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Onosa’i ma Fa’amalosi: Understanding the Cultural Wealth of a First-Generation Pacific Islander

Demeturie Toso-Lafaele Gogue

For many first-generation students, the transition into higher education and beyond is an arduous and challenging process that takes a toll on both their social and emotional wellness. Past literature that has analyzed the transition of first-generation college students employ a deficit-based framework, focusing on areas in which students lack compared to areas where they excel, to investigate the effects of transition on wellness and educational outcomes (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006; Orbe, 2008; Reid & Moore, 2008; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). Although much research has been conducted to analyze the impact that transitioning to college (from high school) has on first-generation college students, few of these scholarly pieces address the transition for first-generation graduate students of color and its relation to health and wellness. In an effort to shed light on the experience of transitioning to graduate school for first-generation students of color, this paper utilizes community cultural wealth frameworks (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014; Yosso, 2005) to conceptualize and explore how the author draws from the multiple strengths of being a first-generation Pacific Islander graduate student to ensure emotional and social wellness throughout their transition and socialization into a graduate program.

Where I Was

When I made the long trek from Los Angeles, California to Burlington, Vermont in late July 2015, feelings of anxiety and excitement loomed over me. During the five-day trip across the country, I reflected on the family and friends who I was leaving and the sense of security and comfort that no longer surrounded me.
Regardless, I embraced the idea that my student affairs mentors shared with me: moving to a new state by myself, where the demographics of the population were vastly different from my hometown, would challenge and allow me to grow in ways that staying in a familiar place would not.

Having already experienced the transition from high school to college as a first-generation student of Color, I assumed I knew what was necessary in order to thrive and acclimate to a new setting as a graduate student: a) find a community that understands my needs, b) participate in activities and events I enjoy, and c) utilize programs and services that will aid in my academic success. Although these tools for transitioning are important and beneficial in certain situations, my adjustment to The University of Vermont (UVM) required that I be more intentional in my efforts to adapt both socially and emotionally.

While I struggled to find a community of Color at this predominantly White institution, the pedagogical frameworks used in the classroom, such as contemplative pedagogy, challenged me to deeply reflect on experiences as I had not done so before; moreover, feelings of loneliness permeated all areas of my life both inside and outside the classroom. These changes and struggles that I encountered ultimately took a toll on my social and emotional wellness. From wanting to avoid interacting with those around me, to a deeply ingrained mentality that I did not belong in this program, the idea of leaving my graduate school program and returning home, where I knew I was loved and supported, was enticing. Now that I have spent a few months in my graduate school program, I have come to a realization that I am no longer in the same state of mind that I was when I first came to this institution. I have been able to create meaningful relationships with some of my colleagues in the program, I am more proactive in exploring all that Burlington and UVM have to offer, and I am more optimistic about my place in this program and this new community.

In an effort to understand my transition to graduate school as a first-generation student, I reflect on my experience through community cultural wealth frameworks (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014; Yosso, 2005) to conceptualize the various strengths of being a first-generation Pacific Islander that have assisted in my social and emotional wellness during this transitional period. I use the term “first-generation graduate student” to extend the definition of “first-generation college student” (Billson & Terry, 1982; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Strayhorn, 2006; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014) to the realm of graduate school. In order to establish consistency throughout this paper, the term first-generation graduate student is defined as a student whose parents did not attend graduate school in the United States.

It is also important to define what social and emotional wellness constitutes because
many definitions exist across various disciplines. For the purpose of this paper, emotional wellness “measures the degree to which one has an awareness and acceptance of one’s feelings...It measures the capacity to appropriately control one’s feelings and related behavior, including the realistic assessment of one’s limitations”; social wellness “measures the degree to which one contributes to the common welfare of one’s community. This emphasizes the interdependence with others and with nature” (Warner, 1984, p. 33). While reflecting on my transition from undergraduate to graduate school, this paper seeks to address the following questions: (a) how does a first-generation Pacific Islander graduate student use their cultural wealth to aid in their transition to graduate school? (b) how does cultural wealth impact a first-generation Pacific Islander graduate student’s social and emotional wellness?

