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“Lift As You Climb”: A Narrative on Self-Empowerment and Student-Initiated Retention

Jude Paul Matias Dizon

Through a study on student-initiated retention projects, Maldonado, Buenavista, and Rhoads (2005) have focused on the role of student agency and group empowerment and offered insight into how retention theory, policy, and practice may be reconsidered. This critical race counter-story will explore how my undergraduate experience was shaped by a student-initiated retention project in a way that contributed to my self-empowerment. I conclude with a discussion on empowerment's relationship to retention and suggest how student affairs educators may engage in student-centered and student-initiated programming to foster critical knowledge construction, community and identity formation, and leadership.

“Lift as you climb” was an often-repeated phrase throughout my undergraduate years. My peers involved in the Pilipino Academic Student Services (PASS) recognized the privilege we had as university students and the accompanying responsibility. We had to continue clearing a path for others to come after us just as previous students had done before we began college. Much of my undergraduate experience was shaped by mentoring relationships I formed within the Pilipin@¹ student community. Since my first moment at the University of California (UC) at Berkeley, other students helped me navigate the campus; they lifted me with them as they progressed through their higher education journeys. For as much as I attribute my success to my peers, I owe my parents significantly more. In May 2009, I had the opportunity to stand on stage and thank them during the 23rd Pilipino Graduation. While not the official, university-sponsored commencement, the student-organized Pilipino Graduation has been a way for graduates to celebrate the integral role family and community have played in their successful retention.

¹ Note on “Pilipin@”: This term is used rather than the generally used “Filipino” by students at UC Berkeley for self-identification. In the original Tagalog language, the “F” sound does not exist, but was introduced by Spanish colonizers. “Pilipin@” is a gender-inclusive term used by Pilipin@ students at UC Berkeley, referring to Pilipinos (males), Pilipinas (females), and those who identify beyond the standard gender binary. When referring to a mixed-gendered group, I will use “Pilipin@.” Regarding formal organizations and events, I will use their official names.

Jude Paul Matias Dizon is a second-year HESA student. He would not be pursuing a career in higher education and student affairs were it not for the Pilipin@ student community and the Bridges coalition at UC Berkeley. Jude Paul would like to especially thank the Pilipino Academic Student Services for creating a bridge to his higher learning endeavors.

Through this narrative, I seek to answer the question “How did I graduate from college?” According to a major retention theory developed by Tinto (1993), students successfully persist when they have separated from their local culture and fully integrate into the academic and social domains of the university. This social integrationist perspective does not describe how I was able to persist through college.

To find an answer to how I successfully navigated higher education, I reflect on college through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT allows me to analyze the influence of race and racism in my college journey. As a Pilipino male and member of the larger Asian American community, popular perception and scholarship historically renders my experiences invisible against a broader racist image of a model minority’s merit-based success. Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante (2009) suggest educational researchers use CRT to “analyze the actual experiences of diverse individuals and subgroups within the Asian American population” (p. 79). CRT also provides researchers a theoretical framework from which to advocate for social justice. In a qualitative study of Chinese and Pilipin@ youth, Teranishi (2011) employed CRT to uncover “susceptibility and vulnerability of supposed resilient model minorities to inequality and oppression in school contexts” (p. 152). Lastly, CRT values experiential knowledge and offers counter-storytelling as a valid methodological tool (Solórzano, 1997). Kiang (2002) found that Asian American immigrant and refugee students drew on reference points outside of the university for motivation to persist through college. For these students, the stories of refugee flight, family life, and racial and gender discrimination were key to their efforts to complete higher education.

I graduated from college by relying on my heritage, family, and peers of Color for support, yet Tinto’s (1993) retention model excludes these factors. Through this narrative, I challenge this dominant paradigm and offer my counter-story.

Student-Initiated Retention

Pilipino Academic Student Services (PASS) was founded in 1985 as a student-initiated and student-run recruitment and retention center. Its mission is to recruit and retain Pilipin@s in higher education. PASS and other student-initiated recruitment and retention centers (collectively known as *bridges*) were studied as part of a larger project on student-initiated retention (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). The study found that student-initiated retention projects (SIRPs) represented a “unified effort among student organizations to develop programs and support structures that are, in significant ways, *student organized*, *student run*, and *student funded* and that primarily serve students of color” (Maldonado et al, 2005, p. 606).

