Cultural integration in campus subcultures: Where the cultural, academic, and social spheres of college life collide
I was not an active student. I did not consider myself American – I am not Black or White. Then, the summer before 10th grade, I joined the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth (CAPAY) at UMass Boston. The first field trip I went on with CAPAY was to Mount Hope Cemetery. There was a stark difference between a majority of the cemetery and the back section, where we were going. In the back, there was trash everywhere. Headstones were broken, crooked, and covered by un-mowed grass. It looked like an abandoned field. We gathered around a man in shorts and a t-shirt, who I later discovered was Peter Kiang, the Director of the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston. He told us the story of Mount Hope cemetery. The back section was the Chinese burial ground, dating back to the 1930s. Those buried there were the first Chinese to settle in Boston. Now they lay forgotten and neglected.

We picked up trash around the graves and pulled up weeds where we could. We burned incense and prayed to show our respect for these men who lay forgotten there. As we were working, a truck came up. Several men came out with clippers and mowers to cut the grass. I was told that the cemetery had sent people to clean the back sections today because they were informed that we’d be coming. When the men finished, one guy stepped on the face of a headstone while walking back to his truck. Shocked, I told the coordinator of CAPAY that this had happened. She asked me, “And, how does that make...
you feel?" This trip made no sense to me up until that moment. I stood there unable to answer her as the blood rushed to my face, “I don’t know...”

This was my first of many lessons in Asian American Studies. My family is refugees from the Vietnam War, and I was born in the refugee camps in the Philippines. In Asian American Studies, I learned about the historical contexts of my family’s stories. They were too painful for my family to tell me and too insignificant for the public school system to teach me about. The lessons that I learned through the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston were not always in the classroom, but I carry them with me wherever I go. It is these connections that are made between education and students’ lives, communities, and histories that leave lasting marks on us. – Son-Ca Lam

This opening narrative illustrates how ethnic subcultures within our educational institutions can and do validate the lives of students of color. In the story, Son-Ca experiences an awakening as a result of an extracurricular fieldtrip that was organized by two ethnic subcultures at UMass Boston – the CAPAY youth organization and Asian American Studies programs. She develops a bond with these programs that leads to greater connections to the historical and social contexts in which she exists. And, those bonds engage Asian American history and communities, thereby stimulating her identification as an Asian American and validating that identity.

In the following section, we synthesize literature on campus subcultures in higher education and success among diverse student populations. Specifically, we highlight the power of ethnic subcultures in fostering cultural integration – the integration of students’ cultural backgrounds and identities with the academic and social spheres of students’ lives – and the role of such integration in validating students’ cultural backgrounds and identities (Museus, in press). Then, we illustrate how such cultural integration and validation shapes students’ experiences
through the voices of three students affiliated with Asian American Studies. We conclude the chapter with implications of this discussion for college and university leaders who are interested in fostering success among racially diverse college student populations.

**Campus Subcultures and Cultural Integration**

There is a substantial body of scholarly literature that underscores the reality that students of color often encounter unwelcoming or hostile environments at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (e.g., Feagin, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; González, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). Extant research also highlights the fact that campus subcultures can provide safe environments for students of color at PWIs (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Murgiua, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Museus, 2008, 2010, 2011, in press; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Building on the work of Bolton and Kammeyer (1972), we argue that a *campus subculture* is a distinct system that is developed by a subset of members of an institution and consists of specific norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that differ from the dominant culture of the campus and guide the thought and behavior of its group members. Group members transmit those norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions to newcomers to facilitate conformity to and perpetuation of them.

Many racial and ethnic minority students seek out and get involved in campus subcultures and those subcultures serve several purposes for students of color. First, evidence indicates that targeted support programs, ethnic studies programs, an ethnic student organizations can provide safe havens for students (González, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2008, 2010). Second, those subcultures can foster important connections between students and their institutions that facilitate those undergraduates’ success (González, 2003; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2008, 2010, in press; Museus & Quaye, 2009).
Museus (2010), for example, found that programs that offer targeted support for students of color can facilitate their success by creating three types of connections: early connections between students and their institutions, continuous connections between undergraduates and their campuses, and integrated connections that lead to a multiplicity of linkages between students and various departments, programs, and institutional agents across their campuses.

A third critical function that campus subcultures serve for students of color at PWIs is that they integrate what are often fragmented aspects of those students’ lives (Museus, in press). Indeed, scholars have highlighted the importance of integrating the academic and social aspects of students’ college experiences. Higher education researchers, for example, have underscored the importance of learning communities, which function to build connections between students’ academic and social lives (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1998). Scholars have also demonstrated how the integration of the academic and social spheres of life in college can contribute to higher levels of success among students of color specifically (Fullilove & Treisman, 1990; Treisman, 1992).

