnamese, 38.1%), in comparison to, for example, Chinese (23%), Asian Indian (13.3%) and Japanese (8.9%; National Commission, 2008).

Similarly, while more East Asian Americans (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) and South Asian Americans (Asian Indian and Pakistani), who enroll in higher education earn at least a bachelor's degree (National Commission, 2011), Southeast Asians' completion rates are much lower. More specifically, SEAAs who attended college but ultimately did not earn a degree are as follows: 42.9% of the Cambodians, 47.5% of the Hmongs, 46.5% of the Laos, and 33.7% of the Vietnamese compared to their AAPI counterparts (e.g., Asian Indian, 8.2%; Chinese, 12.5%; Pakistani, 12.7%; National Commission, 2011). Moreover, SEAAs are more likely to depart prematurely from higher education for nonacademic reasons, which may include finances or perceptions of discrimination (National Commission, 2011). Indeed, this information indicates that higher education must be proactive in understanding how to increase college access and success among SEAAs. Despite this clarion call, the extant literature on AAPI college students has all but ignored factors important to the retention and persistence of SEAAs (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; National Commission, 2011; Teranishi, 2010).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON SOCIAL CAPITAL

There is a common understanding between Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986) that social capital is about relationships, access, and networking (Perna & Titus, 2005). For example, Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group" (p. 248). Although Coleman (1988) viewed social capital as multidimensional, he agreed with Bourdieu (1986) that social capital is about

networks and group membership. Coleman (1988) further noted that social capital is premised on understanding the social mores, trust, and authority that an individual must learn to succeed.

Bourdieu (1986) explained that social capital afforded credit to those with memberships in groups, to facilitate the achievement of goals or mold desirable outcomes (Brown & Davis, 2001; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005). Those with access to larger networks of individuals are viewed as having greater stockpiles of social capital compared to those with smaller networks. Given the probable impact of social capital, Lin (2001, 2005) asserted that some individuals may be intentional about establishing relationships with individuals of a more "privileged" social status to maximize opportunities to gain resources.

Indeed, while social capital maybe viewed as positive, Bourdieu (1986) noted that social capital could be used as a mechanism through which the ruling class seeks to maintain its hegemony (Lin, 2001). Bourdieu (1986) also noted how social capital could be a conduit through which individuals reproduce social inequalities. According to Prado (2009), the procurement of social capital affords selected individuals an advantage "in competitive and exclusionary institutional contexts that facilitates their preferential access to guarded and resource-full institutional space" (p. 15).

Social capital has been used in connection with a variety of topics, such as economic development, policies of local development, and the importance of traditional community values (Ferragina, 2010). In the context of education, social capital has been used to discuss the ways that institutions could mitigate violent outcomes between parent-child and school affiliation (Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Further, researchers have suggested that domains of social capital (e.g., family capital and school capital) could be invaluable to improve academic outcomes for students in K–12 educational settings (Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013).

Higher education researchers have used social capital to examine college access, retention, and persistence for White and Black students at predominantly White institutions and historically Black colleges and universities (Brown & Davis, 2001; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005; Smith, 2007; Tierney & Venegas, 2006; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). For example, Palmer and Gasman (2008) explored how social capital, embedded in the institutional community of a Black institution, facilitated the retention and persistence of Black males who entered the institution academically unprepared and persisted to graduation. Similarly, Perna and Titus (2005) investigated parental involvement as a form of social capital and its impact on facilitating college enrollment across racial and ethnic groups. They found that parental involvement was positively related to college enrollment among diverse student populations. For a more detailed perspective on how researchers have used social capital, please see Dika and Singh's (2002) research, which provides a critical synthesis on the ways in which social capital has been discussed in educational literature. Despite the ways that researchers have used social capital, few, if any, studies have offered insight into how social capital could be used to facilitate academic success among AAPI collegians in general (Museus & Neville, 2012; Prado, 2009) or SEAA collegians specifically. 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. Indeed, this article aims to do that by using Bourdieu's

TABLE 1.
Southeast Asian American Participants

Ethnicity	Women	Men
Cambodian	8	1
Hmong	5	0
Laotian	3	0
Vietnamese	7	6
Multiethnic		
Cambodian/Chinese	1	1
Cambodian/Vietnamese/Thai	1	0
Vietnamese/Chinese	1	0

(1986) conceptualization of social capital to discuss the significance that social networks have on the college access, adjustment, and success of SEAA students.