Maldonado et al. (2005) analyzed the collective strategies and actions of SIRPs to formulate an alternative way of thinking about student retention. They found that SIRPs focused on three central themes: 1) developing knowledge, skills, and networks; 2) building community ties and connections; and 3) challenging social and institutional norms. Whereas the researchers highlighted these themes in the broader picture, I will explore them through my counter-story to answer the question “How did I graduate from college?”

Developing Knowledge, Skills, and Networks

In my first year at Berkeley, I signed up for the PASS internship. I would get field study credits through the Asian American Studies Program for being a member of the organization. For my internship, I was assigned to two PASS staff members, Chris and Mark, who were the facilitators of the Pilipino Student Orientation class. My intern responsibilities included meeting weekly with Chris and Mark to prepare for the class by providing my input and assembling any needed materials. At the time, Chris and Mark were third-year undergraduates and my first role models of professionalism. What they taught me influences my practice today as a graduate student in a student affairs program. It was during my weekly meetings with Chris and Mark that I began learning the value of personally checking in with people at the start of a meeting. In every gathering, PASS members normalized this practice for me. Learning to intentionally provide a space for people to share how they are doing has been foundational to developing a sense of community-based leadership, which informs my work (Bordas, 2007).

A capstone experience of this internship was leading a class session with my co-intern, Sarah. For this task, we had to choose and research a topic, design a curriculum, and facilitate a two-hour long class. Because the “intern-run class” was seen as a community event, Sarah and I found ourselves facilitating a session on Pilipin@ American identity for 50 people, a much larger group than the usual 10-person class. I am amazed when I think back on the elements of this task, including the advantages and challenges of working with another person, the out-of-body experience I had while facilitating a large group session for the very first time, and the debrief afterwards. All of this laid the groundwork for what I am doing now as an aspiring student affairs educator.

I continued my involvement with PASS throughout college. Interning with PASS tied me to the organization and Pilipin@ community. A year of PASS meetings was like taking Pilipin@ American History 101. Although I arrived to the United States in 1988, my peers taught me that Pilipin@s have had a continuous presence on American soil, including Berkeley’s campus, since 1906. Most importantly, general meetings taught me about educational inequity and

the social obstacles Pilipin@s and other communities of Color face. Through increasing my knowledge, I understood more about why PASS was founded. The limited education I had before college did not include the history of Pilipino male laborers brought from the Philippines to Hawaii plantations, California agricultural fields, and Seattle canneries. I was not aware of the Pilipin@ American working class, even though my family was part of it. I did not connect my participation in a college outreach program to my acceptance to Berkeley until I learned about the relationship of Pilipin@s to affirmative action and PASS' mission. Through these meetings and lessons, PASS helped me to understand who I was and where I came from.

Fortunately, I have had a continuous support network from my first day of college to now, still strong two years after graduating. I quickly became aware that my PASS community was composed of current peers and alumni/ae. Because of their on-going support, I was able to actively learn from those who went before me as I engaged in PASS' mission and my personal development.

I graduated from college because of what I learned as a member of PASS. My internship experiences helped me begin to develop professional skills that I needed in order to succeed academically and acquire jobs during the school year and summer. I gained knowledge of my heritage and was able to connect my life to history for the very first time. Encouragement from my peers and alumni/ae was a significant source of motivation alongside my family's support. In contrast to Tinto's (1993) call for separation from the local and home culture, my Pilipino identity and the Berkeley Pilipin@ student community were necessary for me to complete college.

Finding Out What Community Means

Maldonado et al. (2005) found that SIRPs emphasized "developing commitments to particular ethnic/racial communities and to the broader student community of color" (p. 623). A key factor in persisting through college was immersing myself in my cultural heritage and connecting with other communities of Color. PASS was the nexus in developing my identities as a Pilipino and Person of Color.

A Pilipin@ student at Berkeley is in the unique position to join one or more of the seven Pilipin@-focused organizations.² Although I was dedicated to PASS' mission, joining the organization meant becoming a member of the larger Pilip-

² Pilipin@ student organizations at UC Berkeley include: PASS; the Pilipino American Alliance; Pilipino Association of Scientists, Architects, and Engineers; Pilipino Association for Health Careers; Partnership for Pre-Professional Pilipinos; maganda Pilipino American Literary Arts Magazine; and the Kapwa-InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

in@ student community. Throughout my four years, I attended programs hosted by each of the organizations, and often there were collaborative events. One such joint project was the annual Pilipino American Student Orientation (PASO).

