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Cultural Community Connections and College Success: An Examination of Southeast Asian American College Students

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Low rates of college success continue to be a persisting problem in the United States, particularly among Southeast Asian Americans and other populations of color. The purpose of the current inquiry was to understand how cultural community connections influence the success of Southeast Asian American college students. Qualitative methods were employed and face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with 34 Southeast Asian American undergraduates. Participants identified 3 types of connections that facilitated their success in college: physical, epistemological, and transformational cultural connections. Implications for future higher education research and practice are discussed.

Low rates of college degree attainment continue to be a persistent problem in the US. For example, only approximately 59% of all first-year college students who enroll in higher education for the first time at 4-year institutions will complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years of entering college (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). Given this statistic, it is imperative that higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners better understand how to increase rates of *success* (defined here and throughout as persistence toward degree completion) among students in postsecondary education. Baccalaureate degree attainment statistics for undergraduates of color are even more dismal.

While 62% of first-time, full-time White students who matriculate at a 4-year college complete a bachelor's degree in 6 years, that percentage is significantly lower for American Indian and Alaskan Native (39%), Black (40%), Pacific Islander (40), and Latino (50%) students (NCES, 2013). Although Asian American students achieve high rates of success in the aggregate, Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs) face drastic disparities. For example, whereas Asian Indians (76%), Pakistani (55%), Korean (54%), and Chinese (52%) Americans hold bachelor's degrees at rates higher than the national population (28%), their Vietnamese (26%), Hmong (14%), Cambodian (13%), and Laotian (12%) counterparts hold 4-year degrees at rates far lower than the national average (Museus, 2013a).

Given the low degree attainment rates of SEAAs and other populations of color, it is critical that higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners better understand how to increase success among these populations. The current study aimed to advance current levels of understanding regarding the factors that influence the success of SEAA undergraduates. Specifically, we focused on understanding SEAA students' perceptions of how campuses foster connections to their cultural communities that facilitated their persistence in college.

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In the following section, we discuss the persistent growth, challenges, and invisibility of the Asian American population in higher education, thereby underscoring the importance of generating knowledge about this population. Then, we provide an overview of existing literature that explains how SEAA undergraduates and other racially minoritized college students' cultural communities influence their persistence in higher education. The remainder of this paper describes our empirical analysis of how campuses foster cultural community connections that facilitate SEAAs' persistence in college.

GROWTH, CHALLENGES, AND INVISIBILITY

Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the US (Museus, 2013a, 2013b). Between 2000 and 2010, the Asian American population grew by 43% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, 2012). During this same decade, the number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders entering institutions of higher education increased by approximately 400,000 (NCES lumps these two racial groups into the same category). According to future projections, Asian American and Pacific Islander undergraduate and graduate enrollment is expected to increase by an additional 30% by 2019, totaling approximately 1.7 million students overall (Museus, 2013a).

Despite the aforementioned disparities in degree attainment, Asian Americans continue to be misperceived as model minorities who achieve unparalleled and universal academic and occupational success (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Suzuki, 2002). Researchers have underscored, however, that this model minority myth is far from reality, and masks the many challenges that Asian Americans face in higher education (Buenavista, Jayakumar, &

Misa-Escalante, 2009; Kiang, 2002; Chou & Feagin, 2008; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Museus, 2013a, 2013b; Museus & Park, 2015; Museus & Truong, 2009, 2013). These challenges include significant pressure from cultural conflict, unwelcoming racial climates, pressure to conform to racial stereotypes, experienced racial discrimination, and relatively high rates of mental health issues. In addition to masking the challenges faced by Asian American students, the predominance of the model minority myth has resulted in the lack of educational research on Asian Americans (Museus, 2009).

The rapid growth of Asian American communities and college students, coupled with real challenges faced by this population in higher education, underscore the need for postsecondary educators to understand this population. Yet, empirical research on Asian American college students is sparse, leaving educational policymakers and practitioners to rely on misconceptions of this community, rather than their lived realities (Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Suzuki, 2002; Teranishi, 2010). And, research on SEAAs—the Asian American subgroups that face the most significant racial and ethnic disparities in higher education—is even more difficult to find. Therefore, it is imperative that postsecondary education scholars generate more empirically based knowledge about this population to inform policy and practice.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN COLLEGE SUCCESS

One of the earliest perspectives on student success was Tinto's theory of student integration (1987, 1993), which is based on a social integrationist perspective. The social integrationist perspective suggests that students must detach from their home communities

and successfully transition and assimilate into the cultures of their respective campuses to successfully persist (Tinto, 1993). Scholars, however, have critiqued the social integrationist perspective's ability to explain the experiences of students of color in higher education (Rendòn, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992; Tierney, 1999).

While the social integrationist perspective suggests that undergraduates of color must detach from their cultural communities (Tierney, 1999), extant evidence suggests that those communities provide critical support for students of color in college (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2013a, 2013c, 2014; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, & Tan, 2012; Tierney, 1999). Furthermore, the social integrationist perspective places heavy onus on the individual student to adjust and persist, whereas scholars have emphasized that institutions also have a responsibility to facilitate such success (Tierney, 1999).

