

February 2015

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Recommended Citation

Carnaje, Eric Gerona (2015) "Grounded in Experience: Entering Higher-Higher Education as a Pilipino American," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 36, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol36/iss1/6>

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Grounded in Experience: Entering Higher-Higher Education as a Pilipino American

Eric Gerona Carnaje

The decision to go back to school in pursuit of higher-higher education¹ is an extremely strenuous, anxiety-stricken, self-reflective, and courageous process, especially for those that have been “out of school” for two years or more. Although there is some existing literature on nontraditional students and their journey going to college, there is even less literature on the experiences of returning students that decide to pursue a graduate degree after being academically removed from their undergraduate institution for quite some time. Thus, this paper seeks to examine some of the more specific instances experienced by graduate students, particularly those that returned to academia after working for two years or more. Additionally, this article will further study and highlight this multi-faceted and experiential process: the anxieties, challenges, and overall development of these “returners to the academy.” Lastly, through the lens of the Pilipino American² identity, the author will discuss how working within an institution of higher education before attending graduate school has impacted and shaped their personal and professional development as a first-year graduate student, scholar, and practitioner.

¹ Note on “higher-higher education”: This phrase was first introduced to the author by students at the University of California, Berkeley to describe the educational tract for individuals that pursue their Master’s or Doctoral degree upon completion of their Bachelor’s or Master’s, respectively.

² Note on “Pilipino American”: In the Filipino language and alphabet, the “F” sound does not exist, but was introduced to the Philippines by Spanish colonizers. The “P” in Pilipino is a form of self-decolonization and a way to challenge Westernized ways of thinking often used by Pilipino-American activists and scholars.

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Opening Reflection

Fallen from the tree
And blushing with readiness.
Am I just as sweet?

How do institutions guide and support their graduate students that have been “out of school” for some time to become successful students and professionals? While returners to the academy may feel prepared for graduate school given their previous work history, they nonetheless experience several challenges in their transition.

Brief Overview of Nontraditional Students and Returners to the Academy

Research by Bean and Wetzner (1987) suggested that the number of nontraditional students at college campuses would continue to increase in the next few years. According to Ely (1997), nontraditional students are typically students 25 years or older that have taken a voluntary leave of absence or some time off before entering college as an undergraduate for a first or, perhaps, second time. Giancola, Munz, and Trares (as cited in Oberts, 2013) define the nontraditional student as one that falls outside of the typical 18-22 year old full-time college undergraduate. They are sometimes referred to as adult-learners or re-entry students (Ely, 1997). A student taking time off can be defined as doing or participating in an array of activities: traveling or studying abroad, working part-time or full-time, volunteering or doing community service, etc. According to the University of California, Berkeley Common Data Sets from 2003 to 2014, the percentage of undergraduate students age 25 years or older enrolled at the university was consistently between 7% and 8% of the total undergraduate population. At The Ohio State University, Autumn Enrollment Trends suggests that enrollment for undergraduates who were 25 years or older remained between 6% and 7% from 2003 to 2013. Although the data from the two universities was not disaggregated apart from age, it is evident that the nontraditional students, who are 25 years or older, are a stable subgroup of the larger student body. It is important for institutions of higher education to provide adequate resources and programs that promote the overall success and well-being of these nontraditional students.

As with nontraditional undergraduate students, there are also graduate students that have taken time off before returning to the academy in pursuit of an advanced degree. In this article, “returners to the academy” is a popular phrase referring to specific individuals that have already received a bachelor’s degree and have decided to come back to the academy to pursue a master’s degree. What differentiates these returners from other graduate students is the fact that they did not directly matriculate to a graduate program upon graduating from their

did not directly matriculate to a graduate program upon graduating from their undergraduate institution.

Whether nontraditional undergraduate students or graduate students are returners to the academy, each and every one of them undergo a transition to the university. Bernier, Larose, and Tarabulsy (2005) suggested that the college transition process forces all students to adjust to a “new social and academic environment” where expectations of independence and autonomy have increased amongst a sea of instability. Thus, there is a large amount of unexpected challenges, barriers to success, anxieties, and fears for both undergraduate and graduate students making such a transition to an institution of higher education.

Anxieties and Challenges to Success as a Returner to the Academy

The transition from being a full-time employee to a full-time student is a very real and actualized fear for such returners to the academy. Attending lectures, studying for an exam, and writing academic assignments can be a somewhat unfamiliar and daunting territory to enter, especially for one that has been away from the classroom for two or more years. It is a seemingly unspoken expectation for the graduate student that they must maintain “straight A’s” and have an impeccable academic record, as if they were given a “clean slate” from all of their past decisions as an undergraduate.

How does one become a successful student? According to Gardener and Upcraft (2005), success is often driven by the individual’s (and the institution’s) need to achieve personal and educational goals. However, the inability to meet one’s personal expectations and perform up to one’s academic potential can be taxing, stressful, and exhausting. The exposure and transition to a new environment, both in and outside of the classroom, can lead to a poor self-image and negative feelings. These feelings may stem from or become exacerbated by the *impostor phenomenon* which Nelson (as cited in Hoang, 2013) describes as the “crippling feeling of self-doubt, intellectual inadequacy, and anticipated failure that haunts people who attribute their success to luck or help from others rather than their own abilities” (p. 42).

