

Echoes From Within Murky Waters
The Journey of Two Asian Students in a U.S. Higher Education Institution

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study explores the experiences of two foreign-born Asian students in a U.S. higher education institution. The data collected includes written responses to interview questions as well as guided questions from the participants, personal vignettes and reflections written by the participants along with data from informal interviews with each participant. Data was analyzed to address issues related to Asian identity, Discourse and cultural capital.

The research approach used in this study was narrative analysis. Data collected through interview and guided questions were analyzed to determine themes participant vignettes and reflections were based on. The main purpose in using narrative analysis is to capture lived experiences of participants through their lenses, from their perspectives, and in their own words and voices.

The analysis of data surfaced themes related to identity and discourse as well as cultural models. From these themes emerged issues related to identity struggles, disparity in discourse as well as negative self-perception. The main conclusion drawn from this research is the lack of clarity present for foreign-born Asian students to navigate their way through U.S higher education expectations and Discourses.

The research uncovers the lack of support at the institutional level and proposes more collaboration between institutions, faculty and students in order to establish a more supportive learning environment.

DEDICATION

To My Supportive Family & Caring Friends who were there for me throughout my
Educational Journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Words will never be sufficient to describe the overwhelming patience and support offered to me by my respectable educators. Thank You.

Dr. M. Beatriz Arias
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INTRODUCTION

Voice of the Researcher

Faces on Campus

I write the stories of people, faces of those you have seen on college campuses, faces of those you may have become acquainted with in your classrooms or have merely passed you by along the corridors of buildings or on the corners of the Student Center. These are the faces from the Far East, and they come in different shades; from the porcelain shades of yellow to the deep hues of dark brown, and all shades in between, they are a part of the student landscape on your college campus. I'm sure you've noticed them; they have a tendency to gather, speaking at times with loud excitement in a foreign tongue, and just plain hang out as if in oblivion to the world around them.

At times, you may see them in the distance walking, in hand an umbrella, shielding the sun from direct contact with their skin. Or you may have also seen them in the vicinity of the engineering, math or computer science buildings, a serious expression on their faces, and a brisk gait as if in a hurry to get to their next destination. These are the faces of Asians and I am one of them. We are on college campuses for one reason only: to leave better educated than when we first walked in for in our journey through higher education, we have positioned ourselves as seekers of knowledge. We believe that knowledge will take us to the next phase of our lives.

In graduate school, although I was not intentionally seeking out the company of my foreign-born Asian counterparts, I ended up befriending them and they became not only good companions but also supportive colleagues. My Asian friends came from regions of Asia that were familiar to me but I was always the odd one out as I spoke a native language that was dissimilar to my classmates who hailed from Taiwan, Korea, Japan and China.

Even though we were different in that respect, we seemed to have similar values, especially when it came to our high regard and respect for education. Somehow we seemed to always group together in class, possibly due to the compassion we held for one another and also our shared understanding of the struggles we faced in the classroom. As we trudged through classes and course work, we fostered a bond that prompted the forming of our own support system. Our educational goals were similar and we were there to achieve it together. Therefore, words were not needed to express the value of our friendship; we understood the underlying expectations of deep commitment and excellence that we held as graduate students.

Esti

That first fall semester of my Ph.D. program, I looked around and realized that there were no recognizable faces. All my Asian friends from the Master's program had graduated so I was now left on my own and I was a little lost but I was also quick to brush off the melancholy as I reminded myself that this was a new beginning and I just had to start over and learn the ropes of this new environment.

As I sat looking around, waiting for class to begin, I noticed an Asian face walk in. *Not anyone I knew*, I thought to myself but I kept observing. As Professor Carr turned towards each of us during introductions, my eyes were drawn towards the Asian girl sitting across the room. I had never seen her before and was curious as to who she was. I was quite sure that she was of Indonesian descent, from her features and the accent I heard as she spoke.

"My name is Esti and I am from Indonesia," she stated. "This is my first semester in the Master's program and I am very excited to be here. I'm a really smart person," she paused for a brief moment and then continued, "just kidding, but if you have any questions about my country, I'll be more than happy to talk to you."

I sat there wondering to myself about Esti, but we never quite became friends that semester. She did not seem interested in fostering any relationship with me and I was too engrossed in my own program to pay any attention to others. What stood out to me about Esti that semester was her character. I noticed how she seemed overly excited and enthusiastic about everything. During discussions Esti made a concerted effort to offer insights, but her speech was too accelerated and more often than not, what she said became unintelligible, even her ideas seemed to be disconnected. Not that I was an expert in any way with the course topic, but I could see blatant discrepancies that veered off to totally unrelated tangents during discussions.

But there was an element of awkwardness that Esti presented that stirred an unpleasant feeling in me. In almost every utterance Esti attached two additional words... *just kidding*. Every time she said that, I would cringe, unable to see the relevance of it. I wasn't quite sure what other students thought about her or whether they could appreciate the way everything she said was connected to some form of humor, but I knew that this was not an 'Asian' trait. We do not necessarily see humor in everything!

A year-and-a-half later, I walked into a literacy class and as I sat down, there in the door way in plain sight was Esti. *Oh no!* I thought to myself. *Here we go again with another semester of 'just kidding'.* But I was in for a pleasant surprise. Esti seemed a little subdued, not as vocal and her bold expression of humor had vanished. In fact I was taken aback at how quiet she was in class that semester. By now she appeared to be interested in becoming acquainted with me and was not solely intent on bulldozing her way through making an impression of herself in class. Although it was not apparent to me why she had taken on a different approach, towards the end of the semester I realized why; Esti was intimidated by the instructor and her vast knowledge and chose to sit and listen instead.

However with me, when she talked about class work or her project, she made a point to be boastful and would always come back with something when I offered my opinion. I still had not warmed up to her and could not appreciate the 'arrogance' I felt she was exhibiting. After all we were both students and there was no need to put another down to tout one's own work. As the semester drew to a close, I felt a relief that I no longer needed to hear Esti go on and on about how brilliant she was.

Unfortunately, as much as I thought I was finally rid of Esti, that was not the last of her. During the summer, Esti emailed me about working on a conference paper with me and another student, Hiro. Hiro and I had partnered in a poster presentation and were planning to work together again to further expand on our project for a conference.

Dr. Garcia, who was overseeing our work, had suggested that Esti ask us about collaborating. As a fellow researcher, I saw no issue with another student joining us. I felt we all needed to be given opportunities and Hiro too had the same opinion.

But we were unprepared for what we had to deal with. At our first meeting, Hiro presented the outline for our research project, but he could not get far without Esti interrupting and questioning the relevance of our work. "What theories are you guys using for this research?" Esti asked. "I just don't see any relevance to this topic. I would suggest changing this to something more academic. Where is the data for such a research; we need data to support our findings." Esti seemed relentless, and for more than an hour she appeared to be on a mission to tear our work apart and replace it with something else.

Even as I tried to be patient in providing Esti with the background of our proposed work, it became almost impossible to have a productive conversation, so eventually, I sat back and let Hiro handle the situation. It did not get any better and at times, Hiro and Esti went into heated arguments about the research itself. Hiro was adamant about what he wanted to pursue, but Esti kept stirring up the ideas while questioning the rationale behind the research.

As I sat listening to both of them go at each other, I kept checking my wristwatch to take note of the time as this had become a complete waste of a summer day. My patience was thinning out and my face felt fiery hot from being by now, overly annoyed.

So I finally interjected. "Esti, why don't you just calm down," I said. "Hiro and I have worked on this idea of researching the connection between parent influence and a child's learning; we already have an outline. All we are trying to do today is to share with you our work to see if you are still interested in joining us. We are not scouting for new ideas or a different twist to this research so there is no leeway for any changes. We

already know what we are planning to do. It's for you to decide if you want to be a part of this research. If you're not sure, we're fine with it."

There was a momentary silence as Esti listened. She seemed a little surprised and was taken aback. She sat quietly for a moment before she finally said, "I am so sorry guys. Please forgive me. I was not trying to argue or challenge your ideas, but I thought I needed to be critical of what you were planning to do."

"Be critical?" Hiro asked, "Why would you want to be critical of research that is just a pilot study?" Hiro continued.

"Well, I'm just trying to look at your research from all different angles so that you can be better prepared when your work is criticized." Esti added sheepishly.

"Goodness Esti," I chided. "Why are you even thinking that way? This is just a small research project for a local conference. We are not trying to prove or disprove anything but just look into a topic that we find interesting. So do you want to work with us or not?" I asked.

"Guys, please, please, forgive me. I did not mean to be disrespectful. I thought I was helping you guys out. I am so sorry. I feel really bad now. I never meant to give you guys a hard time. It's up to you and Hiro if you want me as part of your group. Again, I am so sorry. I will understand if you decide that you don't want me in the group, really, I won't be upset," Esti responded.

What had just happened? Hiro and I looked at each other puzzled. Esti had totally changed her tone and was on the verge of tears. What had she been trying to accomplish before this? What were her intentions with all that drama she had us engaged in?

Esti did collaborate with us on our research and as we spent more time together, I noticed how Esti was constantly switching identities. In the company of those who seemed more knowledgeable, Esti retracted from her overpowering vigor and became

quiet as a mouse. During the times when she worked with participants for the project, she portrayed a gentle self, soft spoken, accommodating and overly polite. But amongst those whom she thought were on the same level as her in terms of scholarly knowledge, she asserted herself as being superior. I wondered why she felt that it was necessary to create different personas in the academic world.

I felt compelled to step back and allow Esti to navigate between the two identities. When she asked to take on more responsibilities for our project, Hiro and I conceded but it ended up becoming a bitter learning experience for her. Her zeal to impress the professor failed to meet a certain standard and was constantly met with harsh criticism from the professor. That was when Esti would turn to us and in a hushed voice confide that the professor was unhappy with her work. I could not offer any form of assistance, as I knew she had to be more accepting of guidance from Hiro and I. And as long as she saw herself in competition with us, she was on her own to establish herself within the academic world.

I began to understand a lot more about why she may have exhibited characteristics that were totally odd. I can only assume that she felt a need to assimilate within the mainstream American society and take on a western identity. The only problem was that her attempted transformation was unnatural and awkward and it ended up with her becoming argumentative, difficult and strangely inappropriate, instead of coming through as being proactive and somewhat politely assertive. As I continued to observe Esti, I recognized a sense of insecurity, of not quite knowing how to place herself amongst others and as long as she was left to figure everything out, Esti never quite found the correct balance in juggling her identities.

If only she could accept that who she was, the gentle, persevering and intelligent person would have presented a more polished portrayal of herself, she might have been able to avoid the awkward behavior she exhibited. But one thing I knew was that Esti

never received any mentoring or guidance from her professors. She was a good student but she constantly stumbled while trying to appear that she was part of the academic society.

JP

It was in the summer of 2008 that I first encountered JP in the Writing Center. What had caught my attention then was the manner in which JP carried himself: his stride was strong and powerful, his head was usually held high with his shoulders pulled back, and his gaze averted eye contact with anyone. He was not one to smile or make small talk. As I continued to observe his comings and goings in the Writing Center, it was apparent to me that he was driven by a sense of purpose. He had clear goals for himself and he expected everyone to take him seriously.

That summer JP gained quite a reputation at the Writing Center. His perceived arrogance oftentimes resulted in disdain towards him among the tutors and many were unwilling to take him on. Tutors felt that he was excessively demanding, stubborn and rude. He was oblivious to this situation and continued to come in and work with a particular tutor, Ashley, although she too was not happy about the situation, but was nonetheless professionally obliged to do the work. However, there were times when Ashley was not working and the rest of us had to step in. One day this happened to be me.

When I saw the appointment sheet at work that morning and JP's name was written in my slot, I was a little nervous. He was notorious for being argumentative, and I was uncomfortable tutoring under such circumstances, but I really had no choice. The other tutors teased me about the challenging appointment I had that day, and all I could do was nod in agreement.

JP walked in at noon, right on time. As he looked around he noticed that Ashley was not there that day. I signed him in and told him that I was going to work with him and almost immediately his eyes were drawn towards me with an intense glare as he asked, "Where's Ashley? I made an appointment to work with Ashley."

"Ashley is sick today so I'll be working with you," I replied as calmly as I could.

"But, I made an appointment with Ashley," he persisted.

"Well, she's not here today," I continued, "but I'll look over your work."

Without a word, but with a fleeting look of disgust, JP stormed off to the table to sit down. It was clear that he was terribly unhappy, and he made no attempt to conceal his feelings during our session. Every time I pointed out a mistake or offered a suggestion, he would brush it off and insist that there was nothing wrong with his work.

When our session finally came to an end, without offering any form of appreciation, JP walked over to the desk assistant and quite loudly made it known that he wanted to see Ashley next time. I walked back to my desk with a sigh of relief, and as I made eye contact with the other tutors in the room that day, they were either shaking their heads or rolling their eyes in disbelief. *Well, I thought to myself, He's Ashley's problem now, not mine.*

I saw JP again in 2009, but I hardly recognized him this time. He did not seem to remember me, but nonetheless I was truly shocked at how he appeared to be a totally different person. This time he walked in with shoulders hunched; his eyes now looked around for some form of acknowledgement and his demeanor had changed as well. It was as if life had struck him with a forceful blow. He appeared polite, humble and more accepting of guidance. *What had happened to him during that one-year period?*

I continued to wonder how a person who just a year ago walked around with so much confidence was now reduced to this timid student. So one day when JP stopped by my desk for a chat, we somehow connected and began talking. Over time, JP was comfortable enough to express his feelings and confided that throughout the year he had been in classes that challenged his academic ability as a student. His instructors were not helpful and his work was always overly criticized. He said at first he fought back and refused to accept the comments, but over time, he felt totally devalued and stupid.

"My teacher is mean," he said. "She keeps pointing out all my mistakes and even when I try to correct them, she finds more mistakes. I keep trying but I don't know what to do. And last week I got an email from her, and it was bad, really bad. She said some really mean things to me," I listened as JP continued.

"I'm not that bad, you know, I'm not dumb. But she doesn't explain things clearly, and she wants us to figure everything out on our own. How can I figure things out when I don't know what she is talking about," JP voiced with exasperation.

I nodded in agreement and said, "Did you try asking her for help?" "I did," JP replied, "but she seems to be annoyed every time I ask her something, but what am I supposed to do when I don't know how to better my work," he added. "Every time before I go to class, I would prepare a list of questions to ask for clarification, but she shows me that she is not happy that I always have questions, so now I have stopped asking her." He continued with apparent frustration in his voice.

I shook my head, but I was at a loss for words. Nothing I said would have helped JP with his situation.

After a short pause, JP continued, "You know, teachers are supposed to help us, but here in America, they don't care. They are busy with their own work and they expect you to figure things out. They just don't care. Not like in my home country, Thailand. The professors are there for the students, they help us with whatever we need. If we have any questions, they are there to help us understand. They want to teach us so that we get the knowledge. That is their job. But here it's different."

"I guess the system is different in Thailand," I said, " but I am surprised that you are having a hard time."

JP paused for a while in his own thoughts and then added, "I have several problems to understand the American college system. With my professors some are good. However, some are not helpful. Moreover, some try to manipulate me to do

something. More than that, I have to be self-reliant to do my own research. They cannot help me much.”

I was lost for words again, feeling the struggle JP was describing and knowing that he did not deserve to be treated this way. JP was an older student, had lived and studied in several states in the U.S. and even had an MBA from Hawaii. He said he was tired of the business world and wanted to become an educator but even as he was finishing up his MTESOL program, he was on the verge of a deflated ego.

“I work really hard, you know. I don’t mind putting in all my effort in learning or improving myself. I am constantly reading and finding articles to support my learning. But the professor just keeps saying that my work is bad. What does she mean by bad? At least tell me so that I know how to improve myself. For the past year, all I heard is that I’m not good enough. What does that mean? Isn’t this an institution of learning? So show me what and how I should do things to get better. All I’m asking for is guidance. I’m not asking for them to hold my hand. I’m not a child but if no one explains what it is that I’m not doing right, then how am I supposed to get better?” JP seemed really riled up as he continued telling me his experiences.

That evening as JP left the Writing Center, his parting remark was, “I don’t care anymore. I know I have to do it myself and I cannot expect much from the instructors so I have learned to become independent. What can I do? In America instructors rule, we just have to follow.”

I nodded and wished him luck and as he walked away JP turned to me and said, “Write about my story, I want people to know the struggles I went through. There’s so much discrimination here.”

I waved at him and smiled.

Yoon & Chen

JP's experience reminded me of my other friends in the Master's program, Yoon and Chen. They too had parallel stories of feeling abandoned, lost and being told that they were not good enough.

When I first met Yoon, she was filled with excitement and enthusiasm about being in America pursuing her Master's. Yoon was from South Korea and I met her in the first course we took together as graduate students. Yoon embraced a very laid back attitude towards college and never seemed to worry about course work expectations. I could only assume then that she was exceptionally intelligent and confident in herself.

At times during conversations she would speak of works of art and renowned artists and in class she spoke of education theorists and theories as if they were common discourse. It was quite easy to speculate that she had been educated in some of the finest schools in her country. Glimpses of her privileged life at home also surfaced in several instances when she talked about her extensive travels.

But in that first graduate course that we took together, something caused Yoon to be embittered. That semester as we walked out of class after our midterm papers were returned, she looked upset but did not say much. Later on when our conversation shifted towards how we had fared in our midterms, Yoon claimed that there was discrimination in the way her paper was graded. I told her that she could talk to the instructor and get some feedback but she left it at that and did not want to pursue further.

I noticed that from that one experience, she stopped caring about her work. Her papers were always written days before they were due and on one occasion when I helped her with editing, and told her she might be slightly off topic, her response was, "It doesn't matter." I felt it was a little strange coming from someone who had the ability to do well, but she must have had her reasons for not being concerned.

Chen was a graduate student from Taiwan and I met her the same time I met Yoon. We hit it off really well and became good friends, and almost instantly I noticed her traits of being a kind and gentle soul. Chen pursued her graduate work with a tremendous amount of passion and dedication. Graduate school for her was total immersion in course work.

When she was not in class, Chen could be located at the campus library, which she had taken on to be her second home. There she resided over weekends and late nights, struggling to make sense of assignments and readings. There was no life outside of college for Chen and at her commencement ceremony, as she reflected on her memories of graduate school, all she could vividly recall were the times she spent alone facing her computer. As she spoke of her experiences, I saw a glint of regret in her eyes.

Chen had come to college on her own expenses, having diligently saved several years of her pay as an elementary school teacher in Taiwan. But even with completing her undergraduate work at a U.S. college in Hawaii, she still struggled with language barriers and learning discourses in graduate school. Chen rarely turned to others in times of turmoil but on one particular occasion after she felt helpless and could not resolve her predicament, she called me and requested to meet up. I was to find out later that what had distressed her was an email sent by an instructor.

Chen related to me how she broke down into tears in the library while reading the email. From what I knew of her, she had always demonstrated strength and fortitude but it was obvious that something had been torn within her that caused the emotional meltdown. What I came to understand later was that she had asked for guidance with writing her research paper for that course, but the communications that transpired between the instructor and her only managed to reaffirm her lack of academic ability.

"The instructor said that not all good papers are A papers and she said that my work was not up to the standard of an A paper. So I wrote her back and asked how I

could improve my work, and instead of offering suggestions, she repeated what she originally said, that my level of work was not of an A paper quality. How could she be so mean to say something like that? All I asked for is to tell me what I needed to do to improve my paper. At least tell me if there are articles that I could look at to make my paper stronger or maybe change the focus of my research to something different. All I want is to know how to improve myself. It doesn't help when someone says you're a failure," she added. Chen felt harshly judged and was unprepared for what she said was a demonstration of 'cruelty'.

I bore witness to Chen's dedication and perseverance. She brought all her papers to the Writing Center to be looked at and I worked with her on her writing throughout the entire Master's program. Her writing abilities were outstanding and the minor discrepancies that I saw were usually related to organizational skills. But every paper she wrote went through numerous drafts and was thoroughly edited. Even I found it strange that her level of writing was questioned.