Equally as important as the integration of the academic and social spheres of students’ experiences is the building of connections between these two components and the cultural sphere of their lives (i.e., their cultural backgrounds and identities). Indeed, several studies illustrate the positive outcomes associated with merging the academic sphere of student’s experiences with their cultural background and integrating the social sphere with their cultural heritages (e.g., González, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008). When postsecondary institutions engage the cultural backgrounds and identities of students in an academic or social sphere of college life, they create environments characterized by greater inclusivity than when those cultural backgrounds and identities are not engaged.
The potential power of many campus subcultures is, in part, a result of their ability to foster cultural integration (see Figure 6.1). As mentioned, we use the term cultural integration to refer to the integration of all three critical aspects – the academic, social, and cultural components – of racial and ethnic minority students’ experiences (Museus, in press). Specifically, campus subcultures can create spaces, academic courses, workshops, projects, and activities that facilitate cultural integration. And, such integration is critical when college students of color must navigate larger institutional environments that do not typically facilitate such integration. In the second half of this chapter, we illustrate how campus subcultures can foster cultural integration and how such integration leads to the validation of students’ cultural backgrounds and identities. Before we move forward with that discussion, however, it is important to clarify what we mean by integrating students’ cultural backgrounds and identities.

**Figure 6.1. Cultural Fragmentation and Cultural Integration**

It has been over 20 years since Tinto (1987, 1993) discussed the role of academic and social integration in facilitating success among college students. Tinto developed his theory of student integration, which is based on the notion that undergraduates must separate from their
home cultures, transition to the cultures of their campuses, and assimilate into those cultures to succeed. The assumption is that completing those three stages can lead to academic and social integration – students’ integration into the academic and social subsystems of their campuses. Several scholars, however, have questioned the underlying assumptions of Tinto’s theory for their cultural bias and inadequacy in explaining the success of students of color (e.g., Attinasi, 1989; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). They argue that expecting students of color to detach from their home communities in order to succeed places an unfair burden on those undergraduates to sever meaningful and fruitful ties with their home communities. Consequently, to some extent, the terms academic integration and social integration themselves have been associated with cultural bias and inadequacy (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). Thus, it is important to distinguish these terms from our concept of cultural integration.

While we use the term integration in our discussion, our concept of cultural integration differs from Tinto’s (1987, 1993) concepts of academic and social integration in multiple substantial ways. First and perhaps most obvious is the fact that, unlike academic and social integration, the concept of cultural integration includes the critical component of engaging students’ cultural backgrounds and identities in the academic environment. Second, rather than focusing on the extent to which students assimilate into the academic and social subsystems of their respective campuses, cultural integration refers to the extent to which academic, social, and cultural components of students’ lives are meaningfully reflected in a space, courses, projects, activities, or set of activities. Third, because the focus of the concept of cultural integration is primarily on the educational environment and activities rather than students, any members of an institution can be involved in facilitating this integration, but the primary responsibility is on the
part of faculty, administrators, and staff because they are the ones who are responsible for designing and structuring most learning environments.

It is also important to clarify what we mean by engagement of students’ cultural backgrounds and identities. The literature on the role of culture in racial and ethnic minority college students’ success has underscored the importance of precollege cultures in shaping students’ dispositions with which they come to college, in determining the extent to which students’ have to adjust to the cultures on their respective campuses, and ultimately the likelihood that students will succeed (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Museus & Truong, 2009; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999; Torres, 2006). Specifically, that literature suggests that the level of incongruence between racial and ethnic minority students’ respective home cultures and the cultures found on their campuses is positively related to cultural dissonance, or tension due to the incongruence between students’ cultural meaning-making systems and the new cultural knowledge that they encounter, and such dissonance is inversely related to the likelihood of success (Museus & Quaye, 2009). A limitation of this literature, however, is that it does not reflect the complexity of the cultures from which students come.

**Framing Students of Color as Cultural Assets**

Students of color navigate many different cultures before college, including the cultures that exist within their families, ethnic communities, neighborhoods, and schools. Thus, when researchers speak of racial and ethnic minority students’ precollege cultures or cultural backgrounds (e.g., Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999), the former can be used to refer to a range of cultures in which students were previously engaged to varying degrees and the latter can be conceptualized as the experiences that students of color have
accumulated navigating several different cultural milieus. And, it is important for educators to be aware of the multiplicity of those students’ precollege cultures and cultural backgrounds.