METHODOLOGY

We chose qualitative methods for our study for two reasons. First, the qualitative approach allows for an exploration of a concept through using detailed information (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, qualitative methods serve as the best approach to answering questions that involved "how" and "what" (Creswell, 2012). Thus, our epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning-making through human interactions. Given that Charmaz (2000) recommended that ground theory strategies can be incorporated into other qualitative perspectives, tenets of grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bounded to the interview process, but occurred throughout the research process and included continually asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches (Charmaz, 2000). To this end, our study did not employ a pure grounded theory approach.

Participants

We used two types of purposeful sampling techniques to acquire participants for this investigation: intentional sampling, for maximum variation, and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). First, we sought potential undergraduate participants on the east and west coasts and in the midwest with the assistance of student affairs staff and faculty from four-year universities who work closely with SEAA college students (e.g., Asian American Studies, Educational Opportunity Program, TRiO Program, Multicultural Resource Center). Announcements about the study were sent through electronic mailing lists from these offices. It was important to have a varied sample to achieve a greater understanding and representation of SEAA students. To gain a varied sample, we intentionally sought a sample that represented SEAA ethnic backgrounds (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese American), particular numbers of years in college (first through fifth), certain academic majors (e.g., social sciences, hard sciences, and applied fields), certain institutional types (e.g., commuter and residential), and specific geographic regions (west coast, midwest, and east coast). Additionally, participants were found using snowball sampling (asking those who joined the study to recommend others who might meet our criteria). Our final sample consisted of 34 undergraduate SEAA students from five public four-year colleges and universities across the U.S.: 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 study comprised 26 women and 8 men (see Table 1). There

were 25 second-generation participants (the participant was born in the United States and their parents arrived as immigrants), 8 were 1.5 generation (the participant was not born in the United States but lived in the United States at a young age), and 1 did not indicate their generational status.

Data Collection

We collected data in two ways. First, we asked each student to complete a consent form, fill in a brief demographic questionnaire, and 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 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. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality of each participant. The individual interviews were up to 90 minutes in length. During the individual interview, students were asked questions about their pre-college characteristics, academic background, experiences in college, and factors that promote or hinder their success at the collegiate level. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

Some of the questions were (a) What cultural factors promote educational success among Southeast Asian American students? (b) What cultural characteristics hinder the educational success of Southeast Asian American undergraduates? (c) How do Southeast Asian American college students experience those characteristics? (d) How would you describe your community on campus? (e) How have activities you are involved in influence your college experience? (f) What has made your college experience successful so far?

Data Analysis Procedures

We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Charmaz, 2000). According to Charmaz (2000), constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at all stages of the research process. Specifically, as we collected and transcribed the data, we read through our research notes and made self-reflective notes in the margins to help form initial themes. These notes included questions and speculations about the data and themes that emerged. As the amount of data grew, we used *NVivo*®, a qualitative software, to store and organize the data. 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 themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Charmaz, 2000). 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.

Researchers' Positionality

For any qualitative study it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). As researchers of color, we conducted this study because we have a vested interest in increasing opportunities of access and success for populations of color in higher education. Collectively, we 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 offer critical strategies for those involved in higher education institutions.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

We used several techniques to ensure the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2012). 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 (Creswell, 2012). 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 (Creswell, 2012).

FINDINGS

From our data emerged two themes based on the relevance of social capital in the college experiences of SEAA college students. They include the need for (a) *caring agents*—family, counselors/teachers, and peers who provide vital information to succeed in the college environment, and (b) *supportive organizations and student services*—who provide space and services that facilitate their successful navigation of the college environment. The common thread throughout these themes is the emphasis the participants placed on how these caring agents and organizations helped them develop social capital through support, information, mentoring, advice, and encouragement, which played an important role in their college access, adjustment, and success.