Literature Review

There is a wide variety of literature that analyzes the transition of first-generation college students from secondary education to higher education and the impact that this has on students’ development and academic success. The impact of being a first-generation college student becomes apparent even before students set foot on campus. Being the first in one’s family to go to college means that most, if not all, of the immediate family members lack “college knowledge,” or an understanding of “how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college” (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 6). The impact that family has on first-generation college students extends even further. Research has noted that first-generation college students are less likely to receive support from their parents than those whose parents have gone to college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Orbe, 2008). Some first-generation college students “lament for opportunities that they missed while in high school because they did not realize how important it would be in college” (Reid & Moore, 2008, p. 256). These missed opportunities can be attributed to the lack of knowledge that first-generation students’ families often have with regards to the preparation needed for higher education. Family has also been perceived as a barrier for some first-generation college students in pursuing higher education (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). The relationship between these students and their families plays a large role in students feeling ready for college and feeling supported throughout their collegiate experience.

First-generation college students also experience challenges once they arrive on campus. According to Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman (2014), these students often feel a lower sense of belonging and satisfaction with their respective college campuses. Moreover, feeling academically prepared is one of the biggest challenges they must endure. Reid and Moore (2008) found that first-generation students lacked academic preparation in math and science, did not develop good study habits, and did not possess time management skills. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) found that reading was most challenging for the students in their study, ultimately
impacting the way that students were able to acclimate to their rigorous academic workload. Because first-generation college students are the first in their family to go to college, this also introduces different worries and fears. For example, these students are more concerned with failing college, financial aid, and navigating the social environment at a university (Bui, 2002). While the challenges that first-generation students encounter in college may vary, these obstacles all play a role in making the transition to higher education more difficult in comparison to those students whose parents have gone to college.

Although a large amount of literature exists that addresses the effects of transitioning from high school to college for first-generation college students, less research has been conducted on the experience of first-generation graduate students of Color as they shift from undergraduate to graduate school. This paucity of literature is heightened especially for Pacific Islander students, where little is known about their transition to graduate school. Similar to many of the deficit-based approaches of understanding the transition for first-generation college students mentioned above, research suggests that first-generation graduate students lack an understanding of the role of graduate school and are unfamiliar with the requirements necessary when applying to a graduate school program (Lunceford, 2011). Ramirez (2014), in her study of the experiences of “Chicanos/Latinos(as)” in their first year of graduate school, found that some of her respondents lacked self-confidence, felt alienated and isolated, and struggled to acclimate to the graduate school curriculum. Issues of integrating into the graduate school culture and lack of racial and ethnic diversity has made navigating graduate school difficult for many graduate students of Color (Gardner, 2008). Taking into consideration the issues that first-generation graduate students encounter and the obstacles that graduate students of Color face, it can be assumed that students who hold both of these identities experience similar hurdles on both ends. To shed light on the Pacific Islander narrative, this paper utilizes an asset-based approach to understand how the cultural wealth that I possess as a first-generation Pacific Islander graduate student has positively impacted my social and emotional wellness and eased my transition into graduate school.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural capital has been a mechanism used to perpetuate social inequality among various classes. Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) considered knowledge a form of capital that many individuals from the middle and upper class possess, which could only be gained through family and/or education. Having this cultural capital allows for social mobility and for middle and upper class individuals to remain in their positions, while excluding those from the lower class. Lack of accessibility to formal schooling serves as a hindrance for those from the lower class, which ultimately sustains the privileged knowledge
held by those in power. This concept furthers the notion that those from the middle and upper class are endowed with cultural capital that is deemed valuable, while others’ cultural capital is seen as insignificant. According to Yosso (2005), “Bourdieu’s theoretical insight about how a hierarchical society reproduces itself has often been interpreted as a way to explain why the academic and social outcomes of People of Color are significantly lower than the outcomes of Whites” (p. 70). In this observation, people of Color are assumed to possess cultural capital that lacks value while White peoples’ knowledge is privileged, especially in the realm of education.