For weeks on end Chen went about distraught and upset and could not concentrate on her other classes. Her attempts at getting assistance and clarification from the instructor led nowhere and, in the end, she resolved the situation by taking on a defeatist attitude and she accepted the instructor's perception of her ineptness. Being told that she was incapable was disheartening and discouraging but eventually, she came to accept that she was merely the student and nothing much could be done.

One day as we were walking to class I asked her how she was feeling. "I'm okay, I guess," Chen replied. "I don't know what else I can do to impress the professor that I'm capable of exemplary work," she continued. "If the professor thinks that my work is undeserving of a good grade, then I'll have to accept it, even though she doesn't seem to care that I have put my heart and soul into her paper," Chen responded with a tinge of sadness in her voice.

"You know how hard I work, but sometimes I wonder whether all this is worth it?" Chen went on, "All this money that I'm spending, sometimes I don't think it's worth the stress. I could have stayed in Taiwan and did my Master's there," Chen continued voicing her feelings of despair. "What's the point of working so hard and not getting any support? I feel like I have completely wasted my time here," she concluded.

I had no words for Chen other than to tell her that she was a bright, intelligent person who would continue to do well for herself. But I understood what she was saying. Chen had viewed the American college institution as the *Ivory Tower* and had anticipated support and guidance within the academic community. She wanted to excel and return home proud of her accomplishments. And even though no one would come to know of the struggles she went through, to Chen she held that agonizing shame of being told that she was incapable, and such a stigma would remain in her memory for a long time.

Kim

Kim was a few years ahead of me in the program. I never really became acquainted with her on a personal level since we never took classes together and whenever we sat in meetings or ran into each other along the campus corridors, our conversations oftentimes veered towards brief exchanges or formalities. However, I regularly observed Kim from afar and admired the way she carried herself as a Ph.D. student. She was very focused and determined and she appeared to have assimilated well into the academic circle. It was evident that she was extremely well versed in the field that she was pursuing.

One day after a meeting, Kim and I ended up going to lunch together. As we ate, I asked Kim about her doctoral work and how she was preparing for her career. "It's been really tough," Kim said. "I don't mind the hard work or the high expectations, but I struggle with fostering relationships and using the appropriate ways of being with people. Most of the time I am confused as to what is appropriate or not. So I ask a lot of questions to make sure that I am not doing the wrong thing. But as much as I try, I know I still can't seem to be accepted," Kim continued.

I looked at her puzzled. "What are you talking about? From what I see you have established yourself really well within the university community and you seem to have a lot of support from your advisor and instructors. I really don't see any problems," I said.

"You just don't know what is going on. I have been here a long time and I have tried so hard to learn the ways of other American students so I can form the same kind of relationships with my instructors, but I still feel alienated. There were times in the past when I would sit with my advisor and another student, and I would be left out of the conversation or ignored. And the way in which I am talked to compared to other students is different. No matter how hard I try to reach out, I am always treated

differently. It is as if they are uncomfortable with me and there is always the undertone of discrimination that goes on. I notice it a lot but I don't say anything," Kim continued. I was silent. To a certain extent I was surprised but there had been too many parallel stories I had heard and Kim's was just another example.

"You know, sometimes I get really frustrated and discouraged. I work so hard and I take all responsibility for my failures but these instructors are so quick to always put the blame on us. They always think we are inferior; our language is not good enough and our cultural values affect our success. But all this is not true. We work hard but when we don't know how to conduct ourselves in the proper way, we only ask that we be shown. We are not asking for help or for them to do the work for us, but we do need some type of guidance. But they seem to be so at ease with shifting the blame on us. They never reflect on their roles to at least inform us of how we can overcome our shortcomings. It doesn't help to tell me that my English is not good. Tell me what I need to work on to make it better," Kim said in a frustrated tone.

"Yes, I know what you mean. They always try to make it look as if we come with certain cultural expectations of how we should be treated as students, but I agree with you that this has very little to do with our culture. We are serious about learning and all we ask is to be shown the way," I added.

Kim offered more insights. "It is always our fault, and I am tired. I always speak up and I always let them know how I feel about things, but I sense that this makes them uncomfortable and they do not know how to react. So they just ignore me."

"I thought I was the only one having this problem, but I guess it is quite common," I added.

"You wouldn't believe some of the things I have gone through. Recently I told my advisor about a position in an Ivy League college and that I was interested in applying. It was perfect for me and I really wanted to work at that college. But when I

emailed my advisor, she replied saying that I was not good enough for that position, and I did not have the credentials to work at such a renowned institution. And to make matters worse, she even said that if I were to apply, she would not write a reference letter for me. Imagine your advisor saying something so hurtful. I was really upset for a while, but what can I do?" Kim said.

"That is horrible, I don't think that's fair. She should have at least allowed you to apply, and if you didn't get it, at least you gained the experience," I replied in support of what Kim was expressing.

"It's hard, really hard. I know I am graduating soon, but I also know that I can't go very far with my degree. There is so much that I have not learned, the way to communicate properly, to be comfortable with others...so much that I wish I had been taught. I know I don't have knowledge about many norms here, but if no one wants to help me learn all this, then when will I ever be able to know what I don't know. Really, this has nothing to do with our cultural expectations; it really is connected to a denial. People here don't want to admit that they don't know how to support our learning. They may be great people, but when it comes to mentoring students, they fail and then they try to blame us and say that we expect too much. I am so frustrated but really I can't do anything," Kim ended.

This is so true, I thought to myself. So many times I have been in conversations with my instructors and when the issue of foreign-born Asian students is brought up, they always fault the students saying that Asian students come with unrealistic expectations. Kim was right. We do not come with expectations; we know how to be independent learners, but we notice how differently we are treated. Somehow, we never seem to be able to make that connection. No matter how many times we attempt to build something, it turns out awkward and we are kept at a distance. It is almost as if we are not welcomed.

My foreign-born Asian friends graduated and went back to their home countries, with the exception of Kim who resides in the U.S. with her American husband. But their stories live on with me. I was in their midst as a graduate student in pursuit of higher education. Even though I was more familiar with the education system in the United States and would find myself guiding them through some of the hurdles, I was still an outsider. I did not have a voice.

It was sometimes disheartening to witness the struggles they went through and listen to their accounts of feeling inferior and being unable to do anything about it. These were not meek students who came to America to be taken care of, but highly intelligent people who in their home countries were respected for their academic aptitude and outstanding achievements. But in the midst of a large American college population, there were no opportunities to showcase the potential they had within them and instead, they ended up becoming insignificant and ignored.

I felt helpless and yet I wished these students could have been more empowered to speak up or seek assistance. But at our college, we were on our own and only had the support of each other. Maybe if there were more openness and awareness within the college system, Esti, JP, Yoon, Chen and Kim would have felt less abandoned or confused. Towards the end of their program, each one of them would speak of their impatience with finishing up and *'getting out of here'*.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Historical Background of the Study

The college environment does not exist in a total vacuum when it comes to stories. Stories exist around us and in the midst of us. And as I sat in classrooms spread across campus, I noticed how each setting I was placed in produced unique narratives of my journey and the journeys of other students, yet these stories held little significance to be studied or researched on. Thus they remained submerged.

My first introduction to narrative research took place in the Fall of 2009, the very first semester of my doctoral program. I was enrolled in a narrative research class and was pleasantly surprised at the extensive array and forms of narrative research.

Having been accustomed to associating research to quantitative works, it was a breath of fresh air to sit back and listen to renditions of narratives where participants' voices were heard, settings were envisioned and experiences vicariously journeyed through. No longer was I lost in trying to associate numbers and graphs and percentages to make meaning of data. With narratives, I understood.

This is the Spring of 2012, two and a half years removed from the classroom of Dr. Thomas Barone and narrative research but the learnings have remained with me and in my ability to recall some of the readings we shared in class: from the intriguing tellings of *Billy Charles Barnett*, and the antagonizing reliving of *The Year of Magical Thinking* to the powerful renditions of *Touching Eternity*. I have not forgotten but have continued to ponder over those pieces.

That first semester was also monumental for me, I was drawn to the style of Dr. Barone's writing of *Touching Eternity* and realized that I too would like to share stories that could reach out to others and allow people to vicariously live through the

experiences of narratives. I wanted to take others through the journey of learning and knowing within the world of narratives and I had found my calling.

I am not a writer but I am a child of a narrator who through narrations passed down family histories that have provided invaluable life lessons and impacted me as a human being. Growing up I made acquaintance with the past through the act of storied retelling by my mother. As a graduate student I grew to appreciate the value of such a precious gift as I sat in class with Dr. Barone and was invited into the universe of narrative research.

Stories are a big part of who I am. I learn through narrations and I am able to impart knowledge through my understandings of narrations, and I know there are many others like me who also relate well to narrations and are impacted by the stories they hear.

In college, akin to others like me, on the outside we were merely graduate students, part of a statistic that revealed our participation in the college environment. In my case, I was simply a Ph.D. student majoring in education. Yet, my environment was educating me beyond any course material or text as I observed circumstances and situations that were simultaneously impacting my perception of the academic world as well as tugging at my conscience. As students we were beyond being a part of statistics, we mattered and we needed a platform to be heard.

In one class I observed how a male instructor unknowingly demonstrated favoritism towards young, charming female students, not that this should be of concern. Nonetheless this became an obstacle during times when other academically driven students needed support but were casually dismissed or discounted, and instead received acerbic treatment.

In that same classroom, I heard stories of anxiety from some who knew they had to prove themselves capable of academic caliber to that very same instructor, while

others had unlimited access to him via Facebook or regular informal conversations. Such discrepancies were never addressed or seen as problematic as these stories went unrecorded, and did not warrant attention.

However none was more profound than the insights I gained working as a tutor at the Writing Center. It was my work there for over four years that lay the foundation for my curiosity and subsequently dissertation work.

I was witness to the struggles of foreign-born Asian students whose distress with academic writing went unnoticed but I could only observe as a bystander. Instructors handed out assignments and exams with no second thought of the monumental feat these Asian students faced in constructing writing pieces that lacked any prescribed form of guidance or assistance. Their plight with language deficiencies and academic discourse resulted in laborious undertakings of back and forth bouts of translations, merely to get a piece of work completed but their quiet demeanors and submissive character held them back from seeking help or speaking up.

It was not the circumstances that proved to be unjust, but it was how they were perceived as being lesser than and incapable, that troubled me. As I spent time being in their midst, I was bothered over the lack of interest from others who demonstrated a sense of indifference as if these students had nothing much to offer. For in their quiescent manner and reticent state stood confident vibrant individuals who possessed skills, talents and inspiring personal histories which could have enriched the environment they participated in.

I knew that if only they were perceived differently, maybe instructors would have been more willing to work with them, become acquainted and establish a more collaborative relationship and possibly be bestowed upon invaluable knowledge. They were unique individuals who respected and valued education, but within the institution, they were unknowns.

And this is where my dissertation work began. I represent the foreign-born Asian students I met in graduate school who at times fell into moments of desolation and hopelessness. As I listened to their stories, I felt compelled to share their plight, I truly believe their stories deserve a platform. My passion for being the audience to narrations have taught me about the power of narratives. And now in my role as a researcher, I stand on the other side of the fence. I am the researcher as well as the narrator, the voice to the stories of foreign-born Asian students whom I listened to in the Writing Center, who faced circumstances in a college environment that led them to murky waters, in desperate search of clarity.

Overview of the Study

In their pursuit of higher education, Asian students undergo a multitude of experiences, some of which may be challenging and problematic. However, these struggles have gone unnoticed partly due to the fact that Asian students are perceived to be academically high achievers and are presumed to fall under the model minority category.

Common areas that are perceived as struggles by university instructors include those related to language barriers, lack of knowledge in classroom discourse, inadequate basic understandings of the U.S. educational system as well as differences in cultural models. These issues have been discussed and highlighted in numerous publications as well as research; however, even with the magnitude of the foreign-born Asian student population on U.S. college campuses, work within this context is exceptionally confining within U.S higher education institutions because the issues are not recognized.

The heart of my work lies within issues of identity, ¹Discourse and ²cultural models related to foreign-born Asian students. These issues, although fully

¹ Big D Discourse is ways of being, speaking and interacting based on a person's cultural background and value system. (Gee,2004).

² Cultural Models- subconscious taken for granted elements that becomes typical (Gee 2004, p. 721).

acknowledged and described by Gee (1999), are not yet given much prominence in their direct relationship to foreign-born Asian students' experiences while at U.S. higher education institutions. I believe highlighting the issues will stir and evoke conversations within institutions, with educators as well as students themselves, and may pave the way towards concerted collaboration.

Narrative Component

My dissertation work magnifies the struggles and challenges of foreign-born Asian students, and it will also offer narrations that smooth out the wrinkles in these journeys.

I have selected to present my work through a narrative approach, which includes vignettes, reflections and narratives. The basis for these formats is to allow readers, educators and administrators to view aspects of foreign-born Asian students' perceptions of education through the eyes and voices of the participants.

Barone & Eisner (2012) view aesthetic vision as "a high level of consciousness about what one sees" (p.37). They further explain how such work:

engages a sensitivity to suggestions, to pattern, to that which is beneath the surface. It requires...a fine attention to detail and form; the perception of relations (tensions and harmonies), the perception of nuance (colors and meaning), and the perception of change (shifts and subtle motions) (Eisner, 1997 as cited in Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 37).

The effectiveness of such a piece of work is to take the reader on the journey of looking at 'ordinary things' while gaining the understandings of how others may view them differently.

Careful consideration was given to the titling of my work, *Echoes from Within Murky Waters: The Journey of Two Asian Students in a U.S. Higher Education Institution*. I choose the concept of murky waters purposefully as a means to denote the challenges

of Asian students seeking clarity within the expectations of the institution. Oftentimes, to an outsider such as a foreign-born Asian student, common practices and expectations are relatively undefined and confusing, thus leading to conflicts, miscommunication and misappropriation of actions and outcomes. The significance of the word echo speaks to the circumstance of repetition, and to how foreign-born Asian students in this study reflected similar projections of voices which I initially became aware of while listening to students like JP, Chen and Yoon, in the Writing Center. Being in their midst made me aware of an ongoing reverberation that I was curious about and wanted to explore.

Participants

In my study I provide readers with a glimpse into the college experiences of two foreign-born Asian students from the same family: Rina, a mother and Zaf, her son. The family relocated from their native homeland in Southeast Asia to reside in the United States due to the father's employment. Rina previously studied at a Midwestern state college in the U.S. for her undergraduate work in Linguistics where she obtained a Bachelor of Arts. She subsequently worked for over 11 years as an English instructor in Southeast Asia. When the family moved, Zaf was five years old and he began his K-12 education in the U.S. Both Zaf and Rina are bilingual and they have lived in the U.S. for 18 years.

The language spoken by the family is predominantly English, which is also considered a home language. Rina attended K-12 schooling in a British missionary school in her home country and she was raised speaking British English. Prior to moving to the U.S., Zaf attended an English kindergarten for three years. In the country where he grew up, English was his language and the same was true for Rina. Although English is the main language spoken in America, American English is very different from British English.

Rina was raised in an educated, upper middle class family; both her parents received college degrees in Education from England and her father graduated with a

Ph.D. from an American university. Zaf's father was educated in the U.S. and holds a Master's degree in Computer Science. He has worked with several American companies.

At the time of the study, both Zaf and Rina had been in college for over four years. Zaf graduated with a B.Sc. in Architectural Studies at a Southwestern university, prior to his participation in this study and he was pursuing his Master's degree in Business Administration. Rina had returned to college as a Master's student 25 years after she graduated with her B.A.. She was continuing her graduate studies in a Ph.D. program at the College of Education at the same university as Zaf at the time of the study.

Data Collection

The data I collected for this study is comprised of written responses to interview questions as well as guided questions from the participants, personal vignettes and reflections written by the participants along with data from informal interviews with each participant.

There were several tiers to the compilation of data. I first formulated questions that I thought were relevant towards uncovering the role that Asian identity plays within a U.S. college environment. My initial plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews with my participants so I could tape record their responses, but due to conflicts in schedules, both participants requested that the interview questions be sent as a word document by email and their responses would subsequently be sent back by email as well. Although I did not specify a definite timeframe, my participants responded within a week after the questions were sent.

My first set of data was compiled from responses to 12 interview questions (see Appendix A), which initiated a general overview to issues of identity and discourse related to college experiences. As I looked through and analyzed the responses, I identified several themes related to the perception of academic success and communicative practices as well as personal tensions within identity. I used these

responses solely for the purpose of my analysis. After I categorized these themes, I felt I needed more specific responses, thus I requested both participants to respond to seven guided questions (see Appendix B). These questions were also sent as a word document through email and the responses were also sent back to me via email.

The second set of data consisted of responses from the seven guided questions, (a reconfiguration of the original interview questions) within which the participants presented elaborated in depth personal thoughts related to each participant's college experience. Once again, I analyzed these responses and noted new themes that emerged. Themes related to identity struggles as well as negative self-perception became apparent in my reading and analysis of the second set of data. As a narrative researcher, I was committed to privileging the voices of my participants and before I proceeded further, I wanted to validate my findings with the participants. It was at this point that the participants and I scheduled an informal meeting where I shared my findings.

During our meeting, it became clear to me that I needed vignettes that would take readers through the lived college experiences of the participants, Zaf and Rina. As we sat talking, I realized that I could not write Zaf's vignettes as I was unfamiliar with his architectural language discourse as well as insider knowledge of his architecture program. My narratives of his experiences would lack accuracy and definitude, and it would not be his voice speaking. Zaf agreed with me, and it was then that Rina, too, offered to write her own vignettes as well. I realized that Rina's connections to her experiences were also authentic and her vignettes needed to be in her voice. So all three of us agreed that in order to highlight the themes that had emerged, Zaf and Rina, would have to revisit selected experiences related to personal issues of identity struggles and discourse as well as negative self-perception and from those memories they would craft their vignettes.

The sections of my dissertation titled *Zaf, Rina, and Zaf & Rina*, were all written by the participants over a period of four weeks. When I received the vignettes via email, I analyzed the vignettes to look for the themes of identity struggles and discourse as well as negative self-perception. At this point I realized that the vignettes could not stand alone without further analysis, and this was when I emailed Zaf and Rina to ask if they were willing to add a reflection portion to accompany each vignette, which they did. There are one or two vignettes that do not have reflections, and this was the decision of Zaf and Rina; however, after most of the vignettes, Zaf and Rina discuss their personal thoughts related to the experiences shared in their vignettes.

The process of data collection was extensive in that there was constant collaboration between Zaf, Rina, and myself. As a narrative researcher, I had to ensure that Zaf and Rina were consulted at each step of the data collection process as their input toward the construction of the narrative was imperative. I also felt it was essential that the authenticity of their accounts be preserved and that my role as the researcher was to inform the reader of their stories. It was and is my intent that the narrative of the college journeys of Zaf and Rina be shared through the lenses of their experiences and that their stories be told in their own words and voices.

It was also my decision to allow Zaf and Rina to have input into what they thought would be most effective in the telling of their stories; thus, the manner in which the vignettes are organized was decided upon by Zaf and Rina. My role as the researcher was to provide a working framework to what I thought would be ideal, but I had to always share my ideas with Zaf and Rina.

As I began to compile the literature review, participants' vignettes, and reflections, I recognized I was a researcher-participant and I included reflections from my personal experiences as an Asian student to further support the issues that highlight

foreign-born Asian students' experiences in college. My contributions are clearly marked with the heading *Researcher's Notes* at the top of each page or section.

The title of this work was also a collaborative effort between Zaf, Rina and I. After careful consideration, I shared with Zaf and Rina the title, *Echoes From Within Murky Waters*, which I felt denoted the veiled aspect of expectations, discourse and cultural models that existed within the college environment for foreign-born Asian students. Zaf and Rina agreed that the title fit well with the manner in which they experienced their struggles in college.