Of particular importance in our discussion of cultural integration are students’ families and ethnic communities. To make sense of how we can understand the ways that the variety of family and ethnic community cultures shape students’ dispositions and experiences, we build on the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Yosso (2006). Bourdieu coined the term cultural capital to refer to a set of linguistic and cultural competencies that individuals inherit or learn. He delineated three forms of cultural capital: the institutionalized, objectified, and embodied states. The institutionalized state has to do with licenses that are conferred by institutions or governing bodies to individuals and represent sanctioned statuses, while objectified cultural capital refers to cultural goods and the ability to enjoy those goods. However, most relevant to the current discussion is embodied cultural capital, which is a set of dispositions that develop over time, in part, as a result of the cultures that an individual navigates. In other words, embodied capital is cultural capital that is encountered in the environment and internalized by the individual. In Bourdieu’s work, he underscored the fact that individuals from affluent families and communities are more likely to inherit and accumulate cultural capital, which, in turn, increases their likelihood of success in society because society values the capital that they inherit.

It has been noted that the assumption in Bourdieu (1986) theory is that students of color come into the education system bearing disadvantages that hinder their success due to their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2006). Yosso argues that it is important to avoid such deficit perspectives and refrain from viewing some communities as having cultural value and others as not. Building on the work of Yosso (2006) and other education scholars (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 2001), we argue that
students of color can serve as cultural assets because they have internalized valuable resources from the cultures from which they come and can therefore function as assets that reflect the values, knowledge, skills, and networks of their diverse racial and ethnic communities.

First, students of color bring cultural values that can enrich the learning environment on college campuses. The work of Fullilove and Triesman (1992) provide a salient example of this reality. Consistent with research finding that non-Western communities are more likely to espouse collectivist values than Western societies (Beattie, 1980; Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001; Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Mead, 1967; Triandis, McCuster & Hui, 1990; Yamaguchi, Kuhlman, & Sugimori, 1995), Fullilove and Triesman discovered that Chinese Americans espoused more collectivist orientations toward their math homework than other racial and ethnic groups, which led them to work collaboratively and do better than other populations as a result of their collective efforts. Educators have subsequently utilized these findings to develop effective support programs for Black and Latino students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (for review of literature in this area, see Museus, Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011), providing a compelling example of how one group’s cultural values and corresponding working styles can contribute to enriching the academic environment for diverse student populations (Museus & Chang, 2009; Museus et al., 2011).

Second, racial and ethnic minority students enter college with rich cultural knowledge of their ethnic communities, which includes understandings of those communities’ histories, traditions, geographies, and social and political issues. Several scholars have written about the value of students’ knowledge (for discussion, see Chapter Two). Perhaps the most important form of student knowledge is their personal experiences and diverse perspectives that are so fundamental to creating robust learning environments in higher education. If postsecondary
educators engage and validate this knowledge, students can play a central role in enriching the learning environment on their respective campuses.

Third, students of color bring important cultural skills to college. Examples of such skill are linguistic proficiencies and abilities navigating oppressive institutional environments (Yosso, 2006). These skills can serve to enrich the college environment for all students as well. If given the opportunity, racial and ethnic minority undergraduates can utilize those skills to inform institutional decision-making, communicate with diverse communities in service-learning projects and other community engagement activities, or mentor younger students of color around the navigation of institutional barriers that function to oppress their communities.

Finally, students’ come from communities with cultural networks that are rich with human and other resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Yosso, 2006). Indeed, students enter college with connections to religious communities, ethnic community organizations, business establishments, philanthropic organizations, and educational institutions – all of which can serve as valuable resources that can enhance learning opportunities in curricular and co-curricular activates. In sum, it is important for educators to recognize that students possess important cultural values, knowledge, skills, and networks that can contribute to efforts to improve the undergraduate experience for all students on their campuses. By recognizing these ways in which students of color can function as cultural assets, educators can better cultivate learning environments that are robust with rich and diverse resources.

**Cultural Integration of Cultural Assets**

Thus far, we have underscored the importance of cultural integration and discussed how students of color can serve as assets to college educators and their respective campuses. In this section, we provide an example of one campus subculture – an Asian American Studies Program at
That fosters cultural integration by engaging students as cultural assets and integrating their cultural backgrounds and identities into their academic and social experiences. First, we discuss the role of physical and epistemological space in the Asian American Studies Program. Next, we discuss how Asian American Studies faculty, staff, and students use those spaces to cultivate cultural integration through (1) culturally validating curricula, (2) support and motivation for cultural community activism, and (3) cultural community engagement. It should be noted that, in a way, separating these three methods of cultural integration into categories oversimplifies the fluidity and interconnectedness among them. In reality, a singular activity can include all three components. Nevertheless, we provide the typology as a heuristic for readers to understand the different ways in which Asian American Studies cultivates cultural integration.