In addition to academic anxiety, there are power dynamics both within the classroom and outside of it. Transitioning from knowing the ins and outs of one’s job to relearning a new set of responsibilities can leave one feeling vulnerable, anxious, and powerless. This transitional shift in power is an abrupt realization for many returners to the academy. Additionally, there may very well be uneasy moments within the workplace for any student with a graduate assistantship. The relationship between supervisor and graduate assistant may be unhealthy if one half of the pair demands more from the other (Janosik, Cooper, Saunders, & Hirt,

2014). This could be seen in the way a supervisor may ask a returner to take on extra responsibilities and duties because the returner was capable of handling more assignments in their last full-time position. A returner may even experience a sense of monotony and unfulfillment if the assigned tasks are more tedious than they are accustomed to, further disparaging the trust of judgment in their supervisor. Ideally, the relationship between supervisor and graduate assistant is a collective and engaging process where shared learning happens at both ends of the working spectrum (Janosik et al., 2014).

Lastly, there is the need to find community amongst returners, particularly when age or generational gaps are combined with cultural influences and differences (Ely, 1997). The need for empathetic and like-minded individuals is a necessity for returners to the academy. Research further demonstrates that students of color experience lower levels of sense of belonging than their White counterparts, which may be one factor in college attrition rates (Museus & Maramba, 2011). For returners to the academy and students of color, there is an increased demand to find, establish, and nurture one's community in order to promote support and solidarity. As a returner of color to the academy, the role of communities play a significant role in directly shaping, influencing, and molding the college student experience and establishing a sense of personal belonging.

Challenges of Being an Asian American Student in Higher Education

As I continue to reflect on my experience as a returner to the academy, it is important to also acknowledge my identity as a Pilipino American and how my narrative in higher education is often stereotyped, misunderstood, and underrepresented. For example, the “model minority” myth can be harmful for Asian American college students by preventing Asian American graduate students from receiving the support and mentorship needed to be successful in competitive and rigorous programs (Nadal, Pituc, Johnston, & Esparrago, 2010). The model minority myth suggests that the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community is “universally successful” and does not experience academic shortcomings or hardships, as do other ethnic minority groups (Teranishi, 2012). Such a belief stereotypes and trivializes lived experiences and falsely correlates the perceived academic success to AAPIs as a whole without taking into particular context cultural differences and challenges. It is important that student affairs practitioners be careful to not make generalizations about their AAPI students and find ways to ensure that each student becomes successful, engaged, and healthy.

AAPI students are not only suffering from the institutionalized oppression and cultures created by college campuses, but are also facing challenges to being accurately represented in student demographics and enrollment data. According to the 2012 UC Berkeley Undergraduate Profile, of the 36,000 students enrolled,

44% of those students are considered “Asian/Pacific Islander”. When looking at the specific enrollment of freshmen by ethnicity, that 44% is misrepresentative of the actual voices and cultures found on campus. The Pilipina/o undergraduate population makes up less than 3% of the overall student body – a far smaller number than the 44% percent originally reported. Unfortunately, this breakdown does not even consider the graduate student body, a community that is a smaller minority on campus.

When looking at the Fact Sheet for Enrollment Data at the University of Vermont (2013), “Asians” (not including international students) make up fewer than 6% of the graduate student population, with no information as to the specific breakup of the “Asian” community. There is not only a need to recruit and retain students from our AAPI community, but to then encourage and guide them into influential positions at the university level. Sagaria and Johnsrud (as cited in McEwen & Taub, 2006) believed that by having more “minority presence in student affairs” (p. 206), institutions of higher education can create a more culturally and racially diverse learning environment which can then enhance the experience of minority students. Furthermore, Hune, Benkin, and Jordan (1999) stated that under-represented minorities (URMs) in the graduate student body serve not only as mentor figures for undergraduates but also as contributors to the academic field in the form of research, campus life, and interpersonal relationships. As a current Pilipino American graduate student, the pursuit for higher-higher education is an extremely empowering process for not only myself, but also for the communities I serve and work with.

Through Hindsight and Reflection: A Pilipino American Narrative Explored

I believe that having prior work experience is a valuable and practical opportunity to further develop one’s professional and personal identity. After serving as an academic advisor at the University of California, Los Angeles, for the past two years, I learned more about the kinds of students I wanted to work with and how to better prepare them as future scholars and leaders. Furthermore, such an experience has helped me, as a queer, Pilipino American, to understand what my role is working in higher-higher education, especially being on a predominantly White campus.