The work of narrative research is an elaborate and momentous endeavor. Every aspect of the presentation of participant voice has to be respected. For the most part during the data collection process, Zaf, Rina and I communicated through emails, and we had informal face-to-face discussions at times when I needed clarification of their writing pieces. The manner in which the participants and I worked through email was suggested by the participants, citing the fact that if they were allowed to provide their responses without a face-to-face meeting, they could work on the questions during their spare time, between school and work demands. I noticed the efficiency of responses from my participants, which facilitated ease in my work. This proved to be a productive way for most of the data collection process for all three of us.

The section entitled *Murky Waters* is a discussion of the issues revealed in my analysis. I have written this section from my perspective as the researcher, and it is reflective of the parallels in my own journey in graduate school with Zaf's and Rina's experiences in their educational journey. Conclusions and recommendations follow this section.

The Study

My original proposed study was planned around three participants, a mother, Rina, and her two sons. However, the older son, Faz, after he contributed towards the first set of data, retracted from the research. In a casual conversation I had with him, he offered the following reason, *"I can't give anymore information since I can't think anymore."*

Faz came to the United States when he was eleven and initially showed overwhelming excitement about being in an American public school, but I was informed by Rina that Faz, although still committed to diligence and learning, became disillusioned with the manner in which he could not hold on to his cultural values and quiet personality. Too often he was perceived as being less capable or uninterested, all of which was far from the truth. I can only conjecture after talking to Faz and Rina that his experience in college was overly disturbing and unpleasant, thus reliving those memories may have been too painful for him.

Rina told me Faz often shared with her how a few of his instructors were openly judgmental of his capability to succeed when he was in college. She recalled waking up in the early hours of the morning to find him still typing up his assignments and reading. He had no qualms about sacrificing his sleep over college work and eventually proved his instructors wrong. Faz graduated with an Associate's degree from a local community college.

During the course of my data collection, I discovered that Rina and I had parallel backgrounds. We both had worked in Asia as English instructors, we were older returning graduate students, and our families had moved to the United States because of our spouses' work. These parallels provided a strong basis for me to support some of the issues that will be discussed in my research.

The focus of my dissertation work was to investigate how Asian identity played a role in the participants' college experiences. Through the narratives of Zaf and Rina, I hope to share the richness of who the participants are as well as provide insights into the issues they encountered undertaking their experiences in college.

As foreign-born Asian students, we speak English, but we were still foreign students. We are highly educated yet we struggle in American higher education institutions.

It is my humble hope that this study will shed light on how the journey of education in the U.S. for foreign-born Asian students may not be as straightforward as sometimes perceived. I am optimistic that through the sharing of these narratives, my research will call for attention to the need for institutions and instructors to recognize the presence of diversity and disparity that exist amongst the Asian student population, especially those who are foreign-born. This recognition is imperative in order for institutions to be knowledgeable about the exigency of establishing support programs for both instructors and students themselves. Further examination of these issues need to be explored to provide such students with opportunities for appropriate educational support.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Narrative Research

I have based my research on two theoretical frameworks that resonate well with the interest I hold for student diversity and life histories. My choice of utilizing narratives for my research falls in line with a belief that storytelling touches hearts, affects minds and is of value towards the construction of knowledge. I have also chosen to investigate the concepts of identity, Discourse and cultural models as part of my study. Throughout my graduate studies such issues became pivotal in awakening my understandings towards people, diversity and culture.

My deep interest in narratives, identity and Discourse was sparked by the understandings I gained from two esteemed professors who I was privileged to be in the midst of, Dr. Thomas Barone and Dr. James Gee. Their style of teaching as well as their scholarly works made my experiences in their classrooms a transformative educational journey that required deep exploration of my own thoughts as well as strong grasping of understanding. And as I grappled with and witnessed the web of complexities that existed in my educational journey, I was forced to evaluate issues that were emerging within my own inner circle of friends. This is where the teachings of both professors presented clarity as well as aided in clearing up the murky waters for me.

I was a student in the classroom of Dr. James Gee for two semesters and he was instrumental in enriching my comprehension of the presence of Discourse, identity and cultural models. I learned how as individuals we enter an environment with our distinct personal values, experiences and expectations (Discourse and cultural model), and through our Discourse and cultural model, we interact with an established discourse in a new environment. The innocent lens that I peered through in the early months of my graduate program was inadequate to support my thirst for deeper understandings of

education and institutional environments. I walk now better equipped to offer insights to those who struggle to understand the complexities of the academic world.

There are several reasons why I embarked on this journey to write my dissertation as narrative research. The first reason resides in the admiration and respect I hold for Dr. Thomas Barone. His inspirational works and zealous enthusiasm in the classroom brought life to narrative research and made my learning all the more meaningful. It was also in his classroom that I was allowed to practice utilizing narrative writing in my course assignments, and through Dr. Barone's valuable feedback as well as encouragement, my skills with writing were reinforced. Dr. Barone instilled the confidence in me that my ability to use words as a tool for telling stories was not to be taken lightly.

The second reason relates to my background of being an ardent listener to life histories told by my mother. It is with these experiences of how knowledge withstands the test of time that I was inspired to extract narrations from my participants, Zaf and Rina. It is my hope that my participants' stories will allow others to vicariously experience the unfamiliar worlds of the narrators.

Understanding Narrative Research

Two years ago, if I were asked to describe narrative research, I would have drawn a complete blank. My only point of reference would have been to the fact that it is related to some form of 'telling'. But, I am more informed now. At the NAPAR (Narrative, Arts-based and "Post" Approaches to Social Research) conference hosted by Dr. Barone at ASU in January 2011, I walked up to Dr. Elliot Eisner on the second evening and said to him as a means of introducing myself, "I am a student of Dr. Barone." Dr. Eisner who was a little exhausted from his travels, looked at me and smiled, then I noticed the emerging twinkle in his eyes as he said, "You're a lucky girl." Those few kind words opened up a world of possibilities for me. For the first time in my graduate program, I

felt valued and recognized. Finally, I was in the midst of scholars and knowledge. I was no longer insignificant

The NAPAR conference is likened to a trip to Disneyland for a five-year old, and that was my experience also. As I scanned the schedule and attempted to pick out sessions that sounded interesting, I was torn by the expanse of topics that intrigued me. Everything seemed exciting, an adventure, almost like walking into a 'ride' for the first time where you have no clue of what to expect. In the three days that I was in attendance, I heard narrations and tales of success and struggles, and I viewed images and photography that narrated stories, each of which was unique in its own way. The diversity of scholarly work was inspiring, and as I left the conference that Sunday evening with a tinge of sadness that it had all come to an end, I did emerge with more understandings and appreciation of narratives of identity, digital storyboarding and biographies, to name a few.

Through the last four semesters of my doctoral program, I had taken numerous classes with Dr. Barone and I climbed the stairs to his third floor office frequently to have conversations about narrative research. And as much as I take pride in being given recognition as his student, I shudder at being evaluated for this attempt that I make in narrative research. But I have to start somewhere, and so I begin with a glimpse of narrative research defined.

My research is in the form of narrative analysis. What this means is that this work embodies "studies whose data consist of actions, events and happenings but whose analysis produces stories" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.6). In narrative analysis, stories become a way of knowing. These stories "emerge as data are collected and then are framed and rendered through an analytical process that is artistic as well as rigorous (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Ecker, 1966; Eisner, 1981, 1998; Freeman, 2007, as quoted in Coulter & Smith, 2009 p.577). Barone (2007) uses

the term *narrative* constructions to refer to narrative analysis as he explains “this recasting of data into a storied form is more accurately described as an act of textual arrangement” (p. 456).

The reason I used narrative analysis in my study in the words of Coulter & Smith (2006) is “to capture the experiences of the [participants] through their eyes, in their voices, and from their perspectives. The narrative constructions produced express the data as analyzed” (p. 312). Brophy (2009) further supports the importance of narratives as a means to “address an individual situation, but still open up a new world of experience and understanding “...that ...provide insights which the bare ‘facts’ can never reveal” (p. 36). Strange (2002) describes how “well crafted stories hold an intrinsic appeal that draws listeners’ interest and attention to topics they would tend to avoid in other genres” (p.208).

I collected my data through means of participant responses, informal interviews, and personal vignettes to allow the voices of my participants to be heard. As a result, this work privileges their voices and alleviates concerns about the inherent privileging that may be in a researcher–participant relationship of whose voice should be privileged (Barone, 2000; Emihovich, 1995; Goodson, 1995; Nespore & Barber, 1995). The stories are told by, Zaf and Rina, as they reflect on past experiences in their own words and provide storied accounts, reflective thoughts and short vignettes earnestly chosen by the participants themselves.

My research is the channel through which I captured and subsequently explored narrations related to the experiences of foreign-born Asian students in U.S. higher education. The narrations at the heart of my dissertation will enlighten readers to aspects of experiences that impact foreign-born Asian students in American colleges. Their voices illuminate the struggles and tensions that churn within them and within their experiences as students of Asian descent. These struggles and tensions include the issue of identity;

feelings of alienation in the midst of familiarity; and issues of failure in the midst of success along with feelings of ineptness. As I share the stories of my participants, as well as some of my own reflections, I am hopeful the stories will resonate with others who have had similar experiences or even prompt others to reflect on how they can become more informed of the experiences of foreign-born Asian students in their future endeavors.

As I take this journey into presenting the storying of my participants' narrations, I will explore three aspects pertaining to the field of narrative research. Narrative research is a branch of a broader spectrum of qualitative and arts-based research, and I will utilize certain aspects of these broader concepts to address similar understandings that are connected to narrative research.

I begin by examining how narrative research is defined, and follow this with a review of literature that denotes the value of narrative research in education. The third part of this section on narrative will review elements of narrative analysis.

Defining Narrative Research

Barone & Eisner (2012), in their book *Arts-based Research*, state that narrative research which is positioned under arts-based research, "addresses complex and often subtle interactions" to "provide an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable"(p.3). Such research does not "yield propositional claims about states of affairs" (p.3), but rather "create[s] insights into states of affairs" (p.3). This in turn provides a deeper and more complex understanding of aspects of the world which may otherwise be missed.

The field of qualitative research is generally used to include many different methods to understand and explain social phenomena. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), "qualitative research focuses on interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense of the meanings people bring to these settings." They continue

with saying that, "Qualitative research involves collecting information about personal experiences, introspection, life stories, interviews, observations, historical, interactions and visual text which are significant moments and meaningful in peoples' lives" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.2).

Patton (2002) defined qualitative research as an attempt to understand the unique interactions in a particular situation. The purpose of this understanding is not necessarily to predict what might occur, but rather "to understand in depth the characteristics of the situation and the meaning brought by participants and what is happening to them at the moment" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.2). In addition Pope and Mays (1995) state that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings in an effort to discover the meanings seen by those who are being researched (or subjects) rather than that of the researcher" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.2).

Following suit, Smith (1987) describes how the body of work labeled as qualitative research is "richly variegated and diverse" (p.173). Nonetheless it is research that "is based on the notion of context sensitivity" in which researchers "reject the notion of universal, context-free generalization" (p.175). Erickson (1986) aligns qualitative research with interpretive modes that focus on "acts and meanings ascribed to events by actors in a particular social context" (quoted in Smith, 1987, p. 176). Erickson further explains that research in this field, seeks to understand "how ... happenings organized in patterns of social organization and learned principles for the conduct of everyday life and how people in the immediate setting consistently present to each other as environments for one another's meaningful actions" (p.121).

Qualitative research is based on the concept of phenomenology which is a focus on the processes and experiences of people. As such, it is a study of "phenomena" related to experiences and the ways these experiences occur. Since experience is a complex concept that is not directly observable, what is perceived becomes subjective.

However, this 'inter-subjectivity' is often used as a mechanism for understanding how people give meaning to or interpret their experiences (Benz, & Newman, 1998)(Benz, & Newman, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1984).

Polkinghorne (2007) describes narrative research as "the study of stories" (p.471), and further explains these can include historical accounts, fictional novels, autobiographies and other genres. This is further elaborated by Coulter and Smith (2009) who address the difference that Barone (2001) highlights when he describes conventional research as a task that strives "to discover and verify knowledge about the real state of the world" (Coulter and Smith. 2009, p.577), but Barone states that "narrative research strives to portray experience, to question common understandings, and to offer a degree of interpretive space" (Barone, 2001, p. 150).

Barone (2001) also states that conventional quantitative research presents logic and evidence for readers in which the interpretations are controlled by the researcher. In contrast, the crafting of narratives through the usage of literary devices permits readers to interpret each study in their own way, which in turn opens up the possibility of "multiple interpretations by multiple readers" which is "expected and promoted" (Coulter & Smith, 2005, p.578). Narrative research permits the reader to independently appreciate a study.

In lieu of these differences in format and purpose of narrative research, Miller (2005) describes the basis for narrative research as the disclosure of abstract and personal experiences of participants as they perceive ordinary occurrences and contingencies in their lives. Polkinghorne (1988) places narrative in which human action is understood and made meaningful as a way of appreciating hermeneutic expression in the research realm.

In conventional research, participants' voices are silenced, and this is in contrast to narrative research where providing a platform to be heard by others is valued and

necessary. Emihovich (1995) stresses the fact that research should not silence participants' voices, but allow for collaborative work that projects the voices of those being researched. This is deemed possible through narrative works (as cited in Coulter 2003, p. 236).

Along similar lines, Coulter (2003) emphasizes the importance of narratives which allow for the "sustaining of voices of those whose stories are told" and not only held for one particular purpose but continue to last indefinitely. She further elaborates on how a "story is better equipped to accomplish lasting effects ...as we experience life through stories, we remember aspects of life through stories" (p.237).

There is the element of artistic approaches in narrative research. This means that "rather than empirical assertions supported by descriptions", as in the case of conventional research, the qualitative research is designed into an "artistic rendering, usually a narrative account" (Smith, 1987, p. 178). This account informs readers of discoveries or findings by the researcher. Smith (1987) further elaborates that "the investigator seeks to experience directly the qualities inherent in the setting, appreciate the meanings held by the people there, and then represent these discoveries so that the reader can have a vicarious experience of the case" (p.178).

According to Coulter and Smith (2005) in order to have a story, narratives are dependent on cultural expectations of readers about what represents a story. Elements of a story include the structure of beginning to an end with the intertwining of characters and places of the actions and events that subsequently form a whole story. Polkinghorne (1995) describes narratives as research that focuses on the individual and embodies a personal process that has emphasis on subjectivity.

According to Eisner (1981), "What one seeks is not the creation of a code that abides to publicly codified rules, but the creation of an evocative form whose meaning is embedded in the shape of what is expressed" (p. 6). Smith (1978) describes how " the

researcher preserves, in a coherent account, the concrete details of everyday life. He or she uses elements of storytelling, such as dramatic structure, interpretive ordering of events, narrative voice, and generative metaphors" (p.178).

Nothing explains narrative research more explicitly than Barone's (2000) description of narrative as research that allows for the possibility of transgressing phenomena. Barone states that "some transgressive stories challenge the reader to critique the taken-for-granted values that have paved the path of people...and call into question attitudes that prevail social practices" (p.128).

Britzman (1991) in *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*, explains how voice conveys meaning that lies within a person and enables that individual to participate in a community. Through documenting the voices of participants, narratives produce the effect of "evoking dissonance in the reader, enabling the reader to look at educational phenomena with renewed interest and a more questioning stance" (Barone 2001 as quoted in Coulter & Smith, 2005, p. 578).

Barone (2001) believes the understanding of lived stories represented in narrative research "causes us to question our values, prompts new imaginings of the ideal and the possible. It can even stir action against the conventional, the seemingly unquestionable, the tried and true" (p. 736). Narratives also introduce the centrality of emotions in lived experience, which are aesthetically posed to the reader through familiar story forms (Denzin,1992).

Narrative Research in Education

There are many stories to be told in the field of education. These narratives give voice to those who are otherwise muted or who fall into an overarching framework of statistics. Narrations bring forth understandings that speak volumes of lives and lived experiences, and it is only through the sharing of stories that others may gain deeper

understandings of issues that are veiled within statistics. It is no surprise that narrations are vital to affect change.

According to Connelly & Clandinin (1990), the main reason to utilize narrative in educational research is because "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p.2). This being said, narratives are perceived as "the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p.2). Since according to Connelly & Clandinin education, "is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (p.2). They further add that "in understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life's narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations" (p. 3).

Barone & Eisner (2011) point out that narrative research causes "disequilibrium - uncertainty - in the way that both the author/researcher and the audiences of the work regard important cultural and social phenomena" (p.16). In an educational world guided by conformity and generalizations, the narrative researcher is able to "persuade readers...to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view" (p.16).

This is further supported by Noddings (1986) who states that in educational research "too little attention is presently given to matters of community and collegiality and that such research should be construed as research for teaching" (p. 510). She views the collaborative research process as "one in which all participants see themselves as participants in the community, which has value for both researcher and practitioner, theory and practice" (as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990. p. 4).

Hogan (1988) also discusses the need for "empowering relationships" and a sense of connectedness "developed in situations of equality, caring and mutual purpose and intention" (p.12). This is vital in education since participants in conventional research

have experienced the silencing of their voices in the research process and they have been inhibited in telling their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Work in educational research involves a vast community at different levels: administrators, instructors and students, and it is essential that the researcher constructs a relationship in which multiple voices are heard. Such a collaborative process involves mutual storytelling and restorying in the research process. Barone & Eisner (2006) state that the aim for narratives in educational research is to "entice the reader to reconceptualize the educational process through intimate disclosure from lives of individual educators and students" (p.82).

Without narrative research in education, we would be deprived of the works by Cathy Coulter in *Growing Up Immigrant in an American High school*, or Rishma Dunlop in *Boundary Bay* or even Thomas Barone's *Touching Eternity and Ways of being at risk: The case of Billy Charles Barnett*. But more importantly, in the absence of narrative research the educational realm would be void of the unspoken voices of others.

Truth and Reliability in Narrative Research

The use of narratives in research has always been an avenue of contention. Questions related to issues of reliability and validity have often been debated. However, Coulter & Smith (2009) cites Miller (2005) in stressing the fact that the aim of narrative research is "to reveal the subjective experience of participants as they interpret the events and conditions of their everyday lives" (p. 578). Along similar lines Barone (2007) addresses the questions of objectivity and truth that arise from the dominance of the positivist paradigm as a "regulatory ideal," as an inappropriate paradigm for narrative research. Denzin (2000) supports this stating that "narratives do not establish the truth of . . . events [or] reflect the truth of experience. Narratives create the very events they reflect upon. In this sense, narratives are reflections *on—not of—the* world as it is known" (as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 188).

Even as early as two decades ago Smith (1987), in her article *Publishing Qualitative Research*, highlighted some of the discussions that have surfaced with regards to validity and truth in narrative research. In this article she cites Donmoyer (1985) who explains that, "because the primary aim of artistic researchers is to explicate meaning rather than to establish truth, their work should be afforded considerably more latitude than that of other researchers" (as cited in Smith 1987, p. 179).

Additionally, no one discusses the issue of validity more succinctly than Eisner (1981) who emphasizes that:

validity in the arts is the product of the persuasiveness of a personal vision; its utility is determined by the extent to which it informs. What one seeks is illumination and penetration. The proof of the pudding is the way in which it shapes our conception of the world or some aspect of it (p. 6).

On a similar note Spence (1982) writes that "narrative truth" consists of "continuity," "closure," "aesthetic finality," and a sense of "conviction" (p. 31). These are qualities associated both with fictional literature and with something well done. They are life criteria (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, p. 8).

Richardson (1990) continues stating that "unlike the logico scientific mode, which looks for universal truth conditions, the narrative mode is contextually embedded and looks for particular connections between events. The *connections* between the *events* is the *meaning*" (p. 13). According to Freeman (2007), the task of the narrative researcher is not to describe the world as it is, because that one world does not exist in the constructivist or postmodern paradigm. Rather, narrative researchers strive to redescribe events retrospectively through the lenses of collaborative interpretations with participants. Researchers recognize the difference between the literal truth and the story truth (O'Brien, 1990).