Several scholars have also made efforts to reshape discourse around success among students of color by developing new concepts that highlight the responsibility of institutions to allow students to maintain connections to their cultural heritage while adjusting to and persisting through college (e.g., Museus, 2011; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Tierney (1992), for example, critiqued the underlying foundations of the social integrationist perspective when he asserted that, "we might think of the institution as having the 'problem' . . . defined not as a group's lack of 'acculturation' but as an institution's inability to operate in a multicultural world" (p. 615). Tierney (1999) called on institutions to adopt a model of *cultural integrity* that is characterized by educational programs and practices that engage the cultural identities of their students. In addition, Rendòn (1994) asserted that administration and faculty should create *culturally validating* campus

environments and experiences. And, Museus (2011) underscored the abilities of educators to practice *cultural integration*, which he defined as the integration of the academic, social, and cultural spheres of students' lives into programs, practices, spaces, and activities. While these concepts underscore culture as a supportive factor in students' retention, they do not provide a holistic perspective of the college success process for diverse populations.

Scholars have also proposed more holistic alterative theoretical perspectives of college success among racially and ethnically diverse student populations (Museus, 2014; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Kuh and Love (2000), for example, proposed a cultural perspective of student departure. The cultural perspective consists of eight interconnected propositions that explain the role of culture in minority student persistence. They posit that the cultural distance between a student's home culture and campus culture is inversely related to persistence, and students must acclimate to the dominant culture or find connections to one or more cultural enclaves to successfully succeed. Museus and Quaye (2009) noted some important limitations of this cultural perspective, including the absence of empirical evidence validating the model and the absence of other important cultural variables that influence student success, such as individual cultural agents, cultural integrity, and cultural validation (Bourdieu, 1986; de Anda, 1984; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Tierney, 1992, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 1999).

Using existing research and the voices of 30 students of color at a predominantly White institution, Museus and Quaye (2009) analyzed and revised Kuh and Love's (2000) original eight propositions to construct an intercultural perspective of minority student persistence. The intercultural framework deviates from Kuh and Love's (2000) original intercultural perspective in a few important ways. First,

whereas Kuh and Love's cultural perspective suggests that cultural distance is inversely related to persistence, Museus and Quaye's (2009) intercultural perspective clarifies that this distance leads to cultural dissonance (i.e., the tension that results from cultural incongruence and related stressors), which is inversely related to persistence. Second, while Kuh and Love's (2000) perspective suggests that students must acclimate to the dominant culture of their respective campuses or find membership in one or more campus cultural enclaves in order to overcome the incongruence between their home and campus cultures, the intercultural framework posits that both collective (e.g., ethnic organizations, cultural centers) and individual (e.g., faculty, staff, and peers) cultural agents that value academic success and validate the cultural identities of students of color can facilitate their persistence.

It is important to note that both Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural perspective and Museus and Quaye's (2009) intercultural perspective imply that incongruence between students' home and campus cultures can lead to greater challenges in college, and reducing the distance between these cultures can decrease the amount of cultural dissonance experienced and ultimately lead to greater likelihood of persistence. And, while there is some evidence suggesting that there is a correlation between cultural dissonance and encountering challenges in college (e.g., Museus & Maramba, 2011), empirical studies examining the ways in which institutions of higher education can and do purposefully reduce the distance between student's home and campus cultures by fostering connections between them are sparse.

RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN COLLEGE SUCCESS

A small body of research provides some indication that the racial and ethnic minority college students' cultural communities positively influence their success (Kiang, 2002; Deyhle, 1995; Museus, 2011, 2014; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999). For example, existing scholarship reveals that family connections can have a positive impact on the educational trajectories of students of color in general and SEAAs specifically (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2013a; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Nora, 2001; Pizzolato, 2006). This relationship, however, can be complex and pose unique challenges for these students. Museus (2013a), for example, qualitatively examined the impact of parents on the educational trajectories of SEAAs and found that parental expectations, encouragement, and support were salient positive influences on these undergraduates' success. However, this study also revealed that excessive pressure from parents, parental pressures to go into fields that were not a good fit, and family obligations posed challenges for a few participants in the sample.

Existing research also suggests that certain campus environments (e.g., ethnic studies programs and ethnic student organizations) allow racial and ethnic minority students to cultivate connections to their own cultural communities, which can promote success (Kiang, 1997, 2002, 2009; Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010; Museus et al., 2012; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Patton, 2010). For example, in a qualitative analysis of Southeast Asian American experiences at an urban public research university, Kiang (2002, 2009) found that Asian American Studies courses provided spaces of cultural familiarity that encouraged and supported SEAA students on their path toward a postsecondary degree. Several studies also provide evidence that ethnic student organizations provide spaces in which SEAAs and other students of color can connect with peers from their own cultural communities and that these connections can increase success (Guiffrida, 2003; Murgia,

Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Museus, 2008, 2011, 2013a, 2014; Museus & Quaye, 2009). For instance, in a qualitative study of 24 Asian American and Black students at a predominantly White campus, Museus (2008) concluded that ethnic student organizations foster the success of these students by providing them with spaces of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and sources of cultural validation within the larger campus environment.