**Describing the Program**

The Asian American Studies Program has approximately 20 faculty members who have primary appointments in other departments. The program offers more Asian American Studies courses than any other Asian American Studies Program or Department in New England, totaling approximately between 25-30 courses per year. It is founded on the core values of space, voice, and rights for Asian American people and communities and it places special emphasis on under-resourced Asian American communities, including Southeast Asian American, refugee, and low-income populations (Tang & Kiang, 2011; Lin, Suyemoto & Kiang, 2009; Kiang, 2008; 1997). The program has an office that includes one large and two small rooms. The large room provides a space where faculty, staff, and students gather daily to both do work and socialize. In it are a large table, several chairs, and five computers for student use. One of the small rooms houses the Program’s library, and both small rooms have computers and are where faculty members hold office hours and other meetings.
Asian American Studies faculty and staff provide a substantial amount of support for students in this Program, both inside and outside of the classroom. Critical is the fact that the nature of this support ranges from academic advising to personal and professional development, to support for student-initiated projects within the school and across local communities to research and documentation about the program’s pedagogical practices (Kiang, Suyemoto & Tang, 2008; Kiang, 2000). Most importantly, the faculty and staff in the Program provide ample opportunities for cultural integration to occur. In the remainder of this section, we discuss how Asian American Studies fosters cultural integration in space through culturally validating curricula, support for co-curricular activism, and cultural community engagement. We utilize the reflections of undergraduate student-authors – ChuYu Huang (a Chinese American female senior), Pratna Kem (a Cambodian American male senior), and Kevin Tan (a Cambodian American male junior) – and, through their experiences, describe the ways in which Asian American Studies engages the academic, social, and cultural spheres of their lives.

The Physical and Epistemological Space: “For the First Time…I Found a Community to Pursue the Answers”

There are two types of space that play a critical role in the experiences of students in the Asian American Studies Program. First, within Asian American Studies, physical spaces are designated for courses, meetings, campus projects, and community activities. One key physical space is the Asian American Studies office, where faculty, staff, and students regularly engage in both formal and informal academic and social interactions. Kevin explained this in the following:

In the program office, students can go to meet with professors, seek help with their ongoing work, or just interact with others. This office is also open for anyone to walk in and ask questions, get information on events or scholarship
type opportunities. Most people who go there are very familiar with each other and relationships are built and grow from daily interaction.

As Kevin describes, the Asian American Studies office is physical space that houses the Program and where faculty and students can convene and interact around both academic and social issues. Other physical spaces created and utilized by Asian American Studies include classrooms and auditoriums that are used as venues reserved for co-curricular events. But, these physical spaces also serve as spaces where academic and social interactions are connected to an Asian American group identity or a subculture within the larger cultural landscape of the campus. Indeed, Kinzie and Mulholland discuss how physical spaces are meaningfully linked to group identities on campus when they assert that subcultures, “demarcate [physical] space to affirm their presence” and that the “identification of territory contributes to group identity formation as well as enabling others to identify them” (p.109). Consistent with that assertion is the fact that the Asian American Studies Program’s physical spaces are demarcated areas where group identity is recreated and reaffirmed, faculty and students build community around that identity, those affiliated with Asian American Studies can be found, and those seeking connections to the program know to go to the office to make these associations.

Within and beyond the physical spaces in which Asian American Studies faculty, staff, and students interact, those individuals construct *epistemological spaces* – the second type of critical space utilized within Asian American Studies. Epistemological space refers to metaphysical places that can exist in and transcend the physical space of the Asian American Studies office and sometimes the campus, but they are metaphysical places in which Asian American Studies faculty and students explore the creation, exchange, exploration, and
validation of knowledge. Pratna offered these comments about his realization that he was being denied such epistemological spaces during his K-12 education:

I had always known that I was a Cambodian American and I was proud of that, but aside from knowing where my parents were from, I knew very little about my roots. That all changed for me in the 8th grade. My English teacher that year had assigned the class to read the diary of Anne Frank, while my history teacher was going through the unit on the Holocaust and World War II. One day while doing my reading, I asked my mother if she had ever heard of the Holocaust. Her response was “no.” I explained to her about the concentrations camps and the genocide that took place under the reign of Hitler. She then replied that she had never heard of the Holocaust, but that she had survived a Cambodian holocaust. I looked at her with confusion, disbelief, and wonder. What she told me next was unbelievable. She told me about her life in Cambodia, the rise of the communist party, the Khmer Rouge, and how she came to the United States. For the first time, I was hearing a story of my family’s past, my people’s past, a past that I had never learned about in school. I realized that, to find out more about my history, I had to take the initiative and learn on my own time. I became curious and began to ask questions. I wanted to know everything. I wanted to feel connected to some piece of history just as my classmate felt connected their history.

