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Challenging the Model Minority Myth as a First-Generation College Student

Jimmy Huynh

First-generation Asian American college students must be resilient to overcome the many challenges they face in their college experience. Because these students are first-generation students of color and are also Asian American, they experience unique challenges and complexities. First-generation students of color often navigate the college experience with families who have little to no context surrounding higher education, may have varying levels of college readiness upon entry, and frequently encounter financial challenges and other barriers to education. At the same time, Asian American students must grapple with high expectations set by society because of the model minority myth. How are these students expected to meet the high standards set by others while facing so many barriers to their success in higher education? In this article, I explore the challenges that students who hold these intersecting identities face, and I provide recommendations for institutions to better support these students.

First-generation college students face different challenges than students whose parents went to college (Bui, 2002). In addition, society expects Asian Americans to achieve high academic and occupational success (Museus, 2009). Students who hold both Asian-American and first-generation identities must reckon with the expectations of success and overcome the challenges they face in higher education, all while potentially lacking the necessary context and support to either meet these expectations or overcome such obstacles. Therefore, first-generation Asian American college students must be resilient in order to survive and excel at institutions of higher education. In this article, I describe the experiences of first-generation Asian American college students and provide recommendations for institutions on how to better support them. I supplement my research with narratives from my own undergraduate experience at a predominantly White institution (PWI) which heightened my awareness of this issue as I navigated my own identities as a first-generation Asian American college student.

Jimmy Huynh is a first-generation, Asian American who graduated from The University of Connecticut in 2018 and a current student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration at The University of Vermont. He is interested in supporting students who are also first-generation and students with minoritized identities.

Context: Personal Narrative and Positionality

I started my undergraduate experience in Fall 2014 at the University of Connecticut (UConn), Storrs –, a medium-sized research institution with an emphasis on academic rigor, athletics, and school spirit. Loneliness defined my experience during my first two years because it was difficult for me to find my place within a PWI as an Asian American. It was challenging for me to advocate for my own needs as a first-generation college student, since I was not fully aware of the resources available to me.

As a first-generation college student, I did not have any context for higher education. My parents did not understand the challenges I faced, nor could they offer me any meaningful support with navigating financial aid, managing difficult classes, or making friends. As an Asian American, I had been socialized to believe that I needed to achieve good grades, work quietly, and be independent to be considered normal. If I strayed from these societal expectations, I would risk being labeled a failure by myself, my family, and society. I could not let my parents worry about me and I could not seek help from others because I was ashamed to admit I was struggling. I also did not know where to go to find support on campus, which exacerbated the problem – I felt completely alone.

My undergraduate experience did not turn around until I met a student affairs professional who took the time to mentor me. She normalized my feelings, connected me to departments that I had never heard of, and helped me feel like I belonged. Although my undergraduate experience was still challenging, navigating college became significantly more manageable with her support. My experiences forced me to become resilient. However, resilience should not be another requirement for first-generation Asian American college students to succeed in higher education. Institutions can, and should, do more to support students who are both a first-generation college student and Asian American. Education must become more accessible and navigable for students who hold these identities.

Population Experiences

In this section, I provide additional context and scholarly evidence regarding the experiences of Asian American, first-generation college students. First, I review the existing research concerning Asian Americans and first-generation college students as separate identities. I conclude by synthesizing the research to address how students who hold both of these identities may experience that intersection.

Asian Americans and the Model Minority Myth

Historically, Asian Americans have been branded as invading foreigners who

threatened American life. The public perception of Asian Americans was not changed until America was in the midst of major race relation issues during the Civil Rights movement, which prompted the media to promote Asian Americans to a higher social status and better perceived by society (Suzuki, 2002). Museus and Kiang (2009) referred to the model minority myth as the stereotype that Asian Americans are high-achieving, both academically and professionally. According to the myth, Asian Americans represent a successful example of assimilation into American Whiteness. Furthermore, this myth perpetuates the belief that Asian Americans are a monolithic racial group, rather than a culturally diverse group. However, when Museus and Kiang (2009) disaggregated data regarding the education level of various ethnicities within the Asian American category, they uncovered a large disparity between different subgroups of Asian Americans, namely between Southeast Asians and those who identified as Chinese or Indian, thus dismantling the stereotype that Asian Americans are monolithically successful. Although data can convincingly rebuke the model minority myth, the myth continues to render Asian Americans invisible in higher education research.

Today, the model minority myth is widespread and has evolved such that Asian Americans are perceived by society to be more successful than Whites, which contributes to the belief that Asians no longer face racial discrimination. This false perception perpetuates the harmful assumption that Asian Americans do not struggle or require resources or support, since they do not face racial challenges (Museus & Kiang, 2009). As a result, Asian Americans experience significant pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture at PWIs, which creates feelings of isolation and lack of fit on college campuses (Museus, 2015).

First-generation College Students

First-generation college students are the first in their family to attend college and therefore have different characteristics than students whose parents attended college, or later generation students (Bui, 2002). Compared to later generation students, first-generation college students are more likely to be students of color, to have a lower socioeconomic status, to be older, to be married or have dependents, and to enroll as part-time students (Bui, 2002; Hottinger & Rose, 2006). These demographic differences contribute to the challenges that first-generation college students may face during their college experience. For example, first-generation college students often worry more about financial aid, studying for classes, and failing compared to their later generation counterparts (Bui, 2002).

Hottinger and Rose (2006) noted that many first-generation college students also struggle because their parents did not attend college, and consequently did not prepare them to attend college. Thus, first-generation college students may not be as prepared to pay for college, get into college, or be successful in

college. First-generation college students must also balance family dynamics while in college. Although some first-generation college students may receive positive feedback at home, others may face resentment from their families because of their access to education. Some first-generation college students express feeling a sense of responsibility to help their families once they finish college, and some express guilt about pursuing a college degree while their families are struggling to survive financially (Bui, 2002).