While this body of research has made substantial contributions to the existing knowledge base, several limitations persist. First, research that analyzes the ways in which cultural factors shape the experiences and outcomes of SEAAs in college is sparse (e.g., Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2013a). Second, most SEAAs who are currently enrolled in college are 1.5 (i.e., those who arrived in the United States under the age of 15) and second generation (i.e., those who have refugee parents and were born in the US), and literature examining the factors that influence the experiences and outcomes of these populations is difficult to find. Third, while the research discussed herein provides some indication that colleges and universities can provide spaces that allow students of color to foster and strengthen their connections to their cultural communities, the types of connections that SEAA and other college students cultivate with their cultural communities and that positively influence their success in higher education have not been the focus of systematic empirical inquiry. Given the aforementioned evidence regarding the importance of cultural connections in the experiences and outcomes of SEAA students and other undergraduates of color, it is imperative that higher education researchers generate a better understanding of the various types of connections that hinder or foster success among these students in higher education.

SIGNIFICANCE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of our inquiry was to understand how campuses foster cultural community connections that facilitate SEAA students' persistence in college. One overarching research question guided the current investigation: How do SEAA students' connections to their cultural communities influence their persistence in college? Three additional subquestions guided the current analysis:

1. What, if any, types of cultural community connections do SEAA students cultivate in college?

2. How, if at all, do these cultural community connections promote persistence among SEAA undergraduates?

3. How do SEAA students make sense of these cultural community connections in college?

Our study contributes to existing literature in multiple ways. First, this investigation contributes to current levels of understanding regarding the experiences of SEAAs, as it constitutes one of the first in-depth analyses regarding the ways in which cultural factors shape the experiences and outcomes of SEAA undergraduates. Moreover, this study is the first examination of the role of culture in the experiences of 1.5 and second generation SEAAs. Second, this inquiry adds to existing research by shedding light on the *types* of cultural connections that students can cultivate with their cultural communities while enrolled in college, and how these connections influence their persistence. Therefore, this examination adds to current levels of understanding regarding how postsecondary educators can and do construct institutional programs and practices in ways that allow SEAA undergraduates and other college students to foster connections with their respective home communities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The intercultural perspective of minority student persistence constituted the conceptual framework for the current inquiry (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Specifically, the intercultural perspective posits that incongruence between students' home and campus cultures is positively related to the amount of cultural dissonance students will experience in college. The perspective also suggests that experienced cultural dissonance is inversely related to success in higher education. Finally, the intercultural perspective posits that policies, programs, and practices that decrease the amount of cultural dissonance that students experience can increase their likelihood of success. Thus, the perspective provides a useful framework for analyzing how campus spaces allow students to cultivate connections with their cultural communities within the cultures of their respective campuses, reduce the amount of cultural dissonance that these undergraduates experience, and increase their likelihood of success in higher education.

METHODS

This inquiry was a generic qualitative analysis (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research methods were ideal for this inquiry for two primary reasons. First, qualitative methods were chosen for this study because they allow for the exploration of a topic or concept through the use of detailed information (Creswell, 1998). Second, qualitative methods were selected because they are the best approaches for answering "how," "what," and "why" questions. Therefore, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate and were utilized to answer the aforementioned research questions through the generation of detailed information that sheds light on the nature of cultural community connections.

Participant Selection and Sample

Two types of purposeful sampling techniques were employed to acquire participants for this investigation: sampling for maximum variation and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). With regard to maximum variation, a sample that represented a wide array of ethnic backgrounds (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese American), years in college (second through fifth), academic majors (social sciences, hard sciences, and applied fields), institutional types (e.g., commuter and residential), and geographic regions (e.g., West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast) was sought. Sampling for maximum variation ensured that the findings that emerged are transferable to several subgroups that exist within the SEAA college student population. Second, with regard to snowball sampling, participants were asked to recommend peers who could speak meaningfully about their experiences as an SEAA college student. These snowball techniques were used to continue to include additional participants to our sample until we achieved data saturation—that is, until a point at which no new information was emerging (Patton, 2002).

In order to acquire our sample, the assistance of faculty and staff who work closely with SEAA college students—including individuals working in Asian American Studies Programs, Educational Opportunity Programs, TRIO Programs, and Multicultural Resource Centers—at five 4-year colleges and universities was solicited. Those faculty and staff were asked to distribute an e-mail solicitation for participation in this study via listservs housed within these offices. As mentioned, the additional technique of asking participants, at the culmination of their interviews, to recommend potential participants was utilized.