Caring Agents

As noted, caring agents were family, counselors, teachers, mentors, and peers that enabled SEAA students to form social capital and gain access to critical information relative to accessing and succeeding in college. Interactions with the family often encompassed talking with older siblings or cousins who had attended and graduated from college or were currently attending college. Similarly, close communication with teachers, mentors, and peers proved to play an important role in SEAA students' ability to gain necessary information about the college application processes, financing college, and various supportive services in college.

Interestingly, the majority of students did not have parents who graduated from high school or college in the United States; therefore, the family members from whom they sought help in college matters were either siblings, cousins, or family friends who attended college. For example, Shaun, a Vietnamese student and a senior in biochemistry/cell biology, was not able to ask his parents for college advice, but had a cousin who was able to provide detailed information about steps related to applying to college. He shared:

> I found out how to apply through friends and my cousin. She helped me a lot with my application process. Just a lot of friends asked what schools I was applying to and we found out you just go to this website and you apply. Just filling it out was like half of it was just information about yourself and billing stuff. The main portion I needed help with was the essays because I'm not a great writer. I asked my cousin. I started months in advance and I wrote a few essays and I'd have my cousin revise and edit them. She would help me for weeks just constantly revising and editing. She helped me a lot. She knew a lot about how to apply and what you're supposed to do.

Similar to Shaun, Tuyet, a Vietnamese student and a senior in biology, described her brother as the one who taught her "life lessons" for college. She explained that these life lessons included examples about not giving into peer pressure and using drugs and alcohol.

In addition, her brother explained that she should be outgoing in college. Tuyet, who was living away from home for the first time, shared that she was extremely homesick in her first couple of years in college. She felt her brother was there for her along the way. He was a strong support, encouraging her to not give up. To help overcome her homesickness, he advised her to be sociable and outgoing. More specifically, her brother assisted her with the transitional process of being away from home. She shared:

> I remember calling home and there I was crying and just really upset. I didn't know what to do. I was talking to my brother, and he just kind of told me that we all have to go through it so just stick it out and make the best of it . . . he kind of wants me to be more outgoing. Yeah, we talk a lot of about me being social.

Along similar lines, counselors, teachers, and professors played major roles in the majority of the participants' future and current college lives. Tuan, a Vietnamese student and a sophomore in economics, explained that his counselor from a pre-college program helped him prepare for college in a number of ways. For example, courses such as writing were particularly difficult for Tuan, and at first he did not know whom to turn to or where to ask for help. More specifically, his counselor helped him feel more comfortable in the college environment. In addition, his counselor provided a space to discuss college issues that Tuan did not necessarily feel comfortable talking about at home. He shared the following:

> I was talking to my counselor about all of these things that I was feeling about school and how I couldn't express it at home . . . I think having someone to express myself to and be comfortable enough to be who I really am or tell them how I really feel without worrying who else might hear it . . . I think that's definitely something that really helped me through . . . how I felt like I didn't belong and I was having thoughts of leaving and I didn't believe that I could actually make it through the first year just because I was struggling so much in writing and my professor, my really, really horrible professor. I couldn't ask for help [from him]. I felt hopeless for the longest time and having my counselor was there constantly reminding me that "Oh yes, you can do it . . . there are other resources and just keep trying." . . . [My counselor] helped me gain confidence to go out and ask for help or form these relationships.

Similar to Tuan, Alison, a Lao student and a junior in engineering, described her high school counselor as very helpful in gaining more information about college. She felt grateful that she "wasn't afraid to go up to them and ask [questions] because [she felt] comfortable around them." She shared an example of the helpfulness from her high school counselor:

> My college counselor was the best. She gave me information about scholarships, applying for scholarships . . . Because I was super involved, I did a lot of scholarship competitions. I got a lot of scholarships from that.