Pratna’s comments highlight the problematic denial of epistemological spaces where Cambodian American and other Asian American students can learn about their histories and communities (Tang, 2008b; Lin, Suyemoto & Kiang, 2009). He went on to reflect on how, in college, Asian American Studies finally provided him with the epistemological space to ask questions, seek
answers, and co-construct knowledge around the meaning of being Cambodian American in his life:

I knew I was an American, but why didn’t I feel like a part of anything American? What did it mean to be a Cambodian living in America? What did it mean to be Cambodian American? I did not feel like there was a space for me to nurture that curiosity and desire to learn more. Fortunately for me, that changed. I was finally able to find that space in my freshman year of college when I discovered the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. It was there that, for the first time, I found a community of support from peers and mentors to pursue the answers to the question I had asked myself for so long.

In Pratna’s reflection, he refers to an epistemological space that provides room for his, “curiosity and desire to learn more.” The epistemological space is where students’ personal academic questions and concerns, which are often trivialized or ignored in the dominant discourse, are voiced and explored. Pratna alludes to the fact that this voice and exploration is connected to social interactions as he discusses the community of support that consists of faculty and students who helped him pursue the answers to his questions. Finally, those academic and social components of the epistemological space revolve around questions about and exploration of his cultural background and identity (Lin, Suyemoto & Kiang, 2009). In the remainder of this section, we discuss how physical spaces and epistemological spaces are utilized to cultivate cultural integration through culturally validating curricula, support for co-curricular activism, and cultural community engagement.
Culturally Validating Curricula: “That was the Moment Where I Felt the Power in Sharing Personal Narratives with Others”

One way that the faculty members in the Asian American Studies Program cultivate cultural integration is by the intentional design of culturally validating curricula. We use the term validating rather than relevant – as in culturally relevant teaching – because the curricula does not just relate to students’ lives but it engages their identities and stories. And, we use the term curricula, rather than pedagogy, to highlight the fact that, in this Program, the subject is central to the classroom community and not the teacher. The instructors and students all significantly contribute to defining what is taught and what is considered valuable and valid knowledge.

One example of culturally validating curricula in effect is the Asian American Media Literacy course developed by Shirley Tang (Tang, 2011). While the course trains students to be critical in analyzing mainstream portrayal of stereotypical Asian Americans in the media, it also equips them with skills to become more than consumers. Students in the course become producers of media that tells stories of their lived experiences, challenging dominant stereotypical images of Asian Americans. Through these stories, students are encouraged to find the political in the personal, and the universal in the individual. Students are encouraged to appreciate and share their stories, and their experiences are validated in a school-wide showcase of their final projects, which consist of personal narrative digital stories. Coming from marginalized backgrounds, many students feel that their voices and experiences are not significant or worthy of being heard. However, through the course, they come realize that their personal voices related to a collective story of the complexities, commonalities, and diversity within Asian America (Tang, 2011). Kevin shared the following:
Creating these digital stories provides authentic examples of personal narratives of the issues that Asian American deal with. Some of these stories have cultural ties like languages being spoken, ideas focused around home, or even a personal immigration or migration story. Due to the nature of our stories, each student learned a lot about each other and the struggles they may have endured, and they became closer as a result.

Kevin’s statement underscores the cultural integration that takes place in this course. He discusses how the academic curriculum engages students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but he also underscores the social component, as he notes that through students sharing and learning about each other’s stories and struggles, members of the classroom community build strong social bonds and “become closer as a result.”

There is an annual exhibition of digital stories from this course in an auditorium located on the university’s campus. It is not common to have hundreds of faculty, staff, and students attend the class exhibitions. Over the years, the Media Literacy course has garnered a returning audience of viewers, participants, and alumni support – a group that has built a community of their own that was created and is sustained through the space created in the curricular domain. In this way, the epistemological space that is created within the course transcends the physical spaces of the classroom and, in some cases, even the campus (Tang, 2011).