The final sample consisted of 34 SEAA

undergraduate students at five public 4-year colleges and universities across the US. Geographically, 19 participants were located on the West Coast, 3 were attending institutions in the Midwest, and 12 were located on the East Coast. With regard to institutional type, the sample included 19 participants who were enrolled at a large (over 29,000 students) urban public research university on the West Coast, 2 participants enrolled at a large (over 50,000 students) urban public research university in the Midwest, 1 participant enrolled at a small (over 7,000 students) private 4-year college in the Midwest, 4 students enrolled at a midsized (over 15,000 students) urban public research university on the East Coast, and 8 enrolled at a rural mid-sized (over 14,000 students) 4-year institution on the East Coast. In terms of selectivity, the five participating campuses varied substantially. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the public research university on the West Coast admits approximately 38% of its applicants, whereas the urban public research university in the Midwest admits 47% of its applicants, the private 4-year college in the Midwest admits 97% of its applicants, the urban public research university on the East Coast admits 68% of its applicants, and the rural mid-sized 4-year institution on the East Coast admits approximately 40% of its applicants.

This sample included 12 Cambodian, 5 Hmong, 3 Laotian, 15 Vietnamese, and 11 students who reported multiple races or ethnicities. (Students were counted in each category they selected)The sample included substantially more female (24) than male (10) students. With regard to generational statuses in the US, 26 participants were second generation (i.e., their parents immigrated to the US) and 8 students were 1.5 generation (they immigrated to the US at a very early age). Of the 34 participants in the sample, 14

indicated that the highest level of education completed by either parent was less than high school, 8 reported at least one parent who earned a high school diploma, 7 reported having a parent that earned an associate's degree, 4 had at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree, only 1 student had a parent who earned a master's degree, and none had a parent with a professional or doctoral degree.

Among our participants, 3 identified as freshman, 7 were sophomores, 13 were juniors, 10 were seniors in college, and 1 did not indicate a class standing. Participants reported a wide range of majors, including biology (5), chemistry (3), cognitive science, economics (4), engineering, English, ethnic studies (3), health science, human biology (3), human development (2), industrial engineering, international management, international studies, linguistics, management, mechanical engineering, political science, prosthetics, psychology (5), undeclared (3). The 31 participants who reported their grade point averages (GPA) exhibited a mean GPA of 2.94 and a median GPA of 3.0 in college. Three of the 34 participants did not report their GPAs.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using two primary methods. First, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire, which included questions about demographics, their status in college (e.g., their institution, academic major, year in higher education), and information regarding their involvement in various organizations in college. Second, each student participated in a face-to-face, individual, semistructured interview, lasting approximately 1–1.5 hours. Specifically, students were asked to read and sign an informed consent form and were asked a series of interview questions from a preconstructed protocol. The interview protocol included questions, such as the following: (a) What has contributed to your

success in college? And, (b) What continues to be challenging for you as a student here? After participants responded to the questions in the preconstructed protocol, they were asked probes to acquire more detail and clarification, as needed. After each interview was conducted, they were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber or research assistant.

Data Analysis Techniques

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were organized and coded using the NVivo Qualitative Software Research Package. Open- and axial-coding were employed during data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, coding procedures were used to determine the initial thematic categories related to the phenomenon under investigation. Then, axial coding techniques were used to further develop categories that emerged during the open coding phase by identifying the properties or dimensions of those categories.

Finally, it should be noted that constant comparative methods were utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, in constant comparative methods, data collection and analysis are closely interwoven, collection and analysis of data occur simultaneously and alternately, and analysis occurs throughout the data collection process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 59). This permits the researcher to collect and analyze preliminary data, identify emerging categories, and subsequently collect additional data until those emerging categories are "theoretically saturated" (Creswell, 1998). Theoretical saturation occurs when no new or relevant information emerges from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the current investigation, initial interviews were conducted and analyzed. Then, the interview protocol was refined so that the questions probed into areas of emerging categories

and additional interviews were conducted. This process continued until a point of data saturation was reached.

Researcher Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Whereas some qualitative researchers have made attempts to minimize the impact of researcher subjectivity on qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), other researchers have espoused a more constructivist perspective and underscored the importance of researcher reflexivity, which can be defined as the identification and understanding of biases and assumptions that can influence researchers' perspectives, decisions, and interpretations (Charmaz, 2005). We adopt the latter approach in the current examination, allowing us to embrace our subjectivity and incorporate it into the discussion. We are all Asian Americans who previously attended and successfully navigated college. The lead author grew up navigating Southeast Asian American communities. The lead author has spent the last 12 years, and the co-authors have spent the last five years studying the factors that influence the educational experiences and outcomes of racially and ethnically diverse student populations. Thus, our experiences as Asian American students and scholars studying the experiences of diverse populations shape our biases. We believe that low rates of educational attainment among SEAAs are problematic, and we espouse the belief that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the educational outcomes of SEAAs in postsecondary education.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