In addition Alison's high school teacher gave her the opportunity to intern at a local engineering business where she was exposed to engineering and able to work with professionals. Alison shared that she was encouraged to "become a female engineer because there's not a lot of female representation in that field." This experience helped Alison with her decision to major in engineering in college. Similar to Alison's experience, Hung, a Vietnamese student and a senior in ethnic studies, shared that because his high school counselors were not helpful, he was grateful for the advice and information he received from his Advanced Placement U.S. history teacher. He described her: "She really knocked it on

us . . . She told us, she would stress, 'here's the deadline for this, apply, so right now you should write your statements, start looking at applications and look at FAFSA,' [she would tell us] when you can apply, [she] went over that." Hung explained that his teacher's constant encouragement to apply for college was pivotal in his goals for attending and succeeding in college.

Leanne, a Cambodian student and a senior in cognitive science, felt she succeeded because she had a mentor in a pre-college program called Educational Talent Search Program. Leanne's mentor often advised her to be resourceful, "so knowing that there's resources out there can help" was important to her success in college. Leanne learned that it was comforting to know that, when she needed help with college issues, her mentor helped her "instead of [my] just letting it go by and not really tackling it." Once she entered college, she found that the courses were challenging and she used to question whether or not she belonged. But after ongoing conversations with her mentor, with whom she stayed in touch, she was encouraged to persist.

Peers in college were also critical for many of the participants' successful experiences. Tuyet explained that her peers helped each other along the way by picking up on ways to be successful in college. She pointed out the importance of her and her peers staying together. They often had discussions about supporting each other and learning the ins and outs of being successful in college. She explained:

> Most of my friends . . . we experienced the same things academically, socially. It gave me the sense that I'm not alone. It is a good feeling to know you are not the only person enduring whatever that is being thrown at you. . . . We talk a lot. I like to talk. Whenever something upsets me it just comes out, and I'm not trying to hold it back or anything. We get through it. You talk about it and you know they helped me keep my sanity.

Chi, a Hmong student and a freshman in political science, was assigned a peer mentor who was involved in a student organization his first year. Chi believed her peer mentor taught her the importance of managing her time, being involved, and making sure she was keeping up with her work. She elaborated, "My mentor from the Hmong club, he was really, really, helpful. He would come down [to my dorm] and say, 'Chi, are you reading, are you doing your work?' He made sure I went to bed [on time]." She explained that having her peer mentor's constant encouragement and conversations about what it meant for her to be successful in college helped her throughout her college career. Chi felt her mentor helped her understand the importance of taking care of herself both mentally and physically by developing good study habits and getting enough sleep.

This section has emphasized the critical roles that caring agents such as counselors, peer mentors, and family members (cousins and siblings) play in moving students along the pathway of being successful college students. By providing various forms of information such as the process of preparing and applying to college as well as providing tips about managing their transition in college, students felt their caring agents were an indispensable part of their lives. Moreover, the participants used the advice and knowledge they learned in an effective and productive manner, which helped them feel more confident about college life.

Supportive Organizations and Student Services

The second theme involved the important role of supportive organizations and services that allowed students the opportunity to form

social capital, which was vital to their success in college. These supportive organizations included pre-college programs and college programs in which students were involved. Examples of pre-college programs included Equal Opportunity Programs, Educational Talent Search, summer transition programs, and local nonprofit college preparations programs. As the majority of participants were first generation college students, they described pre-college programs as pivotal in their learning about opportunities to attend college and preparation to enter college. Moreover, college programs and activities that they were involved in included student support services (academic and social) as well as ethnic student organizations on campus. These programs and activities provided additional tools for students to retain and sustain themselves within the college environment.

Leanne explained that she did not have any particular people to tell her about college, but she credited a local nonprofit organization in her neighborhood for her learning about the process. It was through this organization that she met other students who shared similar first-generation backgrounds. This organization took students on tours of local colleges, ranging from community colleges to universities. She learned important information about what was needed to apply to and attend college. She explained:

> Having them [people who ran the organization] talk to me about their experiences definitely was something that I realized I wanted to do for myself. I think I realized as a junior that I was really motivated in school. I think that connection was made if I did well in school then I could get to college and college would be my opportunity to help my parents and my family.