The weekend before the first week of Fall term classes, first-year undergraduates and Fall transfer students are invited to a day-long orientation led by the student officers of the seven Pilipin@ organizations. I received a mailing before my first year and made sure to take the postcard with me when I moved into my residence hall. PASO was the first event that formally welcomed me into the Pilipin@ student community at Berkeley. Much like how I felt about the PASS network, the sense of community I felt was amplified in the context of the larger community and history of Pilipin@ students on campus. My first year in college launched a passion and curiosity to learn about my heritage: living and recorded. Becoming aware of the contemporary events and issues relevant to Pilipin@ Americans converged with learning about the histories of other communities of Color.

PASS is one of five student-initiated recruitment and retention centers that constitute the *bridges* Multicultural Resource Center. After the passage of Proposition 209 outlawed affirmative action in 1996, *bridges* was formed as a representative organizing body for the race/ethnic-specific recruitment and retention centers.³ What I appreciate most about the history and significance of *bridges* is that through coming together in community, these five independent organizations were able to survive and continue their work during a politically-charged time.

As I grew to learn more about my heritage through PASS, I began to make connections with the histories of my classmates, particularly those also involved in *bridges*. Seeing photos of shop signs from the 1930s that read “Positively No Filipinos Allowed” helped deepen and connect what I had learned in school about segregation to my identity. In a lecture on the U.S. conquest of the Philippines in 1898, my professor explained a perspective that linked this act of colonization to the westward expansion of American settlers, which resulted in the genocide of indigenous people. These examples illustrate similar experiences that communities of Color face with racism. In addition to forming a greater awareness of how racism affected my peers from all racial/ethnic backgrounds, I also experienced how the work of *bridges* reflected past examples of coalition-building. For instance, PASS meetings often ended with the “unity clap,” which was how United Farm Workers meetings would also end. This movement was led by the well-known Cesar Chávez and is cited as pivotal in the push for civil rights of

³ In addition to PASS, *bridges* includes the Black Recruitment and Retention Center, Raza Recruitment and Retention Center, Native American Recruitment and Retention Center, and REACH! Asian/Pacific Islander Recruitment and Retention Center. Each of these organizations came about independently, each with its own unique history. Through *bridges*, their work converges into a common purpose of increasing students of color in higher education.

Latina/os. However, lesser known is that the union also included a significant membership base of Pilipin@ farm workers as well. Chávez led the movement with Philip Veracruz, the Pilipino vice president of the union. Lastly, Pilipin@ and Asian American and Pacific Islander student communities at Berkeley have long been in support of affirmative action, even when they were not in positions to directly benefit from such policies.

I highlight these examples to demonstrate how becoming aware of my cultural heritage was inextricably tied to developing a consciousness of the issues and struggles that other ethnic/racial communities encounter. Just as the organizations composing *bridges* had to come together to ensure their existence, developing my identity as a Pilipino American was essential to building a sense of solidarity with my peers of Color. I graduated from college because I developed a deep connection with my cultural heritage and expanded my sense of belonging to a community of Color. The idea of “lift as you climb” took on even greater meaning and elevated my level of commitment to support student of Color retention.

Organizing for Social Change

Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledges that systems are inherently racist, which contributes to the disparate experiences of People of Color vis-à-vis the White majority. Maldonado et al. (2005) found that student-initiated retention projects (SIRPs) engaged students in social praxis to challenge institutional norms that limit the success of students of Color. By doing so, SIRPs help open opportunities for students of Color to actively participate in higher education systems. During my third year of college, my peers and I were put to the test to demonstrate leadership for our communities and respond to institutionalized racism.

In 2005, students pushed for a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the administration and the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC, the student government) because the university had failed to fulfill a 1999 agreement to construct a multicultural center (MCC). When I began my third year in Fall 2007, no plans had been made for a permanent MCC, and the temporary space lacked funding for necessary renovations to better serve students. The MOU was set to expire in May 2008, yet the university and students seemed largely unconcerned.