While internal and external validity are critical considerations in quantitative research, trustworthiness and quality assurance are generally determined by the degree of

credibility and transferability of findings in qualitative research. Credibility refers to the congruence of the findings with reality, while transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to situations outside of the cases being studied (Merriam, 1998). We utilized several methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) to maximize trustworthiness of the findings. First, triangulation (i.e., the convergence of multiple data sources) was employed to analyze interview transcripts, code reports, textural-structural descriptions, and researcher notes to cross-check and verify emergent themes. Second, member checks were conducted with all 34 participants to ensure that our interpretations were congruent with these students' perceptions. Specifically, those participants were sent summaries of the themes that emerged from this analysis and invited to provide feedback. Participants' feedback was then juxtaposed with the themes to ensure that the SEAA students' perspectives and the findings were congruent. Finally, throughout the analysis phase of the study, discrepant data were sought and examined to help identify alternative hypotheses and question and critically examine our theoretical presuppositions.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, it is important to note that our study was focused on the factors that SEAA students reported as facilitating their persistence in college, which was defined as persistence for the current inquiry. Similar to previous qualitative studies of enrolled college student persistence (e.g., Museus & Quaye, 2009), we based this analysis on the assumption that persisting college students can provide valuable insight into what has contributed to their progress through the education system up to the point at which the study was conducted. Our intent was not to make claims about what factors ensure degree completion among SEAA students, and such analysis was beyond the scope of our study. Second, participant selection constitutes a limitation of this study. Our gatekeepers provided access to participants who were connected to various programs and offices on campus and who could speak about what promoted their persistence in college. In addition, a majority of these students were connected to ethnic studies programs, multicultural centers, or ethnic student organizations. Thus, their perspectives could potentially differ from those who are disengaged from the campus environment or disconnected from these types of units on their campuses or those who are facing significant struggles and on the verge of dropping out. Analysis of the experiences of these populations was beyond the scope of our study. Moreover, participants were all enrolled at 4-year institutions, and therefore do not represent a large portion of the SEAA population who followed very different educational trajectories, such as those at 2-year colleges, those who dropped out of 4- or 2-year institutions, or those who did not attend college at all. A third limitation is the predominantly female nature of the participant sample (76%), and the fact that a more balanced gender sample may have illuminated different interpretations or experiences. A fourth limitation of our study is the fact that, even though differences across generational statuses, refugee statuses, sexual orientations, or other important aspects of students' identities might play a critical role in shaping how they experience college, analysis of such factors was beyond the scope of this study. The final limitation that we note herein is researcher subjectivity. Our perspectives regarding SEAA college students' experience shaped the analysis of participants' experiences and, if other researchers conducted the same

analysis, they might have interpreted these experiences in different ways.

FINDINGS

Findings of the current analysis reveal three types of critical cultural community connections that shaped our participants' experience in postsecondary education. First, *physical cultural connections* refer to participants being able to connect with people from similar cultural backgrounds on campus. Second, *epistemological cultural connections* underscore the ways in which students encountered and engaged in opportunities to learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultural communities. Finally, *transformational cultural connections* refer to the ways in which students were given and took advantage of opportunities to engage in projects or activities to give back and positively transform their cultural communities.

Before discussing the three aforementioned themes in depth, a few caveats are warranted. First, it is important to note that these three themes are not mutually exclusive, but are interconnected. For example, participants sometimes encountered spaces that allowed them to establish physical cultural connections on campus and, through those connections, emerged epistemological connections that allowed those students to acquire knowledge about their own cultural communities. We define and provide an overview of each type of cultural community connection in the following sections.

In addition, it is important to say a few words about the context of our participants' experiences. All five campuses that participants attended housed ethnic studies programs, either general ethnic studies or those geared toward specific ethnic communities, such as Africana Studies, Asian American Studies, and Chicano and Latino Studies, and at

least one predominantly Asian American student organizations. In addition, two of the five campuses housed multicultural centers that oversaw diversity programming on their respective campuses. Similar to the general college student population, our participants reported being connected to these units to varying degrees. Participants who were more connected to these units spoke more thoroughly about how their campuses cultivated cultural community connections and the ways in which those connections promoted their college persistence. This could be a function of the reality that ethnic studies programs, cultural centers, and ethnic student organizations are often designed to foster these three types of cultural connections. However, a handful of our participants did discuss having opportunities to connect with their cultural communities through other spaces, such as non-ethnic studies courses that focused on social issues or service-learning programs, on their campuses (e.g., sociology courses) as well.

Finally, while our findings illuminate three types of cultural community connections that positively influenced students' educational trajectories, our intention is not to portray the participants as problem-free. Participants in our study spoke of challenges, such as how some educators held low expectations for them, stereotypes that their ethnic communities do not value education (as a result of the low educational attainment rates exhibited by SEAA communities mentioned above), and experienced prejudice and discrimination. These experiences, however, were beyond the scope of our examination.

Physical Cultural Connections

Over half of our SEAA participants emphasized the significance of physical cultural connections. Physical connections occurred when students were able to connect with individuals and groups from their own

cultural communities on campus. Academic departments or programs (e.g., ethnic studies), cultural centers, and ethnic student organizations with members from similar backgrounds as participants all constituted spaces for physical cultural connections to emerge. Leanne, a second-year Cambodian participant, described the value of these physical connections in the following comments about the Asian cultural center on her campus:

> Over here, I got along with everybody. I sit in the Asian Center sometimes, and I just randomly talk to someone I just met . . . and we'll have a long conversation, and they're really friendly with me. I just feel comfortable here, maybe because it's kind of cozy . . . I have somewhere to go now. I come in here. If [the Center] wasn't here, I'd just come to school and leave, right after classes. That's it. I wouldn't hang around. I probably wouldn't even meet people.