Mike, a Vietnamese student and a junior in human biology/ethnic studies, also greatly attributed his decision and learning more about college through a nonprofit organization called the Campus Ministry Christian Service. He explained that the Christian ministry played an important role in his having a greater understanding of plans to attend college as well as increasing his awareness of diversity and social issues important for him to understand as a college student. Mike noted:

> So that's when I started learning more about social justice and what not, and activism in different forms. I didn't really know how to flush it out, how it would take me to college but it just got me more excited because I felt like now I'm going to go to a university. I'm going to have more opportunity to explore.

Although Alison had two older brothers, she said she did not have anyone to turn to because they did not do well in school nor did they attend college. She felt grateful that she got involved in the Upward Bound program when she was in high school. Alison credited this program for encouraging her to focus on academics and preparing to apply to college. Similarly, Hung explained that a federal program in high school called Educational Talent Search helped him learn about applying to college. His high school counselors did not talk about college with him, but through Educational Talent Search he learned about the opportunity to apply to college. Hung explained:

> They actually talked to us and asked us, "Have you taken the SATs yet, did you get the application waivers yet?" So we did all of that. . . . They really helped us out. Anything with scholarship papers, they found scholarships for us. They read our papers. They helped us out.

Hung explained that after he was accepted to a university, he was involved in a summer program that provided him with both academic

and social support before the beginning of his freshman year. He believed that his involvement in the summer program provided tools for him to succeed in college. For example, in addition to the requirement of doing well academically, he learned that getting involved with extracurricular activities was just as important in making his college experience worthwhile. He shared the following about the summer program:

> It helped me out a lot. It totally helped transition [to college], because I remember when I came here I didn't know how to sign up for classes. I didn't know how to fill out those schedules and how to read the schedules. It taught me step by step the little things that really helped . . . I feel like college to me is basically academics but then there's also extracurricular. Those extracurricular activities, they won't come to you. You have to be really out there to look for the experience. You have to be out there to find the clubs or orgs that can really make your experience a lot better.

Tuan indicated that going through a summer program before his freshman year helped him successfully prepare for his first year in college. He continued to be involved in the program throughout his first year. This program supported him via the student mentoring and tutoring services on campus. These activities helped him successfully use the tools he learned during the summer program. Similar to Tuan's experience, Shaun also garnered support through academic support and mentoring services throughout his college career. During his first year, Shaun felt that he had put in many hours of studying chemistry but his grades did not reflect his efforts. He felt discouraged, so he sought help with the student academic support services on campus. He believed that receiving extra help and being in a comfortable, welcoming environment improved his grades. He explained:

> Getting extra help here, it really gave me the encouragement that I needed. I would think negatively about chemistry [before seeking help] . . . I have the encouragement that I need. This was a big part in helping me overcome my struggles.

Shaun also mentioned that the student academic support services provided a two-hour workshop twice a week to get his questions about chemistry answered. Along with learning effective study techniques, he was also able to forge positive relationships with his peers and the people who ran the support services. He said that the comfortable learning environment from the workshop helped him the most. Shaun shared:

> I guess it was not necessarily the tutoring that helped me but just the positive environment that I had. Just being there, wow, they actually care about you. They really want to help you. That kind of motivated me and I felt really welcomed here.

Leanne attributed her knowing more about college to her involvement in the Cambodian and Asian American student organizations. Through these organizations, she was able to attend seminars that helped build her confidence in leadership and public speaking. Along the same lines, Veata, a Cambodian student and a junior in psychology, also attributed learning about being successful in college to the activities provided in an ethnic student organization. She stated that the organization provided a mentor program, which she felt helped with her struggles in college. The program emphasized not only the importance of doing well academically, but also learning about other aspects of what it means to be successful, such as interacting and knowing where and when to ask for help. Veata expanded on that program:

> [My peer mentor program] was very supportive. [They] left no room for judgment, and [they] kind of understood that it's not you, it's the school, it's the

> institution that's brainwashing you to think you just can't do this [succeed in school]. [It] really helped a lot, and that's why I passed. You need people and help, you can't go through this alone.