Constructing the Narrative

Coulter & Smith (2009) write that "narrative almost always involves invoking some theme or moral. Themes that emerge from data can be alluded to or never named explicitly or asserted directly" (p.585) in developing the construction of narratives. They believe that stories follow a framework that constitutes a beginning and an ending, within which emerge characters, settings and events through a span of time in which the characters play their parts or interact with other characters or events. "Without any of these elements, there is no story. The rendition of these elements is the author's construction, the author's choice according to his or her purpose and craft" (p.579).

Smith (1987) contends that in the construction of narratives there is no formalized manner in the presentation of the data. According to Eisner (1981), "What one seeks is not the creation of a code that abides to publicly codified rules, but the creation of an evocative form whose meaning is embedded in the shape of what is expressed" (p. 6). Smith (1987) goes on to explain "the researcher preserves, in a coherent account, the concrete details of everyday life. He or she uses elements of storytelling, such as dramatic structure, interpretive ordering of events, narrative voice, and generative metaphors" (p.178).

According to House (1980) such elements "are distinguished from logical entities in that aesthetic elements are apprehended immediately without recourse to formal arguments" (p. 105) and therefore are assimilated into the reader's system of tacit meanings (as cited in Smith, 1987, p.178).

Connelly & Clandinin (1990) emphasize that it is vital that the researcher listen first to the participant's story, and that it is the participant who first tells his or her story. What this means is that he or she is given the time and space to tell the story so that the story upholds the authority and validity from the participant in the narrative inquiry.

How is the narrative constructed to effectively bring to light the research? To begin with narratives should be written as a whole; not as cause and effect but rather a central idea with insights from the overall narrative. To this effect, Polkinghorne (1988) states that with, "change from 'beginning' to 'end' " (p. 116), "[w]hen done properly, one does not feel lost in minutia but always has a sense of the whole" (p.7).

For the whole, Connelly & Clandinin (1990) suggest elements that may be utilized to construct the narrative. They cite Crites' (1986) cautionary phrase "the illusion of causality" (p. 168) "which is used in reference to the "topsy-turvy hermeneutic principle" in which a sequence of events looked at backward has the appearance of causal necessity and, looked at forward, has the sense of a teleological, intentional pull of the future" (p.7). This seems like what Eisner (1981) said earlier about "The proof of the pudding is the way in which it shapes our conception of the world or some aspect of it" (p. 6). Looking backward or forward is shaped by the order in which the ideas are presented.

Another element that could be used is the "principle of time defeasibility", which means that time may be modified to suit the story told. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) believe that narrative writers "move back and forth several times in a single document as various threads are narrated" (p.7). For such a pattern, Chatman (1981) "makes use of temporal defeasibility in his distinction between "storied-time" and "discourse-time." This "is a distinction between events-as-lived and events-as-told, a distinction central to the writing of good narratives and for avoiding the illusion of causality" (as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.7).

A good narrative invites its reader to vicariously experience the narrations through the reading. Peshkin (1985) noted something similar when he wrote:

When I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain,

not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries (p. 280).

In addition, Tannen (1988) suggested that "a reader of a story connects with it by recognizing particulars, by imagining the scenes in which the particulars could occur, and by reconstructing them from remembered associations with similar particulars" (as cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009, p.8).

In storying the experiences of my participants, foreign-born Asian students, I used Gee's theory of identity as a lens to analyze how the concept of identity came into play for the participants and subsequently influenced experiences during the course of their studies. I also utilized Gee's concept of discourse and cultural models to further explore issues that may have affected the participants' interactions and experiences in college and to present the interrelationship between all three elements in this study.

Through the narratives of the participants in my study, I hope that factors such as identity, discourse and cultural models can shed light on how foreign-born Asian students' college experiences are affected.

The Meaning of Identity

The concept of identity can be defined in numerous ways. Norton (1997) states that identity is "how people understand their relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p.140). West (1994) explains identity as related to desires that could include those associated with recognition, affiliation, security, and safety.

Identities exist on many social and institutional levels. People may think of identity as being something fixed, permanent and rigid; however, this is contrary to how Gee (2000) defines identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context. In *Identity As an Analytical Lens for Research in Education*, Gee states that all

people have multiple identities connected not to their 'internal states' but to their performances in society" (p .99).

Gee (2000) cites Taylor (2004) who wrote that :

one cannot have an identity without some interpretive system underwriting that certain identity. These interpretive systems may be people's historical and cultural views of nature, it may be the norms, traditions and rules of institutions'; it may be the discourse and dialog of others; or it may be the workings of affinity groups (p.108).

All of these factors come into play to reaffirm or dispel one's assumed identity. Gee further explains that:

almost any identity trait can be understood in terms of any...different interpretive systems. People can actively construe the same identity trait in different ways and they can negotiate and contest how their traits are to be seen in terms of the different perspectives on identity (p.108).

At times perceptions and expectations from institutional or societal domains may also contribute toward the perpetuation of identities. Such an example is illustrated in the article, *Race and the We-They Dichotomy in Culture and Classroom*, by Leacock (1977) that refers to the identification disparity phenomena between two distinct groups of people. Here the "we" is in reference to a category of people recognized as whites while "they" refers to non-whites, Indians, Africans and Asians.

Within this context of identification disparity people are divided into the "we" identity, as those who are successful and the "they" identity ascribed to those who are deemed as failures. The problem with this identity framework is that such a dichotomy of success vs. failure and right vs. wrong is problematic and misleading due to the fact that ethnicity does not determine the failure or success of a certain group of people.

Identity can also exist on different dimensions. Norton (1997) believes that people also possess cultural identities in which within the group they share a common history, language and similar ways of understanding the world. However, generalizing cultural identities can result in false presumptions. Teranishi (2010), in his book *Asian in The Ivory Tower*, traces the history of Asian emergence in the academic environment and the identity assigned to them. As far back as 1971, Asians were proclaimed as "The New Whiz Kids" (Brand, 1987 cited in Teranishi 2010, p.3). Another example of Asian identity appeared in an article entitled "The Model Students" published in a New York Times column in 2006 in which the author Nicholas Kristof claimed that the "stellar academic achievement has an Asian face" (as cited in Teranishi 2007, p. 3).

The complexity of upholding an identity or multiple identities, either one of which is naturally endowed or others which may have been created or imposed by the environment, results in intricately weaving and reweaving in the consciousness of an individual. Individuals strive to find a comfortable balance within their multiple identities in order to function effectively.

Garrod and Kilkenny (2007) trace the stories of fourteen Asian students in college in their book *Balancing Two Worlds: Asian American College Students Tell Their Life Stories*. In the chapters related to identity, students cited the issue of "being constantly mediating a historical identity ...while grappling with defining a social and cultural identity" (p.4). The students stated that " the real process of getting to know your identity involves as much an element of creation as it does of discovery.... the act of this searching affects what one 'finds' and what one chooses to jettison" (p.5). Another student described her struggle with identity as being "yellow on the outside and white on the inside" (p.5). These students also cited the institutional perception that "all Asians are nerds who lock themselves up in their rooms all day and study until the words become blurry. Then they take a shot of green tea and study some more" (p.7).

In the untangling of the complexity of people and their identities, how do we attempt to make sense of multiple identities? Identity does not exist in a vacuum and does not stand as a single entity. Gee (2000) explains how these different identities can be categorized. According to Gee people can be identified according to Nature (N-Identity), Institution (I-Identity) Discourse (D-Identity) and Affinity (A-Identity). This means that we operate in different and assumed identities that depend on the environment and the expectations imposed upon us. In Gee's view, a person may have a core N-identity that is genetic, beyond the person's control and which is not related to any accomplishment. For example in my case, being Asian is an N-Identity (Nature).

However, within that identity a person can also have an I-Identity (Institution) that is an imposition on a person by an institution. I-Identities may also be authorized by authorities with a particular role, such as a professor who is recognized in that particular position given to him by an institution. Being a student is an I-Identity as that role is endowed upon a person by the authority of an institution.

The I-Identity "positions people fill or fulfill depends on other people recognizing those positions and recognizing them in certain ways" (Gee, 2000 p.113). When I started my PhD program, I assumed multiple I-Identities besides my Asian identity (N-Identity). I am a Ph.D. student (I-Identity) who is also a Teaching Assistant (I-Identity) with the college and a writing tutor (I-Identity) at the college Writing Center. Within the college environment I existed in at least three different dimensions of I-Identities. But I could also be viewed through more identity lenses.

In addition to these identity types, the same person may be perceived as having "particular traits that are recognized by others through discourse or dialog" (Gee 2000, p.113), thereby giving way to the creation of the D-Identity (Discourse). A D-Identity can be an "ascription or an achievement and can be constructed" (p.113). For example, Asian students are perceived to be studious and committed to hard work. These are

traits attributed to Asian students which are recognized by those in educational institutions and are believed to valid.

The final type of identity is known as the A-Identity (Affinity), which revolves around a group of people. This identity is the one a person takes on with others who come together as members of a particular group, people who share similar interests. The affinity group is a set of people dispersed over large spaces; they have little in common other than their interests. Identity here is recognized through "participation and sharing distinct social practices that create & sustain the group's affiliations" (Gee, 2000, p.105). Outside of the affinity group, members may have nothing in common and they may not share other social activities. For students the A-Identity could revolve around their roles as classmates in a particular course where they are engaged in the activities in the classroom. Beyond that they have no other connections.

Although it may appear that the four identity types Gee (2000) discusses are quite clear cut and straightforward, this is not necessarily so. Identities can overlap as well as be created and within these four identity types there may be an extent of misappropriations. Gee states that people can "accept, contest and negotiate identities in terms of whether they will be seen primarily as N, I, D or A identity" (p.109). What is at issue, though, is how and by whom a particular identity is being recognized. When I worked at the Writing Center, there were times when my Asian identity made students uncomfortable when I was assigned to tutor them. They felt that I could not be a good tutor since I was a foreigner. In this instance, even though I was a writing tutor, my I-Identity was not recognized.

Gee further explains that "while D identities appeal to recognition (discourse and dialog directly) the other sorts of identities rely on recognition which is filtered through a particular perspective on nature, workings of an institution or practices of a specific affinity group" (p.109). I realized that I was caught between identities as I made my way

through the different college environments. On one hand I was a graduate student and I had to abide by all the expectations imposed on me, yet I was also working as a writing tutor where I could assert my authority with academic writing.

What is Discourse?

In his book *How to do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, Gee (2010) describes discourse metaphorically as:

A 'dance' that exists in the abstract of a coordinated pattern of words, deeds, values, beliefs, symbols, tools, objects, times and places and in the here and now as a performance that is recognizable as just such a coordination. Like a dance, the performance here and now is never exactly the same. It all comes down to, often to, what the masters of the dance (the people who inhabit the discourse) will allow to be recognized or will be forced to be recognized as a possible instantiation of the dance (p. 28).

I understand this as we are who we are through our words, deeds, actions, beliefs, values, mannerisms and an extensive array of traits that define us. Gee (2005) proposes the idea of a big D-Discourse, which he defines as "ways of being a certain kind of person" in which who we are is the culmination of "combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity" in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis; Theory and Method* (p.21).

Gee also aligns this big D-Discourse to a community of practice (2001). He further elaborates how Discourse integrates "ways of talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, viewing, valuing, believing and feeling" (p.719). From Gee's perspective, "Discourses are identity kits" which people acquire through their environments and associations that are equipped with "specific devices (i.e., ways with words, deeds, thoughts, values, actions, interactions, objects, tools, and technologies) in

terms of which you can enact a specific identity and engage in specific activities associated with that identity" (p.720).

Researchers have "acknowledged that individuals respond differently to contexts as a result of past experiences" (Detert, Trevino, Sweitzer, 2008; Murphy, 2002; Trevino, 1986 as cited in Sweitzer 2009, p.15). Furthermore, research has also revealed that "individuals reflect on past experiences to help make sense of their current environment" (Louis, 1980; Trice, 1993 as cited in Sweitzer 2009, p.15). Individuals enter environments with individual discourses but then develop new discourses as they pursue their goals in these new environments.

Discourse played a strong role for me in graduate school. I thought being myself was sufficient, but then I realized I was in constant negotiations and tension internally. Questions such as, "Who did I have to become? What characteristics did I have to embrace?" were constantly on my mind and in the end, I made decisions based on what I needed to achieve at any given time, within a particular environment. The same can be said of my participants, Zaf and Rina, who struggled with the value of maintaining their Asian identity. Gee emphasizes that we represent ourselves in discourse environments based on our goals and as such our combinations of Discourse can be seen as either "an active 'bid' to be recognized in a certain way or as leaving oneself 'open' to being recognized in a certain way" (p.29).

My experience was not unique. Fu (1995) in her book *My Trouble is my English: Asian Students and the American Dream* reveals how she initially struggled to fit in and be accepted as part of her literature classes discourse only to discover that "no matter how hard I tried to learn the 'proper' ways to read and write about literature, I continued to suffer feelings of loss and confusion" (p.5). Her disparity became more pronounced as she described her analysis of a poem "I became speechless by the world of difference between the way my peers and I interpreted the same image. When I found no one had

reacted to the poem as I had, I felt so left out. I never thought literature could be a world so unfamiliar, remote and strange to me" (p.5). In *My Trouble is my English*, Fu shares how at one point she thought she may have been accepted into the program by mistake due to how she perceived herself as being deficient in reading and writing in the western world. In the book, she further elaborates on her experiences in eventually acquiring the new discourse to become a successful member of her graduate program.

Gee (2010) believes that "Discourses have no discreet boundaries because people are always creating new discourses" (p.29). He further stresses that:

at any given time and place a person engages in a 'combination', which means combining all aspects of who we are and how we present ourselves to the world. This encompasses actions such as "speaking and writing in a certain way; acting and interacting in a certain way; using one's face and body in a certain way; dressing in a certain way; feeling, believing and valuing in a certain way and using objects, tools and technology in a certain way (p.29).

A study by Sweitzer (2009), *Towards a Theory of Doctoral Student Professional Identity Development: A Developmental Network Approach*, discusses how a doctoral student becomes a member of the graduate school discourse by citing a model of socialization by Weidman et al (2001). This model of socialization points to the reality that in order to become effective members of a particular society, people need to acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions within a particular discourse. The successful acquisition of such skills will determine the effectiveness of participation in that discourse.

Sweitzer (2009) ascribes a criticism to the fact that a large number of organizations, including doctoral programs, offer "one-size-fits-all" socialization programs that often leave individual personal needs unfulfilled or neglected. The bridging of the gap between personal discourse and institutional discourses, especially in an

environment such as a doctoral program, is vital towards easing students into becoming more effective and involved participants of that discourse.

Viewing Through Cultural Models

Everything a person is and does is modified by learning and is therefore malleable. But once learned - behavior patterns, habitual responses, ways of interacting - gradually sink below the surface of the mind and control from the depths, like the admiral of a submerged submarine. Below the depths of the waters are ingrained traits that exist yet shielded from the naked eye.

These hidden controls are usually experienced as though they were innate simply because they are not only ubiquitous but they are habitual as well. What makes it doubly hard to differentiate the innate from the acquired is that, as people grow up, others around them in their varied identities share the same patterns. (Hall, 1976: 42 as cited in Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006, p.75)

The concept of cultural model was also new to me, and I only became aware of it through my work at the Writing Center. According to Gee (1999) "cultural models are storylines, families of connected images (like a mental movie) or (informal) theories shared by people belonging to specific social or cultural groups. Cultural models exist on an unconscious level and operate on a taken for granted dimension" (p. 20).

We base the way we perceive an expected behavior from the perspective of our familiar cultural models within the environments from which we operate. Those of us with foreign backgrounds view new environments through the lens of our own cultural models, and we may discover that there are discrepancies. It is through cultural models that people are informed of what is "typical or normal from the perspective of a particular Discourse" (Gee, 2001, p.720). These models are stored unconsciously in people's minds and are distributed across the different 'expertise' and viewpoints found in the group. These models operate like "a plot to a story (or pieces of a puzzle) [and]

different people have different bits and pieces . . . which they can potentially share in order to mutually develop the 'big picture" (Gee, 1999, p.20).

Fryberg & Markus (2007) refer to cultural models in education as:

historically derived and socially instituted sets of ideas about the meaning of education, about how to be a good student, about the role of education in becoming a "good" person, and about the nature of the relationship between the student and teacher" (p.216).

They further describe how cultural models of education are defined as" elements of cultural context; they are patterns of ideas and practices that define and structure the domain of education. They further explain that "These models are reflected in and fostered by the individual interpretive frameworks or schemas – ways of feeling, thinking, and acting – *and* are also incorporated in and reinforced by publicly available forms, such as policies, practices, symbols, and social situations" (p.216). It is not surprising, therefore, that as learners enter the classroom "they bring with them a framework of meanings that reflect their social and developmental experiences" (Fryberg & Markus ,2007, p.215). The concept of cultural model is further explained by Resnick (1994) who suggests that:

cognition, thinking, and learning develop within particular settings and that these "tools of thought" incorporate distinct cultural assumptions that are often tacit and taken for granted. These tools of thought develop in and are shaped by the nature of specific social interactions, and in general, mediate the relationship between the individual and the environment (Kozulin, 1998, as cited in Fryberg & Markus, 2007, p.215).

Gee (1999) describes the story of a Korean graduate student who perceived her American instructor's' role through the lens of her Korean cultural model in *Learning Language as a Matter of Learning Social Languages within Discourses*. The expectations

that she held of the responsibilities of a professor were different from the one that is generally typical of an American college. Gee describes how the Korean student felt that a professor was "morally obligated as a faculty member to offer assistance to students" (p.22). Her belief was that as long as students committed themselves to being diligent, professors were expected to help out. This was almost expected from professors as long as the student was willing to engage and work hard.

However, this expectation is in contrast to the cultural model that exists in U.S. higher education institutions where as Gee (1999) cited:

a faculty member is willing to give a good deal of time and effort to doctoral students who are near their thesis work, only when they have shown they can make it, produce good work, and become a credit to the faculty member, thereby justifying the effort that the faculty member puts into the student (p.22).

During my coursework, I became acquainted with a foreign-born Asian graduate student from Vietnam who struggled with classroom discourse and cultural models. I attempted to assist him in any way I could as a friend, but my efforts to guide him through his assignments and provide insights into the college environment did little to avert the tensions he felt challenged his identity. I wondered to what extent his perspective about his experiences contributed to identity, discourse and cultural models as they made their mark on his life as a student. I could relate fairly well to his frustrations since he came from the same region of the world, Southeast Asia, that I come from and I understood the tensions. Can such dilemmas be avoided or minimized, I wondered?

As Gu & Schweisfurth (2006) in *Who Adapts? Beyond Cultural Models of 'the' Chinese Learner* exemplify:

we must learn to recognize that different groups may, as a consequence of their socio-cultural contexts and backgrounds, possess 'ways of knowing' that,

although different from our own, may be every bit as valuable and worthwhile as those to which we are accustomed (Reagan, 2000, p.78).

Students, no matter what ethnicity, aspire to be accepted in the environment in which they are placed. In their pursuit of knowledge, Asian students especially are also eager to demonstrate their ability to persevere but at the same time they seek acknowledgement. My participants felt a need to share their stories in the hope that others might perceive Asians, especially those who are foreign-born, in a more illuminating light even though they may speak with an accent and may appear awkward; they are not peculiar, pale skinned people, with little to offer.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Asians In U.S. Higher Institutions

The U.S. Census Bureau defines "Asian" as "those individuals who have origins in "the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent" (Lew, Chang, Wang 2005, p.65). Asians are a diverse group of people. Asians differ in ethnicity, language, religions, cultural heritages, human capital resources, and manners in which they are incorporated into the society (Zhou, Xiong, 2005). This diversity is clearly illustrated in the 2000 U.S. census which recorded 25 Asian groups, including Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and an "Other Asian, not specified" category. In the year 2000, there were 11.9 million Asians (including those who reported Asian and one or more other races) in the United States, and they made up 4.2 % of the U.S. population. Amongst the Asian population, the Chinese made up the largest group, followed by Filipinos and Asian Indians (Lew et al, 2005).