Like Leanne, a fourth-year Vietnamese American female student named Tuyet discussed the importance of such spaces that permitted the cultivation of physical cultural connections:

> To be honest with you, I felt accepted with the Vietnamese Student Association. They were really nice people. . . . They don't try to exclude me. They actually try to bring me in and make me feel accepted. That was freshman year, so I just kind of stuck with it because I know that these people who are running it now they are my trends and I know they are great people and they never try to shut anybody out.

Leanne and Tuyet's comments illustrate how these physical cultural connections were linked to participants having greater levels of acceptance, sense of belonging, and satisfaction in college.

Janet, a third-year Cambodian American student, expanded on this point as she discussed how one targeted support program that fostered physical cultural connections also induced a sense of belonging for her in college:

> If I didn't have this program back then, I don't think I would feel as connected to the campus, to the people here at all. . . . Even now, I feel like this is [the source of] my sense of belonging here. When I think, "Where do I feel most comfortable . . . and connected to?" I automatically think of this program. I don't know if I would feel that way without it.

The physical cultural connections that students made also led to them to build relationships with important role models who made the possibility of succeeding a reality. May, a second-year Hmong student, illuminated the value connecting with role models from her own community:

> What really motivates me to succeed is all of the upper classmates that I meet. I'm just so astonished with them. I'm so amazed. Like Professor Yang . . . I'm like, "wow, you went that far for school." I thought I went far. That's even farther . . . and you're not married yet too, so your age in our culture is past that, you're supposed to be married with kids already. So I'm just so amazed. I look up to her. . . . If she can do that, I can do that too, I can probably even do more than that. So she really motivates me.

It is important to note that SEAA participants who experienced the benefits of physical cultural connections described the motivation that they felt to provide opportunities for other students to make such connections through their involvement in ethnic student organizations. Kurt, a second-year Vietnamese American student, discussed how his ethnic organization aimed to create a space in which other Vietnamese students could connect with other students from their own cultural communities and find a sense of familiarity:

We try to reach out to people so they can feel there's more, you're not just alone, you can come to us any time for help, or you can try to express yourself to other people who are like you, get to know new people, expand contacts, get more friends, and just really have a good time.

As previously mentioned, the physical cultural connections that students established sometimes led to the emergence of epistemological connections, to which we turn in the following section.

Epistemological Cultural Connections

Over two thirds of our SEAA participants also clarified the importance of their campuses providing opportunities for students to develop, maintain, and strengthen epistemological connections to their home cultures and communities. Specifically, the opportunities to create and maintain epistemological connections refer to the ways in which campuses enable students to acquire and share knowledge about their cultural communities. Ethnic studies programs, culturally relevant courses, and cultural cocurricular activities provided such spaces for our SEAA students. A third-year Cambodian/Chinese student named Ken, for example, illuminated this point in the following comments:

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.

Janet, a third-year Chinese/Vietnamese American student, also discussed taking Asian American Studies classes that gave her the opportunity to learn about her own cultural community:

I also took an ethnic studies class on Asian American students, not students but Asian Americans I think in general. . . . That was very interesting for me to identify with . . . We learned about different stereotypes of Asian students. . . . That's kind of like what non-Asian people see, and think, and perceive of Asian people, like how it could be primarily docile, we're quiet, we're obedient, things like that. . . . Yes, I think that I learned a lot, a lot of things that I felt growing up or now that I didn't necessarily know how to explain or understand. . . . So I feel like in that sense it helped me gain a better understanding of my background a bit. But, I think it also tied me to the [campus] community.

Sometimes, these epistemological connections were established and strengthened outside of the classroom. Some participants joined an ethnic student organization specifically to establish this type of connection on-campus, as explained by Vin, a second-year Vietnamese student:

I joined VSA because I felt like I can reach out to people, not to just spread the knowledge of the Vietnamese culture but I feel like I can reach out to other groups that are trying to reach out to people. Then we can just like communicate, talk, and share experiences kind of thing.

For other students, being part of an ethnic student organization was the only way that they were able to establish epistemological connections on-campus. Dayna, a third-year Laotian American student mentioned, "You have to join a club or something. That's the only way to learn about people or make friends with different people. You all learn about each other." Dayna's experience illuminates the importance of having ethnic student organizations within post-secondary educational institutions.

Similarly, Ken described an event that the Asian American Studies Program and

Cambodian Student Association hosted at a local Cambodian restaurant:

> It's a community story sharing and poetry sharing night . . . just a chance for people to reflect on the history of [the community]. It used to be a spot where a lot of Cambodian refugees and immigrants were sent, but currently many of those Cambodian Americans or Cambodians have moved out. Yet, it is still a spot where the state has been sending refugees and immigrants. You see different shops, bilingual scripts, and I think a lot of the history that has happened there has lead [sic] the way for people to live safer in that area . . . It is keeping me motivated. It is like two birds with one stone. You get class work done and you get the extracurricular done all in the same event.