Based on the responses from the students in this study, programs played a pivotal part in helping students learn more about the college process. These programs include pre-college programs such as Upward Bound and summer transition programs. In addition, programs that continued throughout their college experience such as peer mentoring and peer tutoring programs encouraged them to persist despite the challenges that confronted them as Southeast Asian American, first-generation college students.

DISCUSSION

This article discussed the importance of social capital on the access, adjustment, and success of SEAA college students. Caring agents, support services, and organizations facilitated the development of the participants' social capital. Based on our findings, we can draw a number of conclusions from our present study. First, the findings reinforce the importance of gaining access to social capital for success, especially for students who are first generation and those who are from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds. Stanton-Salazar (1997) studied how social capital and institutional support influenced the relationships between working-class minority youth with institutional agents. In his study, he explained that such support from institutional agents aided in the challenges that working-class minority youth encountered in their socialization in school. Relating his findings to the current study helped explain the importance that caring agents (e.g., family members, counselors, teachers, professors, and peer mentors) played in facilitating the college access, adjustment, and success of SEAA students through the use of social capital.

Furthermore, the findings of this current study also address the model minority stereotype that persists in the discourse of Asian American college students. The findings of this study reinforce the need to further disaggregate the ethnic minority groups within the Asian American category. Studying the ethnic groups within the Asian American grouping provides a clearer and in-depth understanding of diversity in immigration histories, socioeconomic class, and needs of Asian Americans—more specifically, SEAAs (Maramba, 2011; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; National Commission, 2010; Ngo, 2006; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2009). Moreover, it provides a better understanding of the vast education and college access and completion disparities among the SEAA population compared to their Asian American counterparts. The findings from the current study of SEAA college students emphasizes how gaining social capital provides tools for SEAAs to successfully navigate through college, which for many of the participants is uncharted territory.

Museus and Neville (2012) studied the general characteristics of institutional agents who provided social capital for students of color. They found that characteristics such as providing overall support and forming commonalities to relate with students were important ways for students to gain social capital for success in college. Furthermore, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) discussed the role of validating agents and the importance of those agents in providing information that helped students navigate their college experience. Similarly, these previous studies refer to such networks as institutional and validating agents, and our current study labeled them as "caring agents." Caring agents included people such as counselors, teachers, professors, and peer mentors who provided

social capital in order for SEAA students to succeed. An example of a form of social capital was learning the detailed process of applying to college. Students in the study described the process of gaining and understanding the tools needed to successfully apply to college, such as filling out the applications for admissions, taking the SAT, and enrolling in certain college prep classes. For the participants, having access to this type of information instilled confidence in their efforts to successfully apply to college. It is evident that caring agents employed a sense of care in that they created positive relationships and provided access to critical information, which helped the participants enter and navigate the higher education environment.

The findings of this current study make a critical contribution to the concept of ethics of care, especially as it relates to the discussion of social capital and SEAA college students. Ethics of care has been discussed by a number of researchers (e.g., Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1984). Grounded in a feminist approach, ethics of care begins with the premise that the desire to be cared for is a basic human need. Moreover, it places an emphasis on the importance of interdependent relationships (Noddings, 1984). According to Noddings, ethics of care can also be applied to educational environments. She emphasizes that there is a need for educators to engage students in dialogue about caring. This understanding of care is similar to how SEAA students in this current study developed positive interdependent relationships with their caring agents. The caring agents with whom they interacted engaged a sense of care while simultaneously providing social capital that assisted them in their successful navigation of the educational environment.

The participants in this current study found social capital through pre-college programs or organizations in college in which they were involved. A number of the students mentioned that pre-college programs such as Educational Talent Search or Upward Bound helped them learn more about college. Specifically, these programs provided information that allowed them to better understand how to access and succeed in college. This finding is consistent with reports by the U.S. Department of Education Federal TRIO (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) regarding the importance of students engaging in pre-college programs, because it helps them to become more familiar with the college environment, thereby increasing their retention and persistence to graduation. Similarly, participants mentioned developing social capital through ethnic student organizations and the important peer-mentoring activities they provided. Peer-mentoring initiatives have been shown to foster integration and academic success in the college environment (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007). More specifically, peer mentors play an important role in facilitating a connection to the community, and providing support and guidance for their mentees (Shotton et al., 2007). In the case of the current study, students were able to gain social capital via ethnic student organizations that had a peer mentoring program in place. This form of social capital found within ethnic student organizations was vital for increasing the potential for the students to succeed in college.