Although taking time to work before going back to graduate school was an extremely beneficial process, it also came with its fair share of challenges. For example, the classroom setting was initially an area of discomfort for myself and perhaps many other returners to the academy. Not only did I have to get used to the academic rigor of graduate level assignments, but I also had to learn how to

be more confident in my scholarly narrative during class discussions. However, through continued practice, support, and reflection, I now find the classroom to be a youthful space for constructive dialogue and open debate, particularly when discussing identity development, institutional history, and the student affairs profession as a whole.

I strongly believe that these professional experiences have given me a subtle advantage in not only the classroom but in the workplace as well. As a former academic advisor, I have had the experience of directly advising and counseling students in a one-on-one setting while familiarizing myself with the inner mechanics of the institution and the bureaucracy innately linked with it. Additionally, I am more confident in establishing, and then navigating, the relationships between colleagues and supervisors. I am also extremely capable of setting professional expectations and realistic goals between my supervisor and myself. Given my previous work experience, I find it easier to bring all aspects of my identity and values into the work I do and the conversations I have with students, peers, and colleagues. I am comfortable and proud to share my identity as a queer, Pilipino American in both the classroom and workplace.

Despite these indirect benefits of working for two years on a college campus, I have found it quite challenging to simply “become” a successful student. No individual, no matter what previous experience or training they come with, merely becomes successful overnight. It is within my purview that such desired success is achieved by the ability to efficiently and effectively navigate the systems within higher education and by taking advantage of the academic resources, programs, and offices that the campus provides. While much of this falls on the responsibility of the student to seek out assistance when it is needed, the institution itself must first become politically conscious and inclusive to serve the diverse needs of its constituents. For example, Pilipino American graduate students may experience a shortage of institutional support: less financial resources, faculty mentors and research opportunities, and social encouragement (Nada et al., 2010).

Through my research, I have stumbled upon a new question worth mentioning: is there a “traditional” graduate student in the same sense that there is a “traditional” undergraduate student? I have come to believe that there is such a student, but I am not one of them. I am a nontraditional graduate student in the way that the system of higher-higher education was not meant for young, queer Pilipino Americans to succeed academically, professionally, or personally. It is with great hopes that my narrative as a queer, Pilipino American graduate student will empower younger generations, particularly queer students of color, to take ownership of their academic potential and future endeavors.

Implications for Higher Education and Student Affairs

There is no typical path for students to enter higher-higher education. Having time off before entering graduate school to work in the field of higher education and student affairs may be a challenging and arduous process. However, it may also be unbelievably advantageous and overall motivating process for individuals from marginalized communities. While scared of the classroom politics and routine assignments at first, I have come to appreciate the way student development concepts, historical readings, and institutional knowledge quite accurately complement my own practical and professional experiences without thinking twice about how the two intersect. As a queer student of Color returning to the academy, I cannot stress enough the importance of finding community, especially at institutions that are heavily White, heterosexual, and/or male dominated, in order to persevere through academic hardship and expectations. By providing these students with the opportunity to engage in discussion around such issues of inadequacy and self-doubt, we can begin to provide them with the support needed to become successful scholars and practitioners within this field (Hoang, 2013).

Institutions of higher education can better support the Pilipino American graduate student by understanding the model minority myth and how it affects specific groups within AAPI communities. Nadal et al. (2010) encourage pan-Asian American identity centers to provide more academic and social programming for the ethnic specific communities it claims to serve. While it is important to increase outreach efforts and support the institutional retention of AAPI undergraduate students, there is also a substantial amount of work to do in regards to recruiting and retaining AAPI students into realms of higher-higher education.

Moreover, there is a need to contribute to the current literature that further examines the lives of the graduate students that came directly from undergrad and then compare those experiences with those of the returners to the academy. One study of interest would be to explore the experiences of returning graduate students outside of Higher Education and Student Affairs programs and identify how such students transitioned back into the academic environment. I would also like to highlight the limitation of my definition of such returners to the academy as I have defined it very narrowly for the purposes of this article to be those that returned to academia after working for two years or more in some professional setting. It is important to note that an individual with two years of work experience in higher education may be different for someone with three to five years of experience in another working environment altogether.

Finally, this article aims to provide a personal and critical eye into the transitional stages for returners to the academy. And yet, there are undoubtedly larger questions that still remain somewhat unanswered: how do we setup our students to

successfully transition from full-time practitioners into academic scholars? What are the resources available for returners to the academy on college campuses? How does the university recognize the importance of graduate students across all areas of higher education and student affairs? What are the experiences for AAPI communities transitioning into a graduate program and how do we allow them to succeed in a traditionally oppressive framework of education? How do we now support the returners to the academy amongst the doctoral student population in their search for community, mentorship, and success?

While these returners to the academy may have already been saturated with unique life experiences, how do we better prepare them for sustained success at institutions of higher education and help them advance their academic and professional endeavors? As student affairs practitioners, scholars, and educators, we must consider reallocating our energy and resources to further support graduate students and their path into higher-higher education. It is my hope to awaken our minds and our hearts to better understand the experiential processes for returners to the academy, and begin to break down assumptions and generalizations of graduate students within our campus community and beyond.

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