In order to combat this deficit approach, Yosso (2005) created an alternative approach called community cultural wealth. This critical race theory centers “the research lens on the experiences of People of Color in [a] critical historical context” that reveals assets that are accumulated throughout the “histories and lives of Communities of Color” (p. 77). Although people of Color possess cultural capital that is not seen as valuable to the traditional education context (i.e., speaking multiple languages, taking care of family, navigating multiple cultures), this accumulation of cultural wealth remains integral in how people of Color navigate life. Yosso (2005) argued that communities of Color possess six forms of capital that are fostered through cultural wealth: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Rendón, Nora, and Kanagala (2014), in their research on Latin@ students’ assets and wealth of knowledge, furthered the concept of community cultural wealth by introducing four additional forms of capital: ganas/perseverance capital, ethnic consciousness capital, spirituality/faith capital, and pluriversal capital. The concept of community cultural wealth posits that communities of Color are not people who are lacking; instead, it frames the conversation around what people of Color possess that enable them to excel.

**Community Cultural Wealth of a First-Generation Pacific Islander**

Using community cultural wealth (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014; Yosso, 2005) as a theoretical framework, this paper will delve into five of the ten forms of capital that were salient throughout my transition. These five forms of capital (i.e. aspirational capital, familial capital, navigational capital, spirituality/faith capital, and ethnic consciousness capital) shed light on the cultural wealth that I, a first-generation Pacific Islander, possess that have helped me successfully transition, both emotionally and socially, to graduate school.
Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. (Yosso, 2005, p. 77)

Before choosing to come to UVM for graduate school, I had to reflect on what I wanted from a graduate school program. I wanted to be in a new environment, be challenged academically, and learn how to navigate unfamiliar spaces. Fortunately, after speaking with faculty, staff, and current graduate students, it seemed UVM would be able to provide all of these aspects and allow me to grow in ways that staying in California would not. My aspirations of being the first in my family to graduate from college, being the first in my family to go to graduate school, and being a representative of the Pacific Islander community in spaces where few of us exist fueled my passion to continue on in my pursuit of graduate school.

Upon moving to Vermont, I constantly needed to ground myself in the aspirations that I held prior to moving across the country rather than focusing on the difficulties that I was encountering with my transition (i.e., feeling lonely, thinking I was incapable of producing quality work, missing home). Leaning into the discomfort of being in a different environment was necessary in order for me to thrive. This motivation to embrace the challenges of my transition stemmed from the dreams that I had for myself. I wanted to make my family proud. Moreover, I wanted to prove to my Pacific Islander community that if I could be successful in graduate school and at a predominantly White institution where no one shared the same identity, that they would be able to do the same. Reminding myself of the reasons why I came to this institution and into this program ultimately eased my transition.

Familial Capital

Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. (Yosso, 2005, p. 79)

Although I am the first in my family to attend graduate school, my family, especially my grandmother, served as an integral source of support throughout my transition. During my first week in Vermont, I called my grandmother in an emotional panic; I wanted to be home with my family rather than alone in an unfamiliar place. “Onosa’i ma fa’amalosi” were the words of support and care that my grandmother shared with me. When translated, she advised me to be patient and to be strong. These words carry a feeling of warmth and love that the English translation does not capture. To be patient meant that these moments of hardship were going to get
better with time; to be strong suggested that this process was not going to be easy, but that it was possible to overcome. Growing up, my grandmother would always share these words with me during some of my most challenging moments. Her words reminded me of the sacrifices that I had to make to be where I am today, sacrifices that included not being home to support my family. My grandmother’s advice has and continues to be a source of motivation and strength to continue on in my pursuit of a Master’s degree.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. (Yosso, 2005, p. 80)

My navigational capital, although being something that has developed since I was young, became more apparent when I went to college. I was in an unfamiliar space of which none of my family members had knowledge about. Many of my friends were also in a similar situation, which made turning to others for advice and support difficult. Being a first-generation college student meant learning how to be a college student. For example, I had to utilize the resources on campus to learn how to write college level papers and to better prepare for exams. When I would call home to complain about the academic rigor, my family could only tell me to persevere. While their advice was comforting, it would take more than their words to make college feel like it was a place where I belonged. Four years later, I realize how much I have learned about myself and what I need in order to thrive in institutions that were not made for Pacific Islanders.