Subsequently Asians can also be categorized into two groups, those who are native born vs. those who are foreign-born. According to Hune and Chan (1997) both groups speak English but generally students who are American born tend to be monolingual with English as their first and only language while many of their foreign-born counterparts tend to be bilingual or multilingual and may also speak dialects of their native language.

I am a foreign-born Asian but until I became a graduate student being Asian was a non-issue for me. I felt that my Asian descent did not impact who I was since America was now my home and in the 20 years that I have lived here, I felt I was part of the mainstream society. I was bilingual as a child, I spoke English well, was a graduate from an American college and most importantly felt I blended in.

However after spending ten semesters and over four years as a graduate student, I noticed that my perception of who I was, was incongruent to the perception I

sensed in classrooms within the college environment. For me, graduate school opened up a new milieu of a deeper dimension of the foreign-born Asian identity spectrum, particularly at an American higher education institution and I was in the midst of navigating who I was within the dimensions of who I was perceived as, throughout my college experience.

My undergraduate experience was in stark contrast to the reality of graduate school. Then foreign-born Asian students were welcomed within the institution and given recognition as unique intelligent individuals whose participation and contributions were valued. The college I graduated from fostered a strong partnership between students and faculty and encouraged open communications. This exceptional collaboration may have been the result of a college administration who was well informed of the discourse and cultural models of the foreign-born Asian student population. Credit to this successful collaboration can be attributed to the acumen of the Dean of Student Affairs who had worked in the education department in Southeast Asia on an exchange program.

Significance of the Research

The Asian population is the second fastest growing racial group in the United States, and recent projections suggest that by 2050 almost one of every ten residents will be of Asian descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, as cited in Museus & Kang, p.6). Due to this growing number, it is imperative that more extensive exploration of empirical knowledge about this population, especially at the higher institution level, be pursued in order to better serve foreign-born Asian participation in the educational field.

However according to Chang (2008) Asians can be considered one of the most misunderstood populations in higher education in the United States, partly due to the lack of scholarly inquiry within this area. Museus (2009) reports that in the past decade amongst the most widely read peer-reviewed academic publications in the field of higher

education, only one percent was directed to the study of Asians in higher institutions (cited in Museus & Kang, 2009). This exclusion from scholarly inquiry in postsecondary education is believed to be due to the ubiquitous perception of Asians fulfilling the model minority myth (Museus, 2009).

The term model minority emerged during the Civil Rights Movement in 1966 (CARE, 2008). The connotation behind this label was to group Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders as “the “good” minority that seeks advancement through quiet diligence in study and work and by not making waves; the minority that other American minorities should seek to emulate” (CARE, p.1). Asians were perceived to achieve universal and unparalleled academic and career achievements due to their unrelenting perseverance in succeeding, which is believed to be reflective of their cultural values (Kitano & Sue, 1973; Lee, 1994 ; Museus & Kang, 2009; Sue & McKinney, 1975).

Unfortunately, such assumed accomplishments have resulted in a compelling assumption of the Asian stereotype. The model minority myth has affected the way Asian students are being perceived on college campuses and have led many to believe that “model minority” students will excel on their own (CARE, 2008). This subsequently affects the pursuit of empirical knowledge, which unfortunately perpetuates further distortion and ignorance of the realities that Asian students face in American college environments (Museus & Chang 2009).

My research was first inspired from my work with foreign-born Asian students in the college Writing Center. I had taken on work as a writing tutor when I started graduate school, and some of the students I tutored were foreign-born Asian students from my Master’s program.

My impression of these students in class was in line with the model minority stereotype since what was clearly apparent was their quiet, yet persevering diligence which demonstrated determination and uncompromising commitment to excelling. This

was unsurprising to me as I too carried similar traits into my graduate work. However, during the times I worked with these very same students in the Writing Center, I realized that success was not as simple as it seemed. In the midst of unparalleled dedication to their learning were overwhelming struggles that went unnoticed in the classroom.

The problem with the model minority myth is how it generalizes Asians as a homogenous group, thus denying the existence of the complexities and diversity that exist within the extensive Asian population. Numerous literature have addressed the misleading effect of racializing and oversimplifying various groups since accurate portrayal of features within ethnic subpopulations may be concealed. Such is the case with foreign-born Asian students, who face a multitude of challenges within the American college environment due to their diverse backgrounds.

Issues of Concerns

Hard work and academic achievement does not nullify the fact that Asian students face a multitude of struggles. Teranishi (2010) in his *book Asians in the Ivory Tower, Dilemmas of Racial Inequality in American Higher Education* presents the stories of four Asian American students in California and the complexities they faced in their journey towards pursuing higher education. Through the stories of these students Teranishi describes the barriers at both the societal and institutional levels, and exemplifies the issues these students face, such as those that relate to the lack of information about postsecondary education, work and family responsibilities, financial need, academic preparation and achievement, limited English proficiency and acculturation.

Baum & Flores (2011) & Jose (2009) attribute the lack of familiarity with the U.S. postsecondary education system as a challenge for students. This is especially true for those “who do not attend U.S. high schools and whose parents are not proficient in English” (p.176). Conway (2010) also addresses this, stating that the typical foreign-born

student lacks academic preparation for college, has a need for remediation in English as a second language (ESL), and has limited financial resources.

According to Baum and Flores (2011) "applying for college and financial aid is a complex task even for students with English-speaking parents who are themselves college graduates " (p.176). This challenge is further compounded by factors such as inadequate information about college opportunities and how to access them, cultural differences, citizenship issues, language barriers, and, too frequently, discrimination (Baum, Flores 2011).

Similarly, Teranishi & Suarez-Orozco (2011) address the fact that many students pursuing a college education may not be well prepared academically for college demands. Such students struggle with their course work and may require remedial help. This may be especially true for foreign-born students who have entered the U.S. with prior schooling or were in American schools that did not have adequate resources and limited access to academic enrichment.

Struggles with language barriers can become pivotal in the successful participation of Asians in education. In *My trouble is my English (1995)*, Fu shares her classroom apprehensions about speaking up and being uncomfortable communicating within the institutional environment. She points out the fact that at times cultural differences restrain foreign-born Asian students from being more aggressive and vocal, which eventually leads to inaccurate portrayals of their intellectual abilities. Such assumed discrepancies lead to more prominent problems that may arise in higher education participation.

Compounded Struggles

In the paper, *Deconstructing the Model Minority Myth and How It Contributes to the Invisible Minority Reality in Higher Education Research*, Museus and Kiang (2009) cite several misconceptions about Asians that may be problematic for students. These

misconceptions include such assumptions that Asians are not considered a part of racial and ethnic minority as well as a belief that they do not encounter major challenges because of their Asian ethnicity. This further asserts the perception that Asians do not seek or require resources and support during the course of their programs.

There are two sides to this issue that affects Asian students. On one hand the stereotypical portrayal of Asians as being the epitome of perfection lays upon itself a heavy overbearing burden on Asians of always having to fulfill the role of succeeding. Conformity to the expectations of the myth exerts overwhelming pressure on Asian students (Chan and Hune, 1995; Chou and Feagin, 2008; Lewis, Chesler, and Forman, 2000) and such stress may impact Asian students engagement in the learning process (Museus, 2008).

The other side of the model minority myth leads to students being left out of programs, support services and even deterred from seeking help. Hune (2002) points out the Asian dilemma faced by Asian students and that they are simultaneously highly visible and invisible on US campuses. "They are highly visible in their number and when touted as the model minority, at the same time they are invisible in the policies and programs" within the US education system (p.12). Such assertions are further confounded by Rohrlack, Alvarado, Zaruba, and Kallio (1998) that assumptions relegated to the success of Asian students falsely concludes that they do not require any assistance and thus renders them invisible.

Like other minority groups, Asian students on college campus do encounter experiences related to discrimination, prejudices, pressure to conform to stereotypes and assimilation in predominantly white institutions (Museus & Kiang 2009 p.8). And such challenges have led Asians students into a constant state of "navigating multiple cultures and negotiating complex racial and ethnic identities" (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper (2003) as cited in Museus &Kiang, p.8).

A common misperception of foreign-born Asian students is the view that they seem to acclimatize well in their environment hence, they do not need resources or other services. Although it is true that Asian college students are not apt to utilize support services (Uba, 1994; Zhang, Snowden, and Sue, 1998), this is not in any manner a reflection of their lack of struggles. On the contrary, according to Chang (1996) and Jung (1995) Asian students are believed to "use avoidant coping strategies in dealing with personal challenges" (as cited in Museus & Kiang p.10). In addition, due to the fact that Asians are perceived as members of the model minority, "many outreach programs overlook the needs of this student population" (Yeh, 2004).

Mathews (2000) believes the assumption of how foreign-born Asians come from stable and distinct cultures creates a perception that all Asians have traits that demonstrate timidity, over dependency and non-assertiveness; and such characteristics exemplify silence and obedience and an inability to initiate conversations (cited in Lee & Pak, 2007, p.101). Such misleading perceptions of foreign-born Asian students work against them. In American classrooms, foreign-born Asians are generally noted to be passive participants but Brickman and Nuzzo (1999) believe that the instructional style of American instruction is in stark contrast to the learning styles of Asian countries and this may create unnecessary challenges for students when it is not apparent to instructors and institutions (cited in Szelenyi, Chang, 2002, p.70).

THE NARRATIVE

Researcher's Notes

It is here that I invite you to lend your ears to Rina, the first participant, as she introduces the beginning of the college journey in their family. Rina's introduction will be followed by Zaf's vignettes and reflections where he shares his college experiences. Before you are taken into Rina's vignettes and reflection, there is a section entitled Rina and Zaf, where Rina provides glimpses of interactions between Zaf and her in their identities as students within their family. The narrative concludes with Rina's vignettes and reflections.

RINA

Introduction

The Story Unfolds

If you never think of how your identity can play a big part in the course of a journey you travel on, you will be surprised. Worse still you will be totally unprepared and caught off guard when that reality hits you, sometimes harshly, in your pathway.

It is still vivid in my mind that very first day when several of us trooped into the office of a community college to enroll Faz. There was us, the immediate family, comprised of my husband, Faz, Zaf and I, and then there was our close family friend, Liz and her two children, Matt and Ann.

Looking back it seems almost strange that Faz was sent off accompanied by an entourage, but then again sometimes good things happen and no understanding is necessary. It was the excitement of seeing Faz enroll on that warm summer evening that led us there. Liz had wanted to come along to be a support for us and we welcomed that thoughtful gesture.

As Faz and his Dad sat with an academic counselor to register for classes, the rest of us sat in the lobby, full of anticipation. Was this really happening, we could not stop wondering? How did Faz get to this point where he was actually about to start college? Our thoughts were filled with a tinge of anxiety but nonetheless overwhelming joy. Even if we felt at times a little apprehensive, those emotions were quickly dismissed.

As a mother, I knew Faz was ready. He was a conscientious student who took on responsibilities seriously. He was committed and extremely focused when centered around schoolwork and he was persistent. Why then was it a big deal that he was about to start college? Only because Faz never completed high school, did not have a high school diploma and did not have his GED. He had taken a different path of education and

had spent the last several years at a Montessori school under the mentorship of a Montessori teacher who happened to also be a friend. Faz knew how to handle school and he knew what perseverance meant.

And as we walked away that evening, with joy in our hearts and smiles planted on our faces, we congratulated Faz for his accomplishment. Not so long ago, this day would have seemed almost impossible but there he was at the doorstep of higher education. That day when we registered Faz for classes, he did not stand out as being any different. When compared to other college students, he blended in. The only noticeable identity that he walked in with that day was his Asian descent.

Two years after Faz started college, it was Zaf's turn. For Zaf there was no fanfare, not even a sending off. Zaf had submitted his application through high school and had made several visits to the college during his senior year. He knew his way around the college environment and had even reached out to other college students to gain insights into what to expect. The one time I accompanied Zaf to campus was when he wanted to change his major and somehow I wanted to make sure that he was asking the right questions.

Zaf started first grade in the United State and was familiar with the education system. He happened to also possess good test taking skills, which was evident from his near perfect scores in both SAT and ACT, outdoing all his classmates. He excelled in school partly because he too was a focused student and was committed to achieving. Zaf did have a laid back attitude but nonetheless he was still excited about college since most of his classmates were going to be there.

As I dropped him off that first day of classes on my way to work, I wished him luck but I was not overly anxious. I saw Zaf as being more American than Asian in his identity and I knew fitting in was not going to be an issue.

A year later, I was on the same campus as Zaf. We had now become college mates. In my case there was no one shadowing me during that initial phase. I had submitted my application online and over the summer had visited campus several times to familiarize myself with my new environment. I knew I had more to learn since I had not been in school for quite a while, but Zaf was there to be my mentor and help me along this new path.

There was so much that I needed to learn about college, from the basics of where to obtain the book list, how to buy books, how to use the campus map to find classroom locations, to the more perplexing challenge of maneuvering the domains of technology. Being a college student was an intricate labyrinthine web of complexities to manage. As I made my way around campus just being a student and learning the ropes of my new identity, unbeknown to me lurking somewhere beneath the college surface, my identity would present itself as a point of scrutiny. Never once did it cross my mind that who I was, mattered.

Within the span of three years our family had undergone a huge transformation. My husband was often left out of conversations that gravitated towards school, but it was obvious that there was a tinge of pride, which surfaced when he talked about us. This often showed up when he wittingly told people that he was living with three college students. Such a remark usually drew puzzled looks, but with clarification, people realized what he was talking about and came to appreciate the humor.

We were now a family of students. Our world was centered around college schedules, class registration, tuition, textbooks, assignments and deadlines. Even our vacations were planned according to school holidays.

Faz, Zaf, and I are Asians. We are similar in the way we view the importance of education. A college education was a norm in our extended family. Both my parents are college graduates, added to this is the fact that my father has a Ph.D. from an American

university. Both my brothers went to graduate school and all their children are either in college or have graduated from one. So college was the only logical pathway to pursue.

However, being college students did not bring about a set of different values for us. The boys were still living at home; I was still Mom with the same household responsibilities, and my husband and I were still responsible for the well being of our children. The only drastic change that took place was having the support of my husband in assisting more with the home responsibilities.

With the boys, they were now charged with decision-making tasks in situations related to college work and activities. Independence meant being responsible towards achieving what they were pursuing. Ultimately we were still a family that needed to support each other, either financially or emotionally, and we continued to function as a family unit.

Our roles at home remained intact, and we all assumed that just being students was sufficient. Ironically, it was college that demanded and expected much more from us, and little did we realize that issues of identity, discourse and cultural models seeped in slowly to color and impact our college experiences.

ZAF

The Interview

I Think I Will Make It

I was sitting in the lobby area of the business career center at the school of business, patiently waiting. I was there for an interview; my first one for a job that I actually wanted. A job that would be my first step in my career in supply-chain management. I was dressed sharply: blazer, dress pants, white shirt and blue tie. I was sitting there just trying to tell my subconscious to calm down as I felt my heart beat faster. "It's just an interview," I told myself. "It's not as if your life depended on it." As I was sitting there swimming in my own thoughts of comfort and self-motivation, someone walked up and asked me how I was doing. I looked up and saw the face of an older woman looking back at me. I thought she was my interviewer so I was waiting for her to call my name. She didn't. She just sat down and introduced herself. Her name was Kathy and she had just finished interviewing students for her company and was just wandering around.

"I saw you here and I wanted to make sure that you were alright," she said to me genuinely. "I remember years ago when I was in your position and I'm here to tell you that it's alright. Just remember to breathe." I smiled.

We then had a conversation about her job and her profession and what she liked and didn't like about it. I was absorbing her words, because it offered me an escape from my own anxiety. She told me that she had worked her way up to be a VP but got tired of working so many hours. So she went to work for a company as a college recruiter, and that's why she was there. She tried to offer me some calming words. "These interviewers, all they want is to see you succeed. There's nothing to be afraid of." I laughed at the simplicity of her words but agreed. "They're just people and years

before they were exactly in your shoes. I'm sure you are qualified and you are prepared. Be yourself."

I saw out of the corner of my eye someone emerging from a hallway and I could tell that this was for me. He looked at the both of us and called my name. I acknowledged that it was me, and thanked Kathy for the sage advice. I stood up and shook the guy's hand who introduced himself as Jeff.

"Just remember to breathe!" she said as I walked away with my interviewer. I smiled at her and thanked her again.

Jeff took me to a room around the corner where another interviewer was waiting. Her name was Meghan and she had a smile that was polite but I could tell that she was serious about her work. The room itself was tiny, just large enough for the three of us to sit there comfortably, facing each other with a small white table separating us. The light above us was flickering, and Jeff apologized for it. I joked and said I thought it was a psychological tick that I was experiencing from my nervousness.

And the interview began. In many ways, it was like most interviews. They asked me to tell about myself and why I wanted the job. They asked me behavioral questions that assessed how I handled setbacks, whether I was successful in completing projects, and how I handled conflict with people. These were the questions I had prepared for and I had answers that seemed honest and real. Throughout this time I was just telling myself that my interviewers were people just like me, and they were there to help me get to where I wanted to be.

I spoke calmly and assertively, with a voice that resonated in the room, and a lightness that portrayed my laid back attitude. I was taking the advice of a friend and just trying to be myself. I knew who I was, and I knew my potential. It was my job to communicate this to the two people on the other side of the table.

After the behavioral questions, Jeff looked at me and said he was going to ask some hypothetical questions. "These are supply chain related questions and we just want to know how you would approach certain situations. Okay?" I nodded my head. I was hoping it was something relatively easy, like the "eight sources of waste in manufacturing" that my friend told me to memorize. "You're put in charge of a factory, and your first job is to see why there are so many delays in the process. What do you do?"

My eyes lit up, and I could feel my heart beat a little slower. In my supply chain class a few months ago we had to read a book called "The Goal" which talked about a situation just like this. So I went into my "managerial" mode where I talked about getting on the factory floor to see whether we could detect the delays physically through the stacking of work in process materials. I went into how I would talk to various workers on the factory floor all the way up to the VPs to see what they all saw the problem as being. I stressed that data gathering would help me figure out the story underneath it all. I also mentioned how I would look outside the factory and see whether delays from our suppliers would cause delays in our factory. I listed out the things I would do, and Jeff and Meghan took notes and occasionally nodded their heads. I wasn't even looking for validation from them. I knew I was right, and even if I did not give the answer they were looking for, I knew that what I said would still yield good results.

After I finished outlining my plan, Jeff looked at me and smiled. "Those are all the questions we have for you today. Do you have anything you want to talk about that we didn't address?"

I smiled back. I took a deep breath. This is it, I told myself. This is a speech six years in the making. All my struggles, all the pain, all the frustrations, and it was coming down to this.

"Yes, there is one thing I wanted to say. I know I'm not your traditional applicant, and my background doesn't quite match up with everyone else. But I want you to know that what I lack in experience, I will make up for in effort, drive and motivation. One of my strongest traits is that I strive to be a perfectionist. Somewhere along the way, especially in architecture school, I learned that always trying to be perfect is not nearly as good as finishing and completing things. I've learned that lesson. But I will work harder than the next guy to achieve perfection up to the point of completion. I will seek help when I need to, ask the right questions, and absorb the knowledge in my surroundings. I feel confident in saying that I can be an asset to your company."

After I finished, I took a deep breath and looked into Jeff and Meghan's eyes. They nodded their head as if agreeing with me. And at that point I knew I had done it. I finally broke out of my shell. This was the new me.