Finally, it is interesting to note that with the exception of one student who did not indicate their generation, the participants identified either as second or 1.5 generation. As the students in the study were either born and raised in the United States or arrived in the United States at an early age, their experiences may be different from their first-generation counterparts. In their study of second-generation Vietnamese and Filipino American college students, Zhou and Xiong

(2005) emphasized the strong bonds and influence of their ethnic communities in their educational experiences. These strong bonds were similarly evident in the experiences of SEAA students in this study. Although the current study did not specifically focus on comparing second and 1.5 generation with first-generation SEAAs, it provides another dimension from which to further explore each of these populations' experiences and deserves future inquiry. The majority of the participants in this study were women (26 out of 34), and, although the scope of the study did not focus on a comparison between men and women, it is yet another opportunity for further examination. Indeed, further analysis might yield more understanding of the complexities of the intersections between social capital, race, and gender.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Our study provides at least three important contributions to higher education research and practice. First, this study adds to the small amount of literature on SEAA college students. As this is the first nationally conducted qualitative study on SEAA students and their experiences in the higher education system, it addresses the concern for disaggregating the ethnic groups within the Asian American category. As mentioned, many researchers have advocated addressing the diverse needs of specific Asian American ethnic groups. Second, the findings of this study also encourage us to further examine the various roles social capital plays in the experiences of underrepresented ethnic and racial minority students. Therefore, future studies on how social capital impacts college access, adjustment, and success for ethnic and racial students should continue. More specifically, further research should also include examining specific Asian American ethnic populations to provide a clearer understanding of these groups.

Additionally, the findings have important implications for higher education practitioners, administrators, and policymakers with regard to ways in which programs are implemented and the types of activities that may be offered. Students in this current study emphasized their connections with caring agents such as family members, counselors, teachers/professors, and peer mentors. In particular, participants mentioned how these agents played roles at both the high school level and the college level. Understanding the levels of participation of both high schools and colleges opens up potential opportunities for further collaboration between these two entities. These opportunities are evident in the participants' responses. For example, students spoke of their high school counselors or teachers who provided important information about the college application process. Their support continued once the participants entered college, as they stayed connected and provided further advice about succeeding in college. This experience helped students learn that it was important to also seek support at the college level. The findings of this study should encourage high schools and universities to find more effective ways to collaborate and communicate with each other in order to provide a more seamless transition for students, especially those who are first-generation and underrepresented ethnic minorities.

In addition, it is also worth mentioning the role of programmatic and nonprofit organizations both outside (pre-college) and within the college environment. More specifically, students in this current study mentioned a number of pre-college organizations and programs that helped them prepare academically and socially for their first year in college. A number of helpful programs mentioned by the participants were federal

funded or nonprofit organizations. Thus, at the policy level, more advocacy can take place for maintaining or providing more funding to pre-college programs that support populations similar to those mentioned in our study. These programs acted as an important linchpin to the access and transition to college for this study's population. Additionally, programs and organizations within the college milieu that serve first-generation and underrepresented minority college students need to continue (or need to be created) and have more funding invested in them. These student services that provide tutoring and mentoring services need to continue to reach out to underrepresented populations.

Moreover, the ethnic college student organizations have provided an important resource for students, especially with regard to developing social capital from peer mentors who have demonstrated success in college. Specifically, it may be important for faculty/staff advisors to seek more effective ways to further support student organizations that have peer-mentoring programs. These advisors can, for example, provide additional tools or training sessions for peer mentors to further assist their mentees. Thus, it is crucial that institutions recognize and support the critical roles that caring agents, supportive student services/programs, and student organizations play in providing social capital. More importantly, they have positively influenced and facilitated the success of underrepresented ethnic minorities within the university setting.

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