The idea of going to graduate school was daunting. The fact that I was the first in my family to go to graduate school meant that I was going to have to navigate this field alone, especially because I was moving to the opposite end of the country for school. In addition, graduate school is very different from college. The courses are more concentrated on a particular area of study, assistantships provide a way to apply theory to practice and vice versa, and there are higher expectations, especially given that students in the program work for the university. Regardless, I knew what I needed to do in order to be successful in this new setting. I connected with the African, Latino(a), Asian, and Native American (ALANA) Student Center, a center for communities of Color, for support; I reached out to faculty to better understand how I could excel at the graduate level; and I formed close relationships with those in the program. Using the skills that enabled me to be successful as an undergraduate were pivotal in my ability to transition to graduate school and find support with those around me.
Spirituality/Faith Capital

One aspect is that being spiritual means having a positive worldview of others and society. In line with that view are the notions that how we treat each other and how we see the world in general is positively affected by a sense of spiritual nobility. Religiosity is represented by a faith in God or a higher power and communicated through the performance and adherence to religious rituals and beliefs. (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014, p. 19)

My Christian faith played an important role in assisting my transition to graduate school, particularly because most of my upbringing revolved around the Christian church. My family, more specifically my parents and grandparents, often emphasized the central role that the Lord played in providing blessings that allowed us to thrive. Growing up in a Christian household, I was taught to seek the Lord through difficult times. Bible verses, such as Philippians 4:13 and Jeremiah 29:11, were integral in how I came to terms with my move to Burlington. When I was grappling with the lack of comfort that I experienced being in a new state, I knew I could find comfort in my faith. My family would affirm these feelings by reminding me to pray and read my Bible daily. Friends from my home church would call to check in with me and pray for a smoother transition. Reading my Bible and praying for strength were practices that I brought from home into this new space. My Christian faith allowed me to be more open to this new experience, especially with the belief that it was the Lord’s plan to bring me here and that He would guide me through this program and through areas of struggle.

Ethnic Consciousness Capital

Ethnic consciousness (capital), as the title implies, involves cultural pride and the sense that personal accomplishment could lead to the betterment of the…collective whole. (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014, p. 18)

Throughout my second year of college, I often visited high schools to recruit students for an overnight stay program hosted by an organization that I worked with. The goal was to get more Asian and Pacific Islander students to consider higher education as an option once they graduated from high school. During one of my information sessions, the only Pacific Islander in the crowd of students stood up to ask me about my ethnicity in front of the audience. When I informed her that I was Pacific Islander, her eyes lit up and she began commending me for representing our people in higher education. In her opinion, I was doing big things. It was in this moment that I came to understand that my pursuit of higher education was no longer just about my family and me; it was connected to the larger Pacific Islander community.
When I came to Vermont, there were numerous times when I doubted my abilities to be successful in this new city and in graduate school. I found myself reevaluating the decision to come to this program and the goals that I had initially set out for myself. As much as I wanted to leave Vermont, I would always think about my family, friends, and students who were looking to me as someone who was overcoming obstacles and challenging myself to navigate difficult spaces. I often reflect on the experience that I had during my recruitment session to remind myself that this success is no longer just about me; moreover, this Master’s degree is no longer just for me. As a first-generation Pacific Islander graduate student, I have come to understand that I am setting an example for younger generations in my family and the generations of Pacific Islanders to come after me. It is because of them that I am able to persevere and thrive throughout my transition to graduate school.

Where I Am

Literature that analyzes the experience of first-generation students and their transition to higher education and beyond often focuses on what these students are lacking that hinder their success. This deficit-based approach fails to recognize the many qualities that first-generation students do possess that enable them to thrive. In hopes of better understanding how I have been able to emotionally and socially transition into graduate school, the community cultural wealth framework (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014; Yosso, 2005) allows me to reflect on various capitals as nurtured by the cultural wealth that I possess as a first-generation Pacific Islander. Through this framework, I am able to reflect on the experiences and values that have been instilled in me through my upbringing within a Pacific Islander context.

When I think back to where I was when I first began this program to where I am now, it becomes apparent that growth has taken place. I reflect on the numerous times that I doubted myself and my capabilities; there were other moments when I lost sight of why I decided to come to this program. One of the biggest challenges that I faced when transitioning to graduate school was the sense of community that I felt I had left behind in California. Through the process of writing and reflecting during this time of change and unfamiliarity, I am reminded that the capital that I possess as a first-generation Pacific Islander are heavily influenced by the community that has raised and supported me. I bring my community with me through all of my experiences and struggles. As I continue to navigate the graduate field, my grandmother’s words continue to stay with me and remind me that I am never alone. “Onosa’i ma fa’amalosi.”
References