Many institutions are not structured to support students and tend to promote independence over interdependence. First-generation college students face many challenges in college, yet are discouraged from seeking help. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) found that American universities are structured according to middle- and upper-class norms, thus disadvantaging first-generation college students, who generally come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. First-generation college students are more at risk of dropping out after their first semester compared to later generation students, which impacts retention and completion rates. By failing to address systems and cultures that dissuade students from seeking help, institutions risk alienating an already marginalized student population.

Being Both a First-Generation College Student and Asian American

First-generation college students navigate their college experience without the context that later generation students may have. However, first-generation Asian American college students have the added layer of their racialized identities and must learn how their race interacts with their first-generation status. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that first-generation college students lack both interpersonal skills and the social support that contributes to positive outcomes in college, and note that minoritized students may also experience conflict with cultural backgrounds that interfere with their academic responsibilities. Among Asian American students, Dennis and colleagues (2005) found that intergenerational tensions existed regarding expectations of educational and career concerns, romantic affairs, and family interactions. When students are both Asian American and first-generation, they are not only navigating the college experience without the support their peers may receive, but they are also experiencing interactions between their racial identities and being a college student.

While first-generation Asian American college students are learning about their racial identities and how these identities impact their college experiences, they simultaneously must navigate a campus environment where the majority of students do not look like them. As members of a subordinated culture, Asian Americans must assimilate into the dominant, White culture. Museus and Park (2015) stated that Asian American cultural values are less desirable in society

than Western cultural values. For example, silence and reflection are important in Asian cultures, whereas they are perceived as disinterest and inattentiveness in a Western classroom (Museus & Park, 2015). Consequently, Asian American students are constantly forced to make difficult decisions about which parts of their culture to retain and which to change or abandon. For a first-generation Asian American college student, these decisions add additional stress to navigating the college experience for the first time.

Mental health is highly stigmatized in Asian cultures. Poor mental health is often attributed to low willpower and lack of mental fortitude, thus leading many people to feel shame when discussing mental health issues within these cultures (Han & Pong, 2015). Furthermore, the topic of mental health is absent from the model minority myth (Museus & Kiang, 2009). That is, in the prevailing societal image of Asian Americans, poor mental health is not represented. This perception further perpetuates the existing stigma surrounding mental health and deters Asian Americans from seeking help (Shea & Yeh, 2008). As a result, Asian Americans use mental health-related services at a lower rate than the general population (Abe-Kim et al., 2007). First-generation college students also have negative experiences with mental health. These students already lack familial support for their college experience and have a lower self-rated sense of belonging, higher levels of stress and depression, and are less likely to seek out mental health services (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). Thus, students who hold both first-generation and Asian American identities not only face mental health issues and but are also deterred from seeking help because of stigmatized cultural influences.

Recommendations

Institutions must do more to support students who hold both first-generation and Asian American identities by acknowledging their existence, changing campus culture and environment to be more culturally competent, and providing mentorship for these students. In this section, I recommend that institutions intentionally reach out to first-generation Asian American college students, normalize help-seeking behaviors, and create strong networks of mentorship to better support these students.

First, it is important for institutions to increase their outreach to first-generation Asian American college students. Programs in functional areas such as financial aid and multicultural services need to be more visible, approachable, and intentional in supporting first-generation Asian American college students. For example, a student affairs professional in multicultural services may consider going to various first-year classes to promote their own programs. Institutions need to reach out to first-generation Asian American college students to break down

stigmas and falsehoods surrounding their services and empower these students to take agency in their own success. As mentioned earlier, Asian American students hesitate to seek out resources that are stigmatized within their culture or community. However, the lack of use of a resource should not imply a lack of need for these resources (Museus & Park, 2015). Instead, institutions must reach out to students and take the initiative to create a culture of support and connection on campus.

Next, institutions should seek to counter stigmas that dissuade students from seeking help by normalizing help-seeking behavior and talking openly about mental health. Addressing the issue of mental health and lack of help-seeking behaviors among first-generation Asian American college students should be a primary concern for institutions. Although students who hold these identities need mental health support services, they tend to avoid using these services. Institutions and student affairs practitioners need to encourage students to use the resources available to them by creating a culture of interdependence, help-seeking, and mentorship as a way to help first-generation college students succeed (Stephens et al., 2012). Furthermore, practitioners in helping roles must model vulnerability with students and affirm their experiences and feelings. When institutions create a culture where help-seeking behavior is encouraged and normalized, all students will feel empowered to seek out resources they need to succeed.

Finally, institutions should seek to create mentorship programs and networks specifically for first-generation Asian American college students. Mentorship programs are an important tool in finding support systems on campus. Mentorship through affinity and shared experiences can be a powerful form of connection for students. Asian American students need mentors to help work through and undo negative thought cycles learned throughout life. First-generation students need mentors to help them navigate their college experience because they lack the familial mentorship that many later generation students have. Students who hold both of these identities can benefit from mentorship that addresses these intersecting issues.

Conclusion

By sharing my personal narrative and reviewing the experiences of other first-generation, Asian American college students, I hope to help institutions better understand how to support students with these identities. These students are faced with two tasks that seemingly contradict one another: they are expected to achieve high levels of educational and career success while navigating a system that is unfamiliar to them with very little familial support and subordinated identities. Furthermore, first-generation, Asian American college students are often cheated from the attention and resources they deserve from institutions because they are expected to be monolithically successful and high-achieving, despite navigating other challenges and lacking the proper support to succeed. It is imperative to help these students, and not fall into the trap of assuming they will be successful.

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