Reflection

I underwent a few personality changes and tweaks during my senior year of my undergraduate program and through my master's program. Before the changes, I was very reserved, content to talk to only a few people. I considered myself an observer of people, someone who liked watching people but always stayed on the fringes of group interactions. I simply liked listening to what people had to say and how they did things. I learned through watching them and it benefitted me in the long run. With my close friends, I was energetic and laid back. I always was the one that planned all our outings and kept in touch with everyone. I was very loyal with those close to me and nonchalant about my casual acquaintances. I was also afraid of social situations that would cause discomfort. I avoided talking about sensitive topics and hated arguments (constructive or destructive). I considered myself a great friend and a hard worker and someone humble.

Once I started realizing I needed to be a little different to succeed, I started adopting traits I saw were successful. I started being more social, especially with strangers. I tried to find common ground with anyone I met and made a concentrated attempt at small talk. I always wanted to put someone at ease, especially in social situations. I still maintained my desire to be an observer, but I made sure I balanced it out with my own thoughts and tried to bring my opinions to the conversation. I tried to make sure that I was still on the radar, whether it was in small group interactions or in classroom settings. I still maintained a positive laid-back attitude which translates as someone who is easy going and goes with the flow.

First Impression

The Task That Lies Ahead is Mine to Accomplish

My first day of college started at 3:40 pm on a Monday in August, 2006. I was doing my best to hide my nervousness as I walked along the wide sidewalks of campus. Three college students passed me by, and I tried to avoid eye contact. "Do they know I'm a freshman? Will they pull some sort of prank on me?" My fears were unfounded, based mostly on movies and TV shows I watched growing up. I focused on my destination, and confidently walked past them. They seemed to not notice me.

My first class was located in one of the larger lecture halls on campus, which I had visited the week before. I wanted to make sure I did not appear lost or confused on my first day and visited all my classrooms and notable buildings on campus.

As I approached the double glass doors of the lecture hall, I saw other students outside. Some were nervously standing around playing with their cell phones. Others were casually sitting on the narrow ledge of the wall smoking their cigarettes. I could tell we were all trying to hide our anxiety. I walked into the lecture hall and started looking for a seat. None of my friends were in this class so I chose my seat based on being practical. I went straight towards the front and sat down near the edge of the second row. Close enough to see the professor, but flexible enough so that I could leave to use the bathroom easily if I needed to. It is the same strategy I use at concerts. If ever needed to move around, I would not need to inconvenience people.

I tried to get settled in my seat. I took out my book and set it on my lap. I took out my laptop and put it on the desk. It felt so odd to have my laptop out during class. All throughout high school we had to abide by the no electronics rule in the classroom, so we were forced to pay attention to the teacher. But in college, in that classroom, it felt too easy to goof off and just spend the whole class checking my email and surfing

the web. "No," I told myself, "that's not why I'm here. I need to give this class a chance and try to learn as much as I can."

That thought excited me. This is the first time that I actually chose my classes. After years of learning material I thought irrelevant to my career aspirations, I finally had the chance to learn something that fueled my passions. There was that excitement that accompanies the start of every new journey building up inside of me.

As it got closer to the start of class time, the classroom was buzzing with more and more students. I saw groups sitting together and laughing. Others were sitting towards the back, their eyes focused on their laptops. Others still were sitting by themselves, looking around the classroom at everyone else. "They're just like me," I thought. It is not like I had no social life, or that I was a hermit by nature. It was just that I had to go through my first college experience alone. I had to learn to be independent and find motivation within myself.

That felt a bit unnerving. I took a minute to reflect on my four years in high school. I was consistently one of the best students academically. I had done so many things for the school through various extracurricular activities and leadership positions. I had pioneered the editorial team and developed the first yearbook. Parents from the school knew me based simply on my reputation, and many of the younger kids looked up to me. In a school as small as mine was, I had worked hard to build a big identity for myself. Surely, there were things that I could have done better, but overall it felt like I made good use of those years.

But here, in a room where there were more people I didn't know than the total number of students in my old school, I was just one of many. What will I be able to do to stand out in these next four years? Will I be able to repeat my success? Do the same rules apply? These thoughts overcame me until my head was swimming in high expectations and visions of success.

Suddenly, the room dimmed, and the conversations in the audience stopped. All our eyes went towards the front, and focused on a smiling, balding man with frameless glasses standing in front of the projector screen. "Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen," he enunciated with a thick, Spanish accent. "Let's get started."

So there it was. After 12 years of schooling, studying for tests, keeping GPAs up and participating in extracurricular activities, I had finally reached the college milestone. Where I went from here would be led by a combination of my choices, my aspirations, and my desire to succeed. And it began with the smile of the balding man standing at the front of the room.

Architecture Or Bust

The Journey of a Thousand Challenges

Architecture school was a test of the human spirit. That may seem like an exaggeration, but while going through the program it certainly felt that way.

We all started the program with big smiles on our faces and with enough energy and bravado to take over the world. In our starting class, there were 400 bright, eager, aspiring architecture students. But there was a catch. At the end of our second year, we all had to apply to be part of the "professional program", for which there were only 60 seats. Sixty out of 400 made for some staggering odds, and it instilled in all of us a sort of cutthroat culture where the weak would be left behind.

They called the first two years of our program the "lower division" and the final two years the "upper division." It felt like a ranking, an achievement to make it to the upper division. It meant that you were among the top 15% of your class and that you had survived the rigor of architecture.

And rigor it was. In our first semester we started out with 400 students. We had general lecture classes about design where we learned about the theories and appreciation of architecture around the world. These were usually held in large lecture halls and had the format of traditional college classes. But the ultimate tests were in our studio classes. Our architecture studios were much smaller, with an average of 20 students each. We were given projects to complete and given short timelines to do it in. On our very first day of studio we went over the syllabus, and we were then assigned to different people to work in groups. We were given our first assignment which would be due the following week. We realized that if you didn't hit the ground running, you would never catch up.

And it was like that for the first two years. We were given mini projects that evolved into larger, more comprehensive projects, and each time we were expected to

produce more and more than before. For example, we were asked to make patterns using several black squares on a white background and explain why we did the pattern we did. Then we used those same patterns and reiterated them with watercolors. We were not given a formal lesson on using watercolors; we just were expected to learn it as we went along.

After this we were asked to make those same shapes into concrete forms that stood 8' tall. They told us to represent these shapes out of cardboard or foam core, and we had to learn how to cut shapes neatly with X-Acto blades and make them to scale. This then evolved into making the concrete forms a part of a landscape, and so we had to learn about different plants, or imagine how people would use our shapes and in what way. And so it continued, getting progressively more complex until it evolved into a design for an endangered desert plant arboretum located on campus.

At the end of each semester, we would always do a headcount, looking around to see how many of us had survived the grueling semester and how many had quit. It was hard making friends with people because you never knew when they would crack from the pressure and decide to step out of the program. And once you stepped out of the program, it almost felt like you ceased to exist. We all lived and breathed architecture and did not hang out with others. We were focused on the end goal, and for the first two years our goal was to make it to upper division.

It seemed that our lives depended on getting to the next level in the program. We all had no other options, and we were dedicated to the art of architecture. When the time came for us to put together our applications for upper division, tensions were at an all time high. We had to take photos of all our projects and designs and compile them into a physical portfolio. Even our portfolio had to seem like a carefully designed product. There were some of us who worked in teams and others who refused to help others. We

were all trying to survive, and it seemed like our animal instincts had come to surface. By this time, there were only 200 of us.

After we submitted the portfolio, we waited for the results. Though it was only a period of two months while the portfolio committee judged all our applications, it felt like a long time. We were stuck in architecture limbo, not sure whether we should start looking at other degree programs or just wait for a positive result. Then, one day in July, we all started getting emails about being accepted or denied from the program. A lot of my close friends were accepted to the program, along with myself. Then there were others who found out that the time and effort they had spent over the previous two years had gone down the drain, and they had to find another program to take them in.

As for the 60 of us that did make it? We felt victorious. We high fived each other and breathed a sigh of relief. We had finally earned the right to call ourselves "upper division" students.

On our first day of class as upper division students we were all smiles and gregariousness. We looked around at each other and made note of who our colleagues were. We were ecstatic...at least until the teachers gave us our syllabus and told us what was expected by the end of our first week. You could feel the class collectively forget to breathe as we realized that our reward for making it this far was simply more intense work. Our first assignment was essentially half a semester's work in one week. And so we hit the ground running once again, just two more years until graduation.

Reflection

I believe that I modeled the way I interacted with people in public after my parents. They were courteous and kind but never went out of their way to be gregarious or the "life of the party." I saw the merits in adopting this personality, and therefore carried this with me. I felt that being respectful was admirable and ran less of a chance of intimidating or offending others. Whenever I visited my relatives in Asia, I realized that

this was common with people of my nationality and culture. It further strengthened this value within my personality.

This allowed me to fly under the radar for most of my life, for better or for worse. In tense situations at school, it served me well to be non-confrontational. People knew me as the calm and quiet person, a contrast to my vocal classmates. However, in college it hurt my reputation. Instead of being attributed to positive traits like calm and respectful, I was seen as being timid and small.

I was in the architecture program, and my classmates all had vibrant and loud personalities. It was almost like a pre-requisite for being in the program. In the beginning, I thought that as long as I worked hard and did my work, it would translate into success within the program. But I realized that being in architecture required me to be actively conversing with others, continually pursuing instructors' opinions and advice, and constantly asking other people for help. This was not something that I was used to but I had to adapt in order to succeed.

The first few times that I tried to be more outgoing and gregarious, I came off as uncomfortable and inauthentic. In the fall semester of my third year I really tried to engage in meaningful conversations with my instructors, especially when discussing homework or projects. But I still came across as quiet and somehow unknowledgeable. In comparison to my classmates, it seemed like I had no idea what I was talking about when talking about my design project. It almost felt like the instructors did not have confidence in me as their student. During discussions with the instructor, I wanted to listen to more of what they had to say than trying to explain to them what I thought. It was just a method of learning that I was more used to. To me, discussions were acceptable amongst peers, but I could not figure out how to carry on an effective discussion with an instructor, most of them older than me.

Perhaps that's where my biggest weakness lies. My comfort in interacting with older people still needs a lot of work. As a child, I followed my parents around as they talked with their peers, and I learned to be the "child" in the conversation, the fly on the wall. Even to this day, it still feels awkward when trying to talk to my parents' friends. If I am standing with my parents and their friends, I try to stay quiet and mirror what my parents are doing so that I don't overstep their boundaries. In doing this, I am assuming that some of my parents' friends think that I'm still in their shadows or am a timid person even as an adult.

It was easy being quiet as a child, but noticeable as an adult. The transition from childhood to adulthood was a learning process for me. I had to learn to let myself go and let my personality shine through when interacting with people older than me. It took me out of my comfort zone and even to this day I struggle with how much of myself I should show. With older relatives, I err towards being respectful and gentle rather than trying to let them see my more active colorful side. It's simply a part of the Asian culture that I am willing to accept at the cost of not appearing like the confident individual I have become.

It's this confusion that I struggle with each day. Whether it's interacting with peers or elders, I never know how much of myself to show. I tend to be an intensive observer in the early stages of knowing someone so that I know where the lines should be drawn. My instincts tell me to just keep quiet, but I have seen that being quiet has no merit. I am seen as incompetent or unintelligent.

When I was vice president of the American Institute of Architecture Students, I did my job by supporting the president. I let her be the face of the organization and do the talking. But with that I also did myself a disservice by allowing the leaders within the school to discount me as a significant member of the club. Whereas she was given

*opportunities to participate in school-wide activities and meet with school administrators,
I don't think anyone even knew my name.*

The Encounter

Learning is Based on Apprenticeship. The Master Leads the Way, the Student Listens and Observes

It was one of my biggest accomplishments in my college career. After starting the architecture program with 400 of my peers, we were weeded down (through tough studio classes and an application process in our second year) to about 60 students. So in August of my junior year, I felt like I was a survivor and a success. I was already that much closer to my dream of becoming an architect.

I started off the semester with a sense of vigor, wanting to learn as much as possible and be great at designing buildings and their environments. I was filled with ideals and motivations that could propel me towards that dream job down the road. But here I reached another obstacle: my instructor, Mr. S.

He was a quiet man. He appeared to be reserved, but he certainly did something to earn the position of teaching 3rd year architecture students. I had him as a teacher the previous year for a computer modeling class that he co-taught with a gregarious designer. I had grown close to his co-teacher, asking for his advice on several computer design projects, and eventually I was recognized as one of the better students in the class. But I never quite cultivated a relationship with Mr. S.

I did not know what to expect from him at the beginning of my 3rd year studio. The truth was, teaching a studio class was quite different from teaching a computer modeling class. Studio was much more in depth and more intense. As architecture students, our lives revolved around this class, often staying up late nights working on designs or physical models for class. Studio was an emulation of our profession in a controlled environment. We lived for studio.

We also depended on our teachers to be our mentors for studio. They were often trained architects, and bestowed their years of experience on us naïve students. I

was hoping for guidance, for revelations, for those professor-student apprenticeships I had seen so many times in movies.

Yet here I was, sitting on my cold plastic chair in front of my metal desk, both my hands clenching my hair and my eyes staring at the floor plan in front of me. Our project was to design pre-fabricated houses, using modular units that could be transported around the country like shipping containers. I had started off with the right ideas but somewhere along the process I cooled off and was stuck.

I closed my eyes for a second and tried to envision what I wanted in this house. I wanted rooms to be interchangeable. I wanted the design to be flexible enough to be changed into several different floor plans using the same modular units. I wanted a simple design that worked. The pieces were there but I needed to take it to the next level.

That's where Mr. S should have come in. He was my instructor, and right now I really needed him to instruct me on what to do next, or at the very least, what to think of next. I opened my eyes and looked at the clock. I had about five more minutes before I had to show Mr. S what I had so far and receive critique from him. I put down my pencil and walked around the studio to peek at other people's projects. We all had vastly different projects and it was hard for me to extract the ideas out of my peers' projects and somehow implement it in mine. I took a stroll through the studio before realizing it was my turn to talk to the professor. I ran back to my desk and gathered all my sketches and brought it in front of the teacher.

Our studio class met twice a week, and during the session we would spend part of it working on our projects, occasionally getting an informational lecture by a guest speaker, and showing our work to the instructor to be critiqued and get new information to hopefully guide us towards the right direction.

This was just another one of those instructor critiques, but I was desperate for help. I needed some sort of jumpstart to my design, and I looked to Mr. S for help.

"So let's see what you have," he said in his soft voice.

I laid out all my sketches and took him through the narrative of my design. I told him my intentions, and showed him how I iterated it through my floor plans. I showed him how it changed from the last week and then just flat out told him I was stuck. After about five straight minutes of my voice going into his ears, I stopped talking and looked at him, trying to put on my best "help me" look without looking too desperate. I was hoping he could look at my face and see the bags under my eyes showing that I had worked hard on coming up with something, and then maybe feel a little pity for me and show me some guidance.

He didn't quite look up from my drawings. He just stared at it for another minute before finally saying something. "So what's next?"

My mind went blank. I think it was more from confusion than anything else. *Was he asking me what I wanted to do next with the design? Didn't I just tell him I was stuck?*

"Well," I stammered, "I tried to design the modules so that they can be rearranged in different ways, and it offers great flexibility with the same design. But I don't know where to go from here." I ended it with a tone that implied that I needed his help. I wanted him to hear that I had hit a wall and I needed some sort of guidance from him.

"Okay I see what you did, but you need to do more work on it. You have to keep working at the design. I don't see that you've done much more than what you showed me last week."

Great, I thought, another one of his vague sentences that lead nowhere. I've had enough of this sidestepping. "Okay, but I already did the work and I'm still stuck.

Can you just show me what kind of things I could be working on or any advice you may have?" I didn't want to cross the line and be rude. I still respected that student-teacher relationship and wanted to make sure that I remained respectful. But I still needed to extract the help from him.

"Well for starters, why is this bathroom here? You need to find a better place for it. And this bedroom seems too small." Internally I rolled my eyes at him. I could feel my heart pump faster as I tried to control my frustration. Why doesn't he understand that I need more from him than just vague instructions and critiques. I wanted in depth; I wanted knowledge. I was a sponge ready to soak up his wisdom and he left me dry.

It was obvious that I wasn't going to get much more out of him, and he looked at me with the expression that said "well, what are you waiting for?" So I gathered all my drawings and walked back dejectedly to my desk. So much for inspiration. I decided to walk around again and clear my head and hopefully talk to my other classmates to see what they were doing with their projects.

After about ten minutes, I realized that one of the better students in our class was having his critique session with Mr. S, so I decided to sit nearby and observe their conversation. The session began the same way mine did: the student, Mike, talked about his design, where he was last week and how he tried to improve on it for this week, and finally ended with asking what the instructor thought.

I smirked as I heard the professor give his usual vague response, and questioning why certain rooms were designed the way they were. But Mike did something different in response. He told Mr. S that he didn't think he did anything wrong. He told him that the bedrooms were letting in light that would amplify the natural daylight coming into the house. Moreover, the kitchen was oriented in a way that would allow social interaction between the street and the residents, but also offer a level of privacy should the residents be more introverted. The instructor nodded his

head in understanding, and kept silent for a bit. And then he asked another question and Mike spent a couple of minutes talking about why he did certain things. Their conversation then segued into other architects that may have done certain things and how it may or may not have been successful, and Mr. S recommended he look at social interactions a different way and see whether that would have any impact on the design.

I sat there like a fly on the wall, partly shocked that the teacher was able to carry on this in-depth discussion and partly annoyed that I did not get the same treatment. Both Mike and I approached the teacher the same way, but he refused to back down from his design ideas, whereas I presented myself like an open book and desperately sought help.

I walked away disgusted. I wasn't even sure if I was mad at myself or the teacher. I wanted to be more like Mike, because he was able to stand up for what he did and just let the teacher judge it for what it is. I wanted to be the designer that he was, but I needed more help and guidance to reach that level. I thought that's what the teacher was for. What was I missing? Why was I such a bad student in studio?

Reflection

I was frustrated by my lack of results. Not just by my identity or the system, but the fact that I wasn't getting the same recognition. In college, I realized towards the end that the most valuable thing you can develop is the relationships with different professors throughout your educational career. I thought that I could succeed in college if I just worked hard and got good grades. But then when I started the process of applying to grad school, I was told that grades were number three on the list of things that the admissions jury would look at. Recommendation letters carried a lot of weight, and it threw me into a panic. No one had talked about how little grades would count even though it was a criteria for many things in college (including GPA and making the Dean's List). So it became an interesting task for me to go back and talk to my previous

professors to ask for recommendation letters. Some professors I was content to learn from but never quite connected to them on a level that made me want to get a recommendation letter from them. I realized at that point how I wished I had done things differently in college.

Some of my classmates who were applying to the same program were successful in getting letters of recommendation. Even though their grades were low in many of their classes, they were able to focus their efforts on the classes that mattered more when getting into graduate school. This was a frustration on my part because I was trying to achieve a sense of holistic success, which was dictated by my upbringing and cultural attitudes. It didn't make sense to me to sacrifice an elective here and there for the sake of doing well in one major class. But at the end of the day this was the tactic I should have employed all along.

And throughout the journey, I was content on having professors be professors without realizing that attempting to create a relationship with them would pay dividends later.

I suppose that's when I really started asking whether who I was would lead to success or more frustrations down the road. It was clear that I needed to emulate my more successful classmates without compromising my own values.

Friends

Sticking Together

My friends all shared similar values, and had futures that reflected my ambitions. We all were passionate about our families. Back in high school I was sort of forced into my friendships. I was in a class of six people and having to see the same people every day bonded you. In college, there were so many people that I interacted with on a daily basis. I felt like I finally had the freedom to pick and choose my friends. I must have met hundreds of people before I found a handful of people that I respected and admired.

The few that I became great friends with had very similar backgrounds as I did. That's not to say that they were Asian and went to private school. One of my closest friends in college went to high school in a small town in Pennsylvania and traveled thousands of miles to come to college. Another close friend of mine lived 20 miles from college and lived with his wife. Yet another friend of mine lived five minutes away from campus and lived with his parents.