Ken's comments suggest that spaces that foster such epistemological connections kept him motivated during his studies at the university.

Indeed, these epistemological cultural connections were associated with a greater sense of membership, interest in learning, and motivation to succeed. Indeed, Ken's comments above highlight the way that an Asian American Studies course gave him an increased passion for learning. Mike, a third-year Vietnamese American student, also discussed how ethnic studies courses were associated with an increased interest in and satisfaction with his college coursework, when he shared the following comments:

> In my second year, I took a course called comparative Filipino Vietnamese communities and identities. . . . 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 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 for me. . . . It just really clicked for me because suddenly ethnic studies was really personal, and it was enjoyable for me.

In addition to connections that were characterized by opportunities for participants to learn about their own cultural communities, these students also discussed connections that allowed them to give back to and positively transform those communities, which are discussed in our final theme.

Transformational Cultural Connections

Finally, just under half of the 34 participants underscored the importance of transformational cultural connections in their college experiences. Transformational connections emerge when college campuses provide their SEAA students with opportunities to give back to and positively transform their cultural communities. Transformational connections can manifest, for example, in activities designed to engage in community activism, participate in service-learning opportunities, or be involved in problem-based research opportunities connected to students' cultural communities of origin. Prach, a third-year Cambodian American student described how Asian American Studies facilitated such connections on his campus by encouraging students to engage in community activism:

> Yes, I feel like what Asian American Studies is trying to do for the community and the things that they've been doing for so many years is just something that I feel like I want to be a part of . . . just the energy is indescribable. It's like they try to do things about awareness for Asian Americans, and not even just that. They try to do media to promote awareness of Asian American issues and things that are just real good.

Similarly, a third-year Laotian American participant named Alison explained why she was majoring in anthropology and, in doing so, underscored the value she placed on doing problem-based research related to her family's country of origin:

> I wanted to study . . . Southeast Asia and pretty much narrowing it down to just specifically Laos, because Laos has a lot of small ethnic groups within the country and there hasn't been much research done within that country as well. And, I was like, "That's my chance, I want to do that."

Cocurricular programs and ethnic student organizations also provide opportunities for participants to transform their cultural communities in positive ways. For example, Patricia, a first-year Cambodian American student, shared the following comment about a student success initiative and a Cambodian student organization that promoted engagement in community service activities in the Cambodian community:

> The student success initiative actually wants us to be more involved with the community. They're giving us different volunteering options and I'll be working with different students like elementary students. . . . With the Cambodian Student Association, we're trying to raise money for children in Cambodia. . . . I've been to Cambodia twice . . . and I know what it's like and my heart went out to them. I just felt like it hit home to me and when I found out that we would be raising money for children in Cambodia. . . . When I was in Cambodia, I was probably 13 or 12 and I didn't understand a lot about what was going on. I couldn't really comprehend why they were there, or why they were beggars, or why there were children without families. Now that I'm older I want to help out.

Our participants associated these transformational cultural connections with higher levels of motivation to learn and succeed in college. Patricia illuminated this relationship in the following remarks, as she discussed how her desire to give back to her community and her success were inextricably intertwined:

> I'll work hard now and be rewarded later. I always think about that. Working really hard now, as well as just trying to be a good example, a good role model . . . Especially for the Laotian community. There is not a lot of good role models. Even if they do become successful, they kind of forget about their own community, so I don't want to do that. . . . I want to be someone good and do something good for my community to come back to it.

Patricia's comment also illuminates her strong commitment to the Cambodian community and in having a positive impact on that population through her work.

Establishing transformational cultural connections has also helped participants engage with their home communities for reasons beyond themselves. For example, Nick, a fourth-year Vietnamese American undergraduate, discussed the reasons why he gets involved with the local Vietnamese community through the student organizations he is part of:

> Basically, it's for me to give back to the younger generations. . . . Very few actually speak any Vietnamese at this point . . . so basically that's what I try to instill in them. I basically teach them religion at the same time. I teach them [religion] in Vietnamese. So it's a better way to improve their way. Really, it's the language that links the past—the history of the culture—to us, so that's what I want to do. I want to give something back.

The quotation above demonstrates how having transformational cultural connections positively influences the way that students perceive themselves in the larger society.

DISCUSSION

Our study adds to existing research and discourse on student success in at least three ways. First, our study contributes to extant literature on SEAA college students by providing the first comprehensive analysis of how cultural community connections influence persistence in college. Earlier studies have clarified that such connections are important for this population (e.g., Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2013a; Museus et al., 2012), but did not focus specifically on creating an in-depth understanding of the different types of connections that shape these students' experiences. Our inquiry details the types of connections that do play a prominent role in SEAA students' experiences.