A few fourth-year students in *bridges* brought this concern to the coalition (they were first-years when the MOU was signed in 2005). I was a PASS staff member at the time, and the other *bridges* members and I quickly began working on the MCC issue. We organized into a group that met weekly to strategize. After a planning retreat in September, we arranged for teach-ins to occur during the rest

of the fall term in order to raise awareness and encourage other students to join our cause. Due to these actions, the administration agreed to draft a new MOU in December.

With the newly appointed Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion and the Assistant Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education, four of my peers and I engaged in a series of meetings to draft and agree on a new three-year MOU. This was a challenging process, and our community responsibility was significant. After meeting with university officials, we needed to report the information at the weekly gathering of MCC organizers and gather feedback to bring to subsequent MOU drafting meetings. The feedback from our peers also informed us of what should be included in the MOU. As this writing process carried over into the spring term, we continued our actions on campus by having a week of events to promote awareness and support for the MCC.

On April 16, 2008, the chancellor and ASUC president signed the final MOU draft prepared by the joint administration-student committee. We were able to acquire over \$100,000 for staffing and programming costs for the temporary center as well as the university's commitment to include plans for the permanent center in its capital campaign. I graduated from college because of the sense of agency I developed through this experience, which allowed me to take ownership of my place in the university and promote the inclusion of students of Color.

Self-Empowerment and Retention

My journey through higher education can be read through established theoretical lenses. The social integrationist perspective of Tinto (1993) partly explains the need to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be a successful student. Through my involvement in PASS, I learned a sense of professionalism that I can to apply to other situations, such as in how I communicate in the classroom and at work. The networks I formed as a student helped me to integrate into the academic and social domains of the university which, according to Tinto (1993), is essential to retention.

In contrast, the context for this learning demonstrates the need for cultural validation. Rendón (1994) argued that when institutions support the identities of students of Color, students experience academic success and retention. PASS, the Pilipin@ student community, and *bridges* provided spaces for me to progress in my racial development to a stage of feeling pride for my heritage and connections to other communities of Color (Atkinson, Morton, & Sue, 1989). My persistence to graduate was in great part due to the stronger ties I developed with my community, which contradicts the notion of separating from the local and home culture as advocated by Tinto (1993).

Where my story departs from these theories is the key role my peers played in providing a setting for me to develop a sense of self-empowerment. Students were my teachers, colleagues, friends, and fellow activists. My peers were role models, and together, we learned the skills necessary to access our capabilities. Whether as a student, resident assistant, summer intern, PASS member, or a member of the MOU committee, I was able to effectively engage in these roles due to the knowledge and skills I gained and the support of a community. Feeling confident in my identity and my abilities helped me navigate the university, take a critical look at my environment, and respond to inequity. As a person with marginalized identities, becoming empowered was key to reaching graduation.

Implications for Student Affairs

The development of the whole student is of central concern for student affairs educators. SIRPs provide a concrete example for student affairs educators to take the intellectual leap from ensuring student-centered policies and programs to supporting student-initiated efforts. Current retention theory, practice, and policy can be reconsidered and potentially enhanced by taking into account Maldonado et al.'s (2005) three key findings. Developing dominant and culturally relevant knowledge, skills, and networks; building community ties; and engaging in social action may help to place the student of Color experience at the center of institutional retention efforts.

Rhoads, Buenavista, and Maldonado (2004) provide suggestions for how student affairs educators may encourage student-initiated projects. Student affairs educators have the opportunity to take the lead in creating collaborative relationships with students. They can share information, such as institutional data, that may spark a widespread feeling of concern for an issue. Student affairs educators can then assist students with developing a student-initiated retention project, although students must clearly lead such an effort. At campuses with student-initiated projects, student affairs educators can collaborate to help enhance such work.

There is no one answer to ensure students enter college and leave with a degree. An outcome of living in a White male dominated society is the myth that there is one appropriate solution for everyone. Racism inhibits diverse students from understanding their perspective and prevents higher education scholars and educators from engaging in student-centered research and practice. Through my counter-story, I support an alternative theoretical consideration of retention that validates the student of Color experience and the significance of student agency. Institutional support for students of Color in their identities and capabilities may help foster an inclusive campus in which all students lift others as they climb.

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