Through the cultural integration that takes place within it, the Media Literacy course functions to validate the cultural backgrounds and identities of students who enroll in it. ChuYu illustrated this validation in the following statement:

I remember attending the annual campus wide event where the students from the course presented their digital stories. I was very moved and inspired by the digital
stories that I had seen, so I decided to enroll into the course… I was able to share some experiences I would never share with anyone because it was so personal and I did not want to be judged… For the event, it was an open invitation to invite family, friends, and the community to listen to our stories. My friend came to support me and watched my digital story. That was the moment where I felt the power in sharing personal narratives to others.

She went on to underscore the social component of the course as well as she stated that, “The close-knit community in the classroom has led to friendships that will last forever.”

The sharing and showcasing of students’ personal stories not only validates their voices, but it also empowers them as they inspire other students to tell their stories. ChuYu provides an example of this when she mentions her motivation to take the course after being moved by the student productions she witness, and feeling “the power in sharing personal narratives to others.” Thus, students not only learn from professors, they also learn from each other. And, the valuing of students’ voices and learning from each other is a theme throughout the courses offered by the Asian American Studies Program (Tang, 2011; Tang & Kiang, 2011).

Motivation and Support for Campus Community Organizing: “There was a Desire to do More…to Contribute to the School Environment Now”

In the Asian American Studies Program, student engagement and learning in the classroom leads to organizing on campus outside of coursework. Faculty motivate and support students’ organizing to advocate for positive social change on campus and in the community. Kevin discussed how Asian American Studies motivated him to start an ethnic organization on campus and the role of his student organization on his experience:
After my first year of coursework, there was a desire to do more. I wanted to contribute to the school environment somehow. There have been a number of student organizations that you could join but there wasn’t a Cambodian cultural group. After speaking with a bunch of people, it started to become more of a realistic idea to start a student club. With the support of my peers and Asian American Studies faculty, the Khmer Culture Association would be a university recognized student club as of the fall 2009 semester.

Through his Asian American Studies courses, Kevin was inspired to “do more” in the co-curricular domain. He found motivation and support from Asian American Studies to establish the Khmer Culture Association. Kevin also noted the motivation for starting the organization, which revolved around his responsibility to educate others about Cambodian American issues:

Cambodian Americans, like other Southeast Asians, are not model minorities.
 Throughout the years, Cambodians have had trouble overcoming issues like racism and achieving the “American Dream”. Although there has been progress throughout the years, there are several issues that exist in our communities and our homes. Part of our responsibility is to explain this to others.

Many of the students are involved in student-led programs – including the Khmer Culture Association, Asian American Student Organization, Asian Student Union, and Pacific Asian American Students and Studies Association in Graduate Education – that advocate for social awareness and positive social change. Students in these programs find support from faculty and staff in Asian American Studies and, through the organizations, promote progress in their racial, ethnic, and cultural communities on and off campus. Like Kevin, ChuYu was inspired by the Asian American Studies Program to get involved in an organization:
Inspired by the Asian American Studies program, I applied to be a part of the Sticky Rice Project. The Project trains facilitators to teach anti-racism workshops that focus on the Asian American experience. The project raises social awareness and gives back to the community by educating community members about racism. It bridges people together and concentrates on the Asian American experience.

Both Kevin and ChuYu’s comments emphasize how the organizations in which they are involved focus on addressing problems that exist within their racial, ethnic, and cultural communities. Those organizations, however, function to cultivate strong social bonds that affect those students’ experiences. Faculty and staff also engage students in campus and community organizing in other ways. They accompany them to conferences, collaboratively plan campus events that revolve around important social and political issues that are relevant to Asian America, and expose them to opportunities that allow them to develop better understandings of problems in Asian American communities and the skills to address those issues.

And, of course, this organizing has a social component as well. Students build strong bonds with both faculty and peers through their involvement in various organizations. Pratna expressed this in the following comment:

Being involved with the Asian American Student Organization helped me meet faculty and other students who supported me through all my undergraduate years and I have a feeling that they will continue to do so long after I've left the university… I think that working closely with my peers in those organizations brought us closer together. We bonded, and I think we will stay good friends.