Second, the current inquiry provides some indication that the intercultural perspective constitutes a useful conceptual lens for studies that seek to advance knowledge about the relationship between campus environments and college success among diverse populations. Specifically, the findings suggest that the framework provides a useful lens to examine the ways in which cultural factors shape the experiences and success of college students (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Previous studies have utilized the intercultural framework to demonstrate a positive relationship between racial and ethnic minority student's connections to their cultural communities and their success in college (e.g., Museus & Maramba, 2011), and our analysis extends understanding of the utility of the intercultural framework by employing this lens to examine and illuminate the ways in which college campuses create the conditions that allow SEAA college students to maintain, develop, or strengthen ties to their cultural communities.

Second, our study sheds light on the complexity of the scholarly discourse focused on the relationship between students' cultural

community connections and college success. It has been argued that college students must detach from their home communities in order to integrate into the cultures of their campus and maximize their likelihood of success (Tinto, 1987, 1993). In contrast, scholars have offered empirical evidence that students' maintenance of ties to their home communities is critical to their success (Museus & Maramba, 2011; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Our findings contribute to this existing discourse by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the types of connections, both positive and negative, that students might develop and maintain with their cultural communities and how those connections influence their success in college. Taken together, they suggest that, while students' home communities can contribute to challenges for SEAA students, campuses that can ensure that SEAA students have access to the particular types of cultural connections outlined above might be able to more effectively maximize those students' likelihood of success.

Finally, the current inquiry underscores the importance of efforts to develop and utilize new, culturally relevant concepts and theories of college student success (Kuh & Love 2000; Museus, 2011; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendòn, 1994; Rendòn et al., 2000). Had we employed an a-cultural framework, such as a general student involvement framework, to execute this study, we might not have been able to generate the more nuanced understanding of how cultural connections influence participants' persistence. Given the mounting evidence that culture plays a critical role in the experiences of college students (Kuh & Love 2000; Museus, 2011; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendòn, 1994; Rendòn et al. 2000), efforts to generate and utilize more culturally relevant perspectives is important in efforts to advance discourse in the field around success among increasingly racially diverse students in

college because they can offer fresh perspectives and stimulate new lines of inquiry that will advance knowledge regarding how institutions can and do hinder or facilitate success among their undergraduate populations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The preceding analysis has important implications for future research and practice in higher education. In the area of research, the findings of the current study provide a framework for future empirical inquiries aimed at understanding the ways in which cultural community connections affect student success. Our first implication for future research results from our recognition of the paucity of literature on SEAA students. Specifically, our review of literature uncovered only a handful of works that shed light on the experiences of SEAAs in higher education (e.g., Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2013a). Therefore, much more empirical research on SEAAs in college is needed. Future studies should shed light on SEAA students in general, as well as the specific experiences of the diverse ethnic groups within the SEAA category.

Second, the findings provide some empirical support of the intercultural perspective of minority student success (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Our study, however, was limited to SEAA students on a handful of campuses. Future inquiries should employ the intercultural perspective and other frameworks that help us understand the impact of cultural connections on college success to examine the experiences of other students of color, including other Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations.

Third, future empirical research could employ quantitative methods to examine the causal effects of cultural community connections on SEAA and other students' college outcomes. Although the current analysis identified three types of connections that were critical in fostering success among our participants, quantitative inquiries could help assess whether these types of connections are predictors of success for larger populations of SEAAs and other students of color. Such analyses can build on the current study and help college educators make better, more informed decisions regarding how to utilize limited resources and time to maximize success among racially and ethnically diverse populations.

Regarding implications for practice, our findings reinforce the importance of educators cultivating spaces where students can connect with faculty, staff, and peers from similar cultural backgrounds. Such spaces might include ethnic studies programs, multicultural centers, and ethnic student organizations, but they might also include courses in other academic programs and student affairs programming that focus on issues specific to ethnic communities. While this recommendation might seem obvious to some, many students still go through college without meaningfully connecting with such spaces. However, such spaces are critical for students to develop a sense of belonging on their respective campuses, and ensuring that educators find ways to connect all students with them is essential.

Second, educators should aim to create spaces where students can cultivate epistemological cultural connections. This means that college and university campuses should make concerted efforts to ensure that their students have opportunities to learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultural communities. Unfortunately, institutional leaders often view the act of providing these types of opportunities as the domain of ethnic studies programs, multicultural centers,

and ethnic student organizations on their campuses. As a result, they often do not view fostering epistemological connections as the responsibility of other general academic and student affairs programs. However, not all students are able to connect meaningfully with ethnic studies programs, multicultural centers, and ethnic student organizations during their time in college. Therefore, to maximize success among increasingly diverse student populations, institutions must consider ways to ensure that these types of connections are fostered in academic and student affairs units across their campuses.

Finally, educators should consider the importance of providing students with opportunities to engage in problem-based research projects and service activities that help posi-

tively transform those communities. Unfortunately, such opportunities are often scarce on college campuses. But, activities that promote transformational connections can have a positive impact on students' motivation to succeed, as well as their knowledge of how they can utilize education and knowledge to make the world a better place for their families and communities. In sum, educators should seek to create spaces, programs, and activities that facilitate and integrate physical, epistemological, and transformational cultural community connections.

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