We all had different paths and experiences, yet we shared the same values, and it was apparent in our discussions about life and people. We were all humble in the sense that we knew not to boast about our accomplishments, though amongst the four of us we had done great things. We all had a dedication and loyalty towards our family. We all attributed our successes to the support and caring that our parents and family members showed us. We all wanted to succeed and shared a desire to do our best.

More than that, we all helped each other. We recognized the need for emotional and mental support throughout our architecture degree and we somehow found comfort in each other. We provided honest feedback to each other when we needed help with our designs.

My friend S and I both lived at home with our parents. It wasn't because we were inadequate by ourselves or incapable of living on our own, but it just made more

sense financially. We never really talked about it, but we both knew the struggles of having to be accountable to someone at home anytime we went out with friends till late at night. We also shared the same experience with having to share cars with our household and the balancing act that is a result of that. This seemed to result in both of us being extremely generous with giving rides to our friends and being willing to drive places. Anytime our friends would want to go out, both of us would volunteer to drive people.

My friend D and I had similar values related to life. We both viewed life as a journey that neither of us really knew what the outcome was, and we both had a nonchalant view of architecture as a career and major. Through this we were able to open up discussions about everything and it turned out we shared more than just that. We also were very reserved people who believed that our work should speak for itself. We did not seek recognition yet we did everything to the best of our abilities. We also were very observant and kept low profiles in large group situations. When our class would hang out, instead of me just watching everyone and listening to what they had to say, I would have him to talk to and observe with me.

Reflection

It's interesting to think about the ideals we have when going through different stages in our lives. For me, I was always looking for a mentor figure to help me succeed in college. I saw countless movies where I saw students become attached to a particular professor, and through that relationship they were pushed to succeed and learn important life lessons. When it came to reality, I never actually had that type of relationship with any of my professors. Perhaps it was my own fault for being a closed book to most of my instructors. I was not willing to share anything pertaining to my personal life, nor did I trust any of them enough to want to discuss things on that level.

What I resorted to was the relationships I had cultivated between my parents and my peers. I had built some strong friendships in high school that I continuously leaned on when talking about school and classes. We all had been through some hard times in high school together, and we all shared the same values and academic expectations. We used each other as soundboards for motivation, and met up with each other to share our various stories about college life.

I also was fortunate enough to meet individuals in my freshman class that I immediately connected with. One in particular ended up being my best friend in college. We had the same class in the spring semester of my first year and continued having the same classes (mostly by choice) until graduation. We leaned on each other when we were frustrated with school. Since we were in the same academic program, we continuously helped each other by providing notes, advice, and support. Our program required a lot of all-nighters and long weekends and we made sure that we helped each other get through it. We also found that we complemented each other, because our varied background and skills made for an effective combination in our program. When school became really tough and one of us would contemplate switching majors, we pulled each other back and helped each other get through it. Having that emotional support with someone who shared the front lines with me was important and I believe crucial to the success I had in my program.

My family was also important in my journey. Though they took a mostly hands-off approach in my college education, they were there for me when I was struggling through certain classes. They listened to my complaints and provided feedback on how to overcome the obstacles. During the weeks where I was fully immersed in a final project, they gave me the support I needed to complete it. Whether I needed an extra hand putting an architectural model together, or just uninterrupted time to complete things, they respected my wishes and trusted I was doing the right thing.

Though I did not find the mentor-figure in college, the combination of friends and family was a potent and effective support group for me. Perhaps it speaks to my personality that I found comfort in friends and family. Maybe it's that I was able to build a better rapport when I felt that the relationship was a two-way street and I could divulge my personal details. It's also because I only can feel that support when the other person can see me and my weaknesses. I still do not feel comfortable showing professors my weaknesses, either out of pride or out of survival. But with friends and family, I don't mind showing that side of me.

Graduation

Success Without Celebration

I could feel the sweat drops on the back of my neck. My head was itchy from my cap. I was starting to lose my patience. This is the situation I volunteered for, but I knew it would pay off. Because I do freelance photography, I took the initiative to coordinate a class photo on the day of our graduation. We wanted something to remember each other by after four years of grueling, intense architecture classes. It was true that going through the pain and stress of all-nighters and over-caffeinating had bonded us past the normal limits of friendship. So there I was, on graduation day, donning a maroon graduation cap and gown and attempting to take a picture of our class of 50 people. I was trying to attach my camera to my tripod while a hundred pairs of eyes were watching me. The location we chose was on the ramp in front of the arena where we were graduating, and it was obvious that we had clogged up a pedestrian path. So now I had family members watching me along with my classmates. I looked up to see how everyone was doing. "At least they're lined up properly," I thought. They had arranged themselves in two neat rows and were just joking around with each other while waiting for me.

I wished I could join in their camaraderie. As much as trying to coordinate this photo shoot spoiled my mood, I also held some negative feelings about graduation. In particular, I felt short-changed by the program. I lost sight of my goal somewhere in my senior year and forgot why I got into architecture in the first place. It wasn't quite a feeling of regret, but I knew my efforts would have been better used somewhere else.

I finally got my camera set up and took a couple test shots. "Okay everyone!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. My vocal cords were not made to be loud, especially in public places. "Let's get lined up and we're going to take a few pictures! First one is just formal, then we can do some with fun poses." I found a classmate's boyfriend standing

nearby and gave him the remote that triggered my camera. I told him to just tell us when he was taking the picture and just click it. I trusted him. I had seen him operate a professional camera before.

I ran towards my classmates and jumped in the second row. I straightened my cap and took a deep breath. I watched the guy operating the camera as he gave us the signal. *Smile*, I told myself. Even if I wasn't feeling jovial, I knew the importance of looking happy in photographs. I put on my best fake smile and then found myself laughing. Graduation was supposed to be a sense of accomplishment, but this just felt like someone played a joke on me.

An hour later, I was sitting inside the arena next to my friends. My brothers; my amigos who survived the same stresses I did. The dean had started calling students to the stage and was reading their names. My thoughts again wandered back to architecture. To the naïve me four years ago that believed he could change the world through architecture. I desperately wanted to succeed but somehow fell off the tracks somewhere. Sure, I had the honor cords around my neck to show that my GPA was really high but that was more of a consolation prize for me more than anything. The grades were certainly an accomplishment but I did not feel comforted by it. I thought that when I got to this point in time, I would feel like an architect, a designer ready to take on all the challenges offered up to him. But all I learned in the four years of college was about how real life ate people like me up. If I kept moving along in life full of ideals, I'd find myself extremely disappointed and depressed about everything.

Our row was called up and we made our way towards the stage. "This is the moment that we had worked so hard towards," I told myself. Each step towards that stage represented a late night spent in the studio drawing sketches and making models. Late nights that resulted in nervous breakdowns and weeks of sickness. The vicious cycle that I somehow endured and convinced myself was worth it for this moment.

I made my way up to the podium and handed the announcer the slip of paper with my name. Then cringed as he botched the pronunciation of it. I walked confidently towards the dean and shook his hand, my face showing emotions of happiness and relief, and accepted the diploma holder from him. I turned towards the crowd and felt like there should have been fireworks at this point. But no, I was just another student graduating from another college with another degree. Fine, I can accept that. I'm just yet another one of the masses still fighting to be recognized for my hard work and uniqueness. Somehow the diploma cover in my hands didn't feel like four years of blood (literally), sweat (definitely), and tears (surely).

I walked back to my seat nonchalantly and waited patiently while the other 600 students from the other majors were called on stage. Each time someone was called, I tried to see how much happiness shone in his or her eyes. Were they really that excited? Or were they also feeling the conflict of emotions within that I was feeling?

When the last name was called two hours later, and after the dean made his final remarks about the future and clichéd quips about being responsible for the world, we all started walking out of the arena. We exited through the back, and had to walk a ramp upwards towards the ground level. It was almost like a metaphorical climb towards success but I wasn't able to appreciate the symbolism.

As I neared the exit outdoors, I felt the cool desert night air flow over my face and I closed my eyes for a brief second, trying to shed all the negative feelings off of me. I opened my eyes to the darkness of the sky and realized that the world still looked the same. I was expecting everything to look a lot different once I actually had my diploma like it was some sort of talisman that made you powerful. But no, it was all the same, but now I was four years older. I sighed. I was just ready to take on the next challenge and hopefully find a sense of accomplishment through that. On to the next one.

Reflection

Being Asian has played a strong role in my educational career. Though it is strongly rooted in my parents, the values originate from my culture. Education is a huge part of the society in Asia. Kids go through a rigorous secondary educational system in hopes of being accepted into a good university. Children go to school during the day, and at night and weekends they attend tutoring sessions. There are national standardized exams that can determine the fate of a student. Good scores mean higher potential for scholarships and placement at overseas universities. Lower scores were not desired. Though I grew up in the United States, I saw this in the lives of my cousins during the times that I visited. My aunts and uncles would always be worried about their children's achievement scores and would help support their children's future ambitions. When I would spend my summer holiday there, my time with my cousins had to fit in between their constant tutoring sessions and extra study sessions. When scores for national exams came out, the top scorers would be interviewed on national television. I had the opportunity to watch one of my cousins be on the news as they asked her what helped her succeed and what advice she would give to aspiring students. Her carefully chosen words paid respect to the support of her parents and their commitment towards her success, and her advice echoed my own values: you have to work hard and you will get what you want.

It's easy to get caught up in the distractions of life, especially as a teenager growing up in the United States. I found myself looking to have fun instead of focusing on my studies, especially during my high school years. But my parents reminded me that education came first. My parents had always told me that they brought the family to the United States so that we would have better access to the education here. They wanted to ensure that they gave me the best possible chance at getting a degree. When relatives asked if and when we were coming back to Asia, my parents would politely

reply by saying that they had to wait till my brother and I finished college first. I grew up with the notion that the entire purpose of being in the U.S. was to get an education.

It was not lost on me then, that getting a degree was a necessary milestone in my life. I had to finish high school, finish college, get a job, and then proceed to the next steps in life.

I felt like I had a duty to my parents to succeed in school so that they would have something to share amongst my relatives. In order for me to succeed, I needed to do my absolute best in my studies.

Getting There

The Business World

"I hope everyone is wearing a suit," I thought as I walked to the business building. I was walking slowly, as if I that would somehow slow down my heart beat and stop me from sweating. I was nervous.

Being who I was, I didn't want to display that anxiety when I walked in the classroom. There were only about 35 people in there, in a 60 person capacity room. They all looked older. The academic advisor had told me that the average age of my class was 30 years old. That made me eight years younger than them. Gulp. That's eight years of experience, knowledge, and wisdom that I would have to catch up to.

I saw that there were seats in the back row so I made a beeline straight towards the back and set my backpack down. From this position I would be able to see everyone. It was relatively quiet in the classroom. I was assuming that we were all a little bit nervous. I didn't recognize any faces so I just settled down into my chair and pulled out my laptop. I checked the clock: 30 minutes left till class started.

I went online and checked my email and my Facebook, looking at what my friends were doing in their lives. I was in a classroom at 6 pm on a Tuesday night. Others were out having dinner, exercising, or just doing things with friends. Oh well, I thought. This was my choice and I am excited about this.

To this day I still laugh about how I ended up in the program. In my second to last semester, I had received an email about this new graduate program the school of business was piloting, a Master's of Science in Commerce that targeted undergraduates with no work experience. It was perfect for me. Four years of architecture had killed my drive and my passion for design, and I was burnt out. I knew I could not go on and pursue the career and life of an architect. My parents had been witness to the slow degradation of my happiness and energy while doing the architecture program so they

supported whatever decision I wanted to make. In our senior year of college, everyone was talking about going to do their Master's of Architecture and I detested the idea.

Another two years of sleeplessness, unhealthy schedules, and being pushed to my absolute limits? No thank you. I would rather spend that time letting my body recover from the trauma it endured. I was also looking around at other graduate programs that I could enroll in that would set me up for a job after graduating. I looked at a program called Arts Media and Engineering but I felt like I did not have the right qualifications for it. I looked at other liberal arts graduate programs but none of them seemed right.

So the Master's of Science in Commerce seemed to fit well into my life plan. I would do the one-year program, pick up the necessary business skills and then find a job in a big company. It seemed simple enough, and definitely more appealing than spending two more years torturing myself in architecture.

I went to one of their info sessions; you know, the ones where they try to sell you on the program and its values and feed you free pizza so you make that positive emotional connection. But in addition to seeing what the program was about, I was also able to see my fellow applicants. Most of them seemed like average students, but there was one person there who I felt threatened by. She seemed to ask the right questions and seemed highly motivated. I was trying to sink into my seat and just observe everyone else, but she seemed to want to take over the room with her personality and her drive. I knew right then and there that the only person I had to beat in the application pool was this girl.

After submitting the application in January, I waited. I tried my best to just let the system work itself out while I focused on my last semester. It seemed to work until one day I received a text from my friend who worked in the business school. I had told

her I was applying to the program and had asked her for advice. But I was not expecting the news she was about to give me.

“Did you hear anything about your graduate application?” she wrote without any weight or drama. I replied that I did not, to which she replied, “I heard that they’re canceling the program.” My heart sank. I was in my room at the time and just laid down on the bed for a moment to think. I texted her back, “No I haven’t heard anything. Should I call someone?” She told me that she’d try to find out more information and let me know. CRAP, I thought. This was my one and only chance at graduate school and I was watching it go away, and I had no control of it.

I processed it in my mind a couple more times and then I had to go back to work on my architecture project. It wasn’t till a couple days later that I received a call from the school of business. “Is Zaf Kam there?” an official but pleasant sounding woman asked. “Yes this is him.” I replied cautiously. I was ready for them to tell me the bad news.

“Hi, this is Stephanie and I’m calling from the School of Business. I wanted to see when you were available to come in to talk about your options regarding the Master’s of Science in Commerce.” This sounded weird at the time, but I gave her a time I was available and agreed to come in then.

Fast forward to that day, and I was sitting nervously in the lobby of the School of Business. I was dressed in my suit, just in case. It seemed like I made the right decision because the two other guys in the lobby were also dressed in suits. “Was I competing with them now?” I had no idea why they were there.

Ten minutes later I was greeted by Robert Gray and invited into his office. I recognized him as one of the presenters at the info session I had attended earlier. “Thanks for coming,” he began. He then went into a long explanation about the purpose of the Master’s of Science in Commerce and how the idea came about. Finally he sighed

and said, "unfortunately, we are going to be discontinuing the program at this time." I knew it. This was it. I felt silly in my suit at that time. I was trying to impress people but now it seemed useless. "That being said," he continued, "you were one of our top applicants, and we want to make sure we are able to retain you in our program. As a result, we want you to consider being part of our Evening MBA program."

I looked at him quizzically. Did he just tell me I could go into the MBA program? This had been a dream of mine for the longest time, but I knew that I couldn't apply for it until I had at least 3 years of work experience. I was hoping to pursue it sometime in the future, but apparently the future was now.

"Just take the time to consider it, and let me know as soon as possible. This is not a guarantee that you would be in the class, but I will make sure that you are displayed in a good light to the application committee."

My insides all jumped for joy. I took this story home to my parents and asked what they thought. It seemed too good to be true and I wanted someone else to digest this news. My dad thought it was a no-brainer. He had always wanted me to pursue my MBA and told me to go for it. My mom was also supportive but asked me to talk to others about it and think about it for a little while longer.

A week later, I called Robert Gray and told him that I wanted to be considered for the MBA program. He sounded excited and told me to send him my resume. After sending my resume, I waited. This time I was more nervous than before. I was actually really excited about getting the opportunity to pursue one of my dreams.

It wasn't until the middle of April that I heard anything back. I was sitting with one of my friends before class started. Suddenly I got a phone call that I recognized was from the school of business. I hurriedly ran outside of the classroom to find some quiet and took the call.

"Hello, I'm looking for Zaf Kam," a pleasant sounding lady asked.

"Yes this is him." Somehow I felt like this was déjà vu. "Zaf! I have some good news for you. I would like to extend an invitation for you to be part of our Evening MBA program starting in the Fall." I think I physically jumped in the air at this point. Barely able to contain my excitement, I somehow thanked her for the opportunity and accepted the invitation.

After the phone call ended, I ran back to my friend with the biggest smile on my face. I raised my hand up calling for a high five, and he returned the gesture. "YOU GOT IT!?!!" he asked excitedly. I jumped in the air again and screamed "YES!"

Reflection

I should have broken out of my shell sooner. I would have adopted more of my current traits. I learned a lot through my job as a peer success coach and my experience in the business school. I learned about giving feedback as an authority figure as a success coach. I learned how to pull from experience and share it with people to take as advice. From business school, I learned to toot my own horn without being insincere and arrogant. I learned about how to make small talk and carry conversations with people. I wish that I had learned these traits sooner so I could develop the relationships I needed to build my network. I definitely would not have compromised my values, because those things are what brought me my success today, but I definitely wish I could have begun the process of finding that right balance sooner.

If anything, I've learned through trial and error. With my job as a success coach, I tried to learn how to be more congenial, but oftentimes I would default to just being professional at the workplace. This was appreciated by my boss, but my coworkers felt I was too distant and I was never really able to develop a relationship with some of them. I think this was the same case with my networks. I was so concerned with maintaining a professional relationship that I forgot to make that human connection with them.

Today, I am working on making that connection with individuals. I find that common ground and work that point to develop a congenial relationship in the workplace. And within my professional network I try to do the same thing. I give a little information about myself in order to humanize myself, and remember details that they tell me. I wish I had done this earlier in my college career.

That Asian Woman

One Perseveres No Matter What

I kept quiet in my first MBA class. I was surrounded by students who were all at least three years older than me and I felt intimidated. Our class was about organizational behavior and everyone shared their experience of working in a full time job. I had no such experience and was just sitting there trying to absorb everything. The professor was talking about why there was group conflict and what were the causes of it. I looked around the room to see who would be the first to raise their hand. There was a woman from China sitting in the second row who was dressed up professionally who eagerly raised her hand to answer the question. Her name tag said that her name was Crystal Xi.

The professor called on her and she stood up. She said something in such a heavy accent that all of us were confused. I could tell that even the professor did not quite catch what she was saying and asked her to repeat it. In broken English she said something about people being selfish. The class, finally comprehending what she had said, laughed in agreement. Somehow her strong accent made her simplistic answer hilarious. She looked a little hurt and sat down. I felt bad for her. I felt like I was going against the odds by being the youngest person in here and having no work experience. But at least I could speak English fluently and had no accent. I internally applauded her for her bravery and forwardness.

The professor chuckled and agreed that her answer was correct, but it wasn't the answer he was looking for. He then looked around the room to see what else people had to say. Now that the ice had been broken, people raised their hands. Just as the professor was about to call on another person, Crystal stood up again and offered another answer. "Also...because...people try to do....different things," she spurted out loud. The professor looked at her, a little annoyed that she interrupted his class and

thanked her for the answer. He then went back to the other student and asked for his answer. Crystal then sat back down.

We were all trying to hold in our laughter at this point, and I was trying to understand what her motive was. It seemed like she was trying to stand out in the class, perhaps trying to get ahead as much as possible, but she was doing it in a way that was inappropriate in this setting. I shared her sentiment of wanting to succeed in this program, but my introverted self wanted me to just sit there and listen to what others had to say instead.

Crystal kept doing this the entire class. For every question asked, she offered an answer, and if it were not satisfactory she would offer a second, third or fourth answer. She reached a point where the teacher had to ignore her voice and continue on teaching and getting answers from other students.

I was both annoyed and envious at the same time. I was annoyed that she kept interrupting, and let her own personal agenda get in the way of the collective agenda. We were all here to learn and yet she was here to prove that she was better. It was the cutthroat mentality that I so despised in classrooms. But I also was envious that she had the courage to do what she needed to do. She had no fear of being judged or being critiqued. She knew what she wanted to do and did it. Would I ever want to be her? No. I'm not aiming to be someone who appeared as rude and inconsiderate. But I did want to reach a point where I could be more assertive and forward. That was what I needed to work towards.