Pratna’s comment illuminates the strong connections and friendships that develop, in part, as a result of the collaborative efforts that take place in campus organizations.
Cultural Community Engagement:

The third way that members of Asian American Studies foster cultural integration is through cultural community engagement – that is, engagement of Asian American communities external to the campus. Asian American Studies faculty members engage the surrounding cultural communities in numerous ways (Tang, 2011; Kiang, Suyemoto & Tang, 2008). First, the faculty have developed and maintain a complex reciprocal relationship with the community, by which the Asian American Studies students learn from community members and Asian American students advocate to better Asian American communities external to the campus (Tang, 2008a). ChuYu explained how faculty members tap into the knowledge and expertise within the external cultural community with the following comments:

Not only is there a community setting in the classroom, but professors also encourage and bring opportunities to students from communities outside of the classroom. They will bring in speakers, like community organizers, who discuss the current issues that local communities are struggling with or introduce alumnae and what they have been involved in after graduating.

The Asian American Studies faculty also bring students out into the community to hold course-related activities, go on field trips, and attend community events. This branching out into the community enables students to connect the curriculum to the communities from which they come and to which they still belong. Son-Ca’s opening story about Mount Hope Cemetery was a salient example of the impact that such a field trip can have on the growth of a student. Kevin remembers another field trip that had a powerful impact on his experience:

When I took the course on Southeast Asians, my first Asian American Studies course, we went on a field trip to Revere, Massachusetts. I recall walking up and down Shirley
Avenue observing the different businesses as we learned about the history of the town. When I was younger I remember visiting the same area with my family every once in a while, but never really knew anything about the community there. Like my hometown, Revere also had a very large Cambodian community. During the field trip, I started to realize that there were very common issues that Southeast Asian communities have to deal with. Gang violence and high drop out rates led me to wonder what contributed to these instances being so high. I find that in my own experience, I could have just as easily been in that situation had my parents not send me to a different school system.

Kevin recalls how this trip stimulated his recognition of important social issues and the connections and common struggles among Southeast Asian American communities, but is also able to readily see how his own life is connected to those struggles and communities – making his educational experience relevant.

Asian American Studies faculty bringing students from their courses out into the community comes in the form of required field trips, but also manifests in voluntary community events that students are eager to attend. Pratna describes one such event that a faculty member held at a local Cambodian restaurant:

The Floating Rock Restaurant event was held in honor of the restaurant moving to a bigger space in Cambridge. After students performed their poems, the floor was opened up to provide a space for community members to share their experiences in the restaurant and the Cambodian community in Revere…What was important about the events was that it brought the community together to share their stories about the importance of having a space where they felt safe to share their voices and be together. It was especially empowering to all of us in the class because these are the communities we come from.
And it is meaningful to know that these are the communities we are going back to. While Asian American Studies faculty engage the knowledge and expertise of community members, they also give back to the local Asian American communities in several ways. For example, the program encourages and supports students to become active and engage in the local community. As a result, many alumni of the program become leaders in various Asian American community organizations surrounding the campus, advocating for under-resourced and oppressed groups within those communities (Tang, 2008a; Kiang, 2008).

Asian American Studies faculty, staff, and students also help organize events for local youth and other members of the cultural community. One example of this organizing are the activities organized by CAPAY – the youth organization to which Son-Ca referred in the opening story, which is housed in the Asian American Studies Program. CAPAY organized several events for youth in the local community, including an annual conference, which includes workshops that are facilitated by Asian American Studies faculty, staff, and students (Kiang, 2004; 2001).

In many ways, because of the plethora of connections that have been created and are maintained, the lines between the Asian American Studies Program, CAPAY, and the cultural community are blurred (Kiang, 2004). Many of the Asian American Studies faculty and staff were and are community leaders as well as researchers and teachers. Some youth that go through CAPAY become UMass Boston students later on. Many Asian American Studies alumni go back to work in and serve in the local communities and become community leaders themselves. In sum, members of the Asian American Studies program are members of the community and vice versa.
Recommendations for College Educators

The discussion above has several implications for institutions that seek to cultivate cultures that maximize success among diverse student populations. We offer four recommendations below. While not exhaustive, the list can help college educators think about how they can utilize campus subcultures, such as the one discussed in this chapter, to transform their institutions.

Learn from and Leverage Subcultures

It is important for institutional leaders to both be sensitive to subcultures and promote models of effective practice on their campuses (Schein, 1992). Thus, campus leaders should pay particular attention to those subcultures that effectively connect, engage, motivate, and empower students from racial and ethnic minority populations. At institutions where high-impact subcultures, such as the one described in this chapter, that facilitate the success of racial and ethnic minority student populations exist, campus leaders should learn from those subcultures and promote them as an effective model for increasing success among particular student populations.

While the example that we use in this chapter is an Asian American Studies Program, the concepts applies to any group that can form an identity and has a community – including Black, Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, multiracial, urban, low-income, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities. Of course, there are examples of programs at institutions all over the country that do some of the things discussed in this chapter, but there are also many institutions that do not have subcultures that achieve the same kind of cultural integration and validation as the Program described above.

Promote and Reward Cultural Integration Initiatives

Cultural integration leads to cultural validation, and that validation has a positive influence on the experiences of students of color because it facilitates undergraduates’ connections to their
institutions and maximizes those students’ learning and success. (Rendón, 1994, 2002; Rendón et al., 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Faculty and staff, therefore, should consider the concept of cultural integration and how that integration can apply to various environments across their campuses. Cultural integration is not something that can only transpire in an Ethnic Studies Program or ethnic student organizations. Rather, all faculty can engage in cultural integration as they develop their courses, construct classroom environments, and interact with students outside of the classroom – as demonstrated by faculty in the examples above. Similarly, staff can make efforts to employ this concept of cultural integration into projects, activities, and events that they plan. In reality, cultural integration is something that should take place to some extent across all departments, programs, and offices on college campuses.

Institutional leaders should also consider rewarding innovative efforts and activities that fall into the category of cultural integration. Reward structures are a critical component of the cultures of college campuses because they send signals to members of the institution about what is valued by the campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Rewards can also be an important mechanism for institutional leaders to embed particular values, beliefs, and assumptions into the culture of an organization (Schein, 1992). Therefore, institutional decision-makers should consider identifying cultural integration as one criterion in evaluating faculty and staff for annual teaching and research awards, staff achievement awards, and promotion and tenure processes.

**Make Engaging Diverse Voices within the 3 Cs (Classroom, Campus, and Community) a Core Value and Norm**

It is critical that educators engage the voices of students from racial and ethnic minority populations (see Chapter Two). In the Program described above, educators do so in the classroom. They also acknowledge the importance of and make room for students’ stories in
events outside of the classroom on campus and engage students’ and other community members’ voices in community events outside of the campus. College educators should make efforts to similarly engage the voices and stories of students and community members in the curricula and other activities in which they are involved.

Moreover, postsecondary educators should make efforts to embed this voice engagement as a core value in their institutions and a norm throughout the cultures of their campuses. Across the country, faculty, staff, and students gather at co-curricular events during which professors and professional experts share their opinions about historical, economic, social, and political issues. These events are fundamental components of the culture of higher education and they create a vibrant academic community that is based on the exchange of ideas. However, students’ voices are often only included in the discussions as receptors of knowledge. College educators should normalize events that acknowledge and engage the voices and stories of students, as well as perspectives of professors and professionals. They can do this by promoting such events that are already taking place on campus or allocate resources to academic programs that are willing to work collaboratively with student organizations to plan and execute such events.

**Utilize Cultural Community Connections**

Sometimes, when the term community engagement is used, it is conceptualized as community service and service learning. In our example above, individuals and organizations within the community are more than receivers of service from faculty, staff, and students. Rather, they engage community members as resources that possess valuable knowledge. They bring community members into academic spaces and students into cultural community spaces. They co-construct epistemological spaces with community members both on and off campus. In a
sense, community members are a part of this subculture, while faculty, staff, and students in the Program are members of the surrounding cultural communities.

Faculty should seek to strengthen bonds with community members and the linkages between their classrooms and the communities from which their students come. They can do this by incorporating field trips into their courses, inviting guest speakers from the community, and organizing co-curricular events in the community. For such practices to be adopted campus-wide, however, institutional leaders must commit to valuing cultural community engagement, and they must make intentional efforts to enact that value. This means that institutional leaders should consider incorporating the engagement of diverse communities into their missions, defining what they mean by community engagement in institutional documents and clarify that this entails more than community service and service learning, promote models of engagement that integrate members of the community into the cultures of the campus.

**Conclusion**

Leading an institution effectively is a matter of integrating elements of the institution and cultivating common goals, language, and behaviors among institutional members (Schein, 1992). This can be a difficult task because many colleges and universities have become so large and consist of so many subcultures that the identification of goals, language, and behaviors that are common across environments within those institutions can be challenging. One useful strategy for institutional leaders is to scale up subcultures that consist of important values, beliefs, and assumptions that effectively foster success among students of color so that those subcultures have a larger presence at the institution and can influence other groups and individuals on their campuses. To do this, campus leaders must identify high-impact subcultures, promote them as models, and support their growth. If institutional leaders can identify subcultures in which
cultural integration is valued and normalized, they can learn from and leverage those subcultures to foster larger positive institutional transformation.

References