Reflection

From an early age I was already taught that I had to achieve the highest grades possible in school. When I got test grades back, my parents would ask if it was the highest, or why it wasn't higher. Earlier in my life, I was stressed out about always needing to do better than what I did. But it did set the foundation for my self-set high

expectations in college. In my first college course, I not only did my best to get 100% on my exams, but I made sure to take advantage of all the extra credit opportunities possible. I ended up with a grade of 104% due to my perseverance.

Throughout my academic career, I was also supported and pushed by my parents. They always asked me whether I felt like I had done my best, and if there was anything I could have done any better. During the times that I felt like I did enough to pass, they would always tell me to make sure I did more than pass. Their support allowed me to think with a motivated and Type-A mentality. At the same time, they made sure they let me do things that expanded my perspective and understanding of the world through traveling, concerts and volunteer opportunities.

I also found success through prioritizing and time management. These are skills every college student struggles with, and it was no easy task for me either. It became a challenge to figure out how to divide all the time I had between homework and things that I wanted to do for fun. There were weeks where I would be torn between decisions and remained idle which was very counter productive. But one thing that kept me going was studying how more successful classmates did things and emulated them.

In my junior year of college, I got a job as a success coach. The job responsibilities entailed being a peer mentor for freshman students and helping them transition between the high school and college life. We went through rigorous training on the different techniques and methods that we could utilize to ensure academic success. Through learning the different tools and techniques, I was exposed to multiple methods of improving my own time management and study skills. The more I learned about how to do my job better, the more I was able to reflect on my own shortcomings and improve on it. Being a success coach was a key milestone for my academic career.

The underlying theme for my success is the sense of continuous self-improvement. I always take the time to enjoy my accomplishments, but am always

thinking about how to do it better the next time. Without this sense of self-correction, all the lessons learned from parents and success coaching would be for naught.

It also pushes me harder when I am able to learn about more successful individuals (be it friends, family, or strangers) and realize that I have a long ways to go. There were times when always trying to improve became a destructive trait. I found myself being very self-critical and blind to my successes. But with a good balance between self-admiration and self-criticism, I think I have been able to motivate and push myself to be successful.

NAAAP*The Platform, the Resources, the Professionalism*

I was three months into my MBA program and I was realizing that I had a long way to go before I was the same level as my older, more experienced classmates. Most of them had worked for years at companies, and through that time they picked up leadership skills, professional speaking abilities, and a better understanding of how organizations worked. My current job was a part-time gig and was not giving me enough opportunities to be the leader that I wanted to be. I desperately wanted to get better and learn to be more like my classmates.

It was no coincidence then that I got heavily involved in an organization called the National Association of Asian American Professionals. They were exactly what I was looking for. I immediately joined their marketing committee as a photographer, utilizing my skills with a camera and hoping to contribute positively to the organization. I started going to monthly meetings where there were agendas and minutes and task items. I was taking on responsibility and volunteering to do some of the graphic design work.

Throughout this time I was also observing how everyone acted at meetings. There was the president of the organization whose personality seemed to light up the room and was always the most energetic person at the table. Even when she was exhausted from the day's work, she used her smiles and laughter to get everyone engaged. There was the chair of the marketing committee who was more of a quiet leader. He had the meeting minutes and listened patiently to everyone's contributions and then offered his own take and made the decisions. He was cool and collected, but he lacked charisma. There was the chairman of the board of the directors, who spoke with authority but always with a smile. He would ask people's opinions then take a second to digest it. He then would either approve of their opinions or offer a counter argument. Whenever he spoke, everyone listened. He had commanded respect.

I was in awe of all these leadership styles and was taking mental notes, trying to figure out how I would do it. I was watching with a student's eye and just wished that somehow I could test drive my own leadership skills.

Three months later, I found my opportunity. The previous chair of the marketing committee had to step down for personal reasons and now we were lacking a commander. I didn't think about taking on that role until the president asked me how I felt about being the chair. It was certainly a lot of responsibility, and I already had a full plate with my school and work. But something inside me said that I could do it. That if I just committed to something, I would find the time and energy to do it. So I agreed, and suddenly I was the one leading meetings and coordinating marketing efforts with the organization.

I got to put into practice everything I learned about a leader: how to motivate people, how to delegate properly, how to settle conflicts, how to be assertive. With each passing week I became more comfortable with my role and with the coaching of the president; I was suddenly speaking out at meetings and making decisions on the spot, something I was unable to do before. I joined a Toastmaster's club so that I could practice my public speaking skills. I was taking phone calls everyday from various members of the leadership team wanting to talk to me about marketing and various projects we had to complete. I felt responsible, respected, and important. I was no longer just the MBA student with no experience or the employee who just did his job. I was now handling mini-crises, dealing with multiple priorities and being a leader. This was what I needed.

Researcher's Notes

Zaf in His Own Words

Zaf was brought up Asian but grew up American. Somehow this intersection of identities played out in Zaf's identity development during his college years. On one hand Zaf was accustomed to the values and cultural norms of the East; respect for elders, high regard for knowledge and hard work. However as he became a member of the mainstream society, his values that shaped his identity created areas of unsettling tension.

Zaf realized that in order to fully participate within the college environment, he had to take on new values that inadvertently would alter his identity. Towards the end of Zaf's college life, Zaf was able to function within a creatively designed, I-Identity (institutional), which according to Gee is an identity that supports the position and roles in which they are recognized.

Had Zaf remained in his N-Identity, a naturally endowed identity of being Asian, his character of being submissive, quiet and particularly observant would not have supported his progress. Zaf, in recognition of the need to strengthen his I-Identity, while retaining some of the values that came with his N-Identity, managed to balance both.

Zaf's biggest challenge was dealing with identity. He was familiar with the American classroom discourse and since he was not brought up in Asia there were no cultural models that would have caused confusion. Although his familiarity with the American cultural model was an asset, nonetheless, the role of identity was still a major point of contention for him. Zaf's understanding of how identity played a major role in college helped him with cultivating values that ultimately supported his growth and successful participation in his environment.

Zaf in his own words...

As a child with Asian parents, I was taught to work hard. It's not just the clichéd advice that every parent attempts to bestow on their sons and daughters, but it really was a way of life for me, especially concerning my academics. In the third grade I remember getting 90%-95% on a math test, and my parents would ask me whether I got the highest grade or not. Their persistence was not about asking whether I was the

smartest in the class. They wanted me to realize that the person with the highest score was the person who worked the hardest.

From an early age, I had learned that my parents relocated to America so that my brother and I would get more educational opportunities. Education not only became essential to my future, but it was the entire reason we were here. It was hard to not feel the weight of that and the sacrifice my parents were making for my sake.

With those two ideas in mind, I went through elementary and middle school with a determination to finish first in class. It bred competitiveness and perfectionism within me and pushed me to assert my independence and strength academically. However, once I started high school, I began to realize that colleges wanted more than your A+ student. Good grades were certainly a qualification, but they wanted a well-rounded individual. I sought out clubs and extra-curricular activities that I was interested in and spent more time volunteering. Though initially I pursued these activities in an effort to improve my chances of getting into college, I found myself learning and developing important skills while participating in these clubs.

I started my school's first yearbook and learned about managing a project, taking photos, and publishing a book. There were several obstacles and learning moments during the process, but through it all my parents were there. They were there to support my activities, but they also pushed me to do better. There were moments where I wanted to do just "good enough" and they would question my intentions. What is the point of "good enough" when you can do better with your best effort? Their words would make sense afterwards, but the constant pressure to do better were tough moments.

Those moments proved to be building blocks for my future endeavors. I carried the mentality of always trying to do your best with any project in college. It not only gave me a sense of accomplishment with every task that I completed, but also gave me

a motivation to continually do better at every opportunity I got, even when I seem to be doing "good enough."

I had a class in my first college semester that had 500 students. Going from a small class of six people in high school to this gargantuan lecture certainly had an effect on me. I realized that paying attention took a little more effort and learning material required more participation and work from me. By mid-semester, I had already gotten A's on my midterm and my assignments. There was extra credit given in class any time you asked a meaningful question or contributed to the discussion. I told my parents I was doing well in that class, but they told me that I needed to pursue the extra credit. Grudgingly, I obliged.

Before every class period, I would write down questions that I thought might be appreciated by the professor and ask them throughout the class. I accumulated a lot of extra credit points that eventually led me to realize I needed only a 75% on the final to get an A for the course. However, I was not brought up to settle for "good enough", so I studied intensely for the final and received a final grade of A+.

At the risk of sounding like a stereotypical Asian family, my parents really emphasized the importance of education in my life. In my home country, most people within my circle of extended family and friends had gone through grade school, gone to college (some of them overseas), and then got a job immediately after graduation. It was an accepted cycle of life and my parents were adamant about instilling the same rigor and standards in me. Though there were the usual mantras of "working hard" and "getting A+", they also instilled in me the significance of education as an ideology. A college degree opens doors, and it shows the general public that you are educated and more than competent. They taught me that it was imperative for my livelihood.

I am not just the child of Asian parents that moved to America. I am the child of a part of the world that truly believes that the key to the future is through school, and to that end I am able to use my inspiration to succeed.

Researcher's Notes

Rina's Recollections

Rina was able to share with me stories of her interactions with Zaf over the span of their college career. I, too, am a mother, and as I listened to her narrations of how life as college students brought certain parallel experiences between her and Zaf, I sensed how the additional responsibility of her role as a mother weighed heavily on her as she witnessed some of Zaf's struggles. On one hand, Rina was the only person in the home who could understand the demands of college, but her motherly instincts had to step in when situations became too overwhelming for Zaf. As much as she wanted to be supportive of Zaf's aspirations, she had to be there to offer wisdom; that responsibility, was never taken lightly.

Rina shares some of her stories...

ZAF & RINA

We're Almost There

Every Journey Brings Forth a Learning

The final semester and it will soon be over. Even though the countdown has not actually begun, we sense the end looming in plain sight. As the last leg of this long laborious journey fast approaches for Zaf and I who have shouldered the weight of college work, the seconds of each minute of each hour seem to take their time, ticking by painfully slow.

We have had our fair share of commitment, perseverance and toil: the sleepless nights, the rhythmic typing on our laptop keyboards, the mechanical printing of pages upon pages of written work on the home computer and the intense concentration of eyes on printed words. Soon all this will be a mere memory of the past, but it is a past that has touched us as individuals in too many ways.

In bits of conversations with friends and family, both Zaf and I are often caught expressing our subdued excitement about finishing up. We seem eager, but we are realistic of the work still ahead of us. For me it was the dissertation writing, a monstrous task that appeared to be staring at me, uncompromisingly. Our kind listeners smile and nod in agreement. We have been kept at a distance for too long; college consumed our lives and our friends seemed to understand the overwhelming fatigue.

Sometimes as I drive Zaf to work in the morning, I see his exhausted expression as he stares blankly at the traffic in front of us. His mind is somewhere else and I am cautious about interrupting his thoughts. But on certain mornings when I do not sense too much tension in him, I gently offer my motherly wisdom, "It's almost ending Zaf, hang in there, just a few more months and we will be done." Sometimes he nods, but more often than not I get no reaction. My words do not seem to pacify that restlessness

that stirs within him. Yes, it will all be over, but then there is the worry of what lays ahead - an uncertain future after six years of education.

Life for us as a family has been solely centered on school. Over the winter break we were treated by a visit from my brother, hailing thousands of miles from home. His presence and company reminded us of our longing to go back to our corner of Southeast Asia and visit family again. It's been several years since we were there and we miss the place, the people and the culture. But even with the yearning to be in a more familiar surrounding, I am surprised how in my speech, I no longer say, *go back home*. I stop short at *go back* and as I explained to my brother on his recent visit, *going back was still exciting, but coming back to our home in the American Southwest was comforting as well*. I could not believe my own words. My brother looked at me puzzled, his expression denoted an unspoken perplexity questioning when and how my thoughts had shifted and how my allegiance to my home country had altered. He averted his eyes and his silence spoke volumes, probably wondering when America had become my home.

Home is in the American Southwest for us now. We have been living here for almost two decades and America is now *our place*. Going back to Asia is almost like venturing out on an indulgent retreat, to be able to briefly immerse ourselves in a familiar environment where we fit in within a large circle of family and friends, traditions and customs. And when the visit comes to an end, we leave everything dear and familiar behind with a tinge of sadness. But as we travel in the high skies heading back to the U.S. our emotions quickly transform into a calm feeling of reassurance.

The moment our plane touches down at the local airport, that feeling of arriving at our destination takes over and a sense of our real life emerges. America is now where our lives revolve around. We have finally arrived home and feelings of comfort and security settles within us. In America we exist as individuals, always plowing our way through environments to be recognized as unique persons; but we have become

accustomed to such a lifestyle. Here we balance multiple identities, always attempting to make ourselves *fit in*. It hasn't been simple or straightforward but over time we have become acclimatized to existing between two worlds. We are an Asian family living in the Southwest of America and this is now our reality.

Writing Project

Building Confidence

"Hey Zaf, do you have some free time tonight?" I asked Zaf at the dinner table.

"Sure," Zaf replied. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Well, I have this final paper that I need to present in class tomorrow and I want you to listen to me read and maybe offer some suggestions. You can also help me with the enunciation of certain words, in case I don't sound American enough," I replied.

"Sure, I'll listen to you but why are you so worried about your enunciation. Your English is fine Mommy. Just be yourself," Zaf added.

"Well, I just want to make sure that I'm not mispronouncing words; I know what I'm saying but it bothers me when people give me these expressions like I'm from another planet when I speak or when they say out loud, *what did you say or excuse me...* It's really unpleasant and degrading at times," I said.

"Don't worry too much," Zaf remarked, "You'll do ok."

That night after dinner I sat down with Zaf in the living room. "So what's this about?" he inquired.

"It's for my writing class, we all have to share our work in class tomorrow. I've put together a short narrative and want to practice reading it so that I can do well tomorrow. Who do you think is a good orator; someone who mesmerizes people with their words?" I asked.

Zaf pondered for a while and said. "Maya Angelou, she's really good."

"I've never heard her read before," I added.

Zaf was up in an instant heading towards his room, and as he walked away, he said, "I'll get my laptop, so you can see how she does it."

When Zaf returned and sat down once again next to me, we both hunched over his laptop as he typed *Maya Angelou YouTube*. Within seconds links appeared with

images of the renowned poet. Zaf and I looked through them, and I spotted one that seemed related to my own narrative.

"Let's try that one Zaf," I said excitedly as I pointed to the link that was halfway down the page. "*Maya Angelou introduces Letter to My Daughter*. That's similar to what I have written" I chided, excitement building up in my voice.

Zaf grinned, as if unable to contain how tickled he was over my behavior. I was never the stern mother but I know that it was still strange for him to see a different side to me. Being students allowed us to be on the same level and it never failed to intrigue him how I could at times exhibit characteristics of a typical student, reacting to the most mundane things. I can only guess that he could never quite get used to Mom being in school and as he witnessed a side of my youthful self, it must have been refreshing, but nonetheless bizarre.

As we watched the YouTube clip together, I knew that there was no way I could ever emulate Maya Angelou. She had a unique style of rendition that embodied her stalwart persona; however, her style did not quite resonate with me. Maya Angelou read in a monotone and I wanted to be more dramatic.

"No," I told Zaf, "that won't work for me." I said. "Why don't I read it to you and you tell me what you think."

"Sure," Zaf responded.

With Zaf facing me now, I took the typed paper in hand and started reading. I was no Maya Angelou, but my words were strong and powerful and as I read I heard my voice start to quiver, at times choking up as emotions overwhelmed my senses. I was truly baffled over what was taking place.

This was all new to me; self-revelation is very rare for an Asian. Asians have the tendency to conceal emotions. Exhibits of emotions are associated with being weak and feeble. Asians are trained to always front a strong exterior, and this inculcated

characteristic becomes second nature over time. So even though I knew that in order to do well in this course I was expected to be compelling, nonetheless I was still a little apprehensive in revealing too much about myself. Or so I thought.

When I wrote my paper, I was unaware of how down deep within me I had to reach in order to uncover my thoughts and emotions. And in doing so, I had propelled myself into the direction of evoking deep-seated emotions which had struck a chord. There I was in plain sight exposing my own vulnerability. And it was such an unsettling experience.

Zaf sat quietly listening. At some point, I had to pause for a while to gather my nerves. It was clear that tomorrow's reading in class was going to be a challenge. My worries were not with my enunciation anymore, but with calming my nerves.

As I finished up my reading Zaf caught my eye and reassuring said, "You'll be fine tomorrow Mommy, no worries. Your work is really good."

With a sense of relief that I had successfully concluded my reading, I smiled at Zaf and said, "Thanks. I guess I'll be okay. My worry now is how am I going to read this piece in front of the whole class without becoming emotional. God, this is so strange. Where is all this emotion coming from?" I said, partly talking to myself and partly to Zaf.

"Just do it," Zaf said. "No one will care about how you read it." And with that Zaf said goodnight and made his way to his room.

Worry I did that whole night as I tried to sleep. As I tossed from one side of the bed to the other, I was desperate to try and figure out how to be distant from my work. Somehow I knew that tomorrow's reading would not be within my control; it would be an experience.

Night Owl

Being A Mother

I am awakened in the middle of the night. It has been yet another restless night. Even though I stayed up a little to work on my paper, I could not wait up for Zaf. I turn over and squint my eyes to look at the digital clock across from my bed. The red numbers first appeared blurred as my eyes adjusted to the darkness that surrounded me. My husband, too, seemed restless throughout the night. It's one of those nights again when Zaf had not made it home.

The red numbers on the digital clock indicate that it is 2.30 am; I sense my heart pounding a little faster. I saw Zaf at 8.00 this morning as he headed out to school. He looked exhausted as I bid him goodbye, hoping that I would see him at dinnertime; but even when he had stayed up the previous night, probably catching about three hours of sleep working on his model, he still has not made it back.

I feel a rising anxiety in me, but there is nothing much I can do. I know where he is, at the design studio on campus, still working on his architecture project due the next day. I worry whether he has had any food the whole day; I worry about the dangers lurking in the dark as he walks from campus across University Drive to College Avenue to get to the car at the stadium structure. I worry that he is consumed with exhaustion and may fall asleep at the wheel as he drives home...all these thoughts flood my mind and worry me.

This has been a familiar scenario since his second year in the architecture program, and as a parent, all I can do is be patient and supportive. But I still worry.

I try to turn over and close my eyes, and let my anxieties go, hoping he won't be much longer. With a project due and a presentation to prepare for, I hope he'll get some sleep tonight. *How much longer will he be?* I wonder to myself. At times like these,

being a parent weighs heavily on the heart. Worrying about your child's wellbeing no matter old how he is.

As I finally feel myself slipping into a light sleep, I hear the front door. *Good, he's finally back.* I glanced at the clock again, it's 5.30 am. He barely has two hours to rest before he has to head back to campus. *What a life,* I thought to myself. I don't understand why the program demands such sacrifices from students.

But this is the norm for architecture students. Night owls as well as day humans intertwined, one easing into the other as if it was natural. *Another year and this will be over,* I said to myself.

It was time for me to get up and start my day and in a short time to then awaken Zaf.

RINA

My New World

Excitement is in the Air

Back to college!!! With school supplies painstakingly selected from my favorite back to school store, Target, I had my stash all ready: three ring binders, wide ruled filler paper, spiral notebooks and a set of Pilot gel pens, highly recommended by Zaf. I was definitely ready to be a student again, to now be on the other side of the table where I could sit, listen and learn. I did not foresee any real anxieties since the classroom had been my abode for sixteen years, and I was all geared up for this new enriching experience.

I was a full time student, no longer shouldering the workload of lesson plans, grading and nurturing; and I had hoped to start light but three courses did not seem too overwhelming. So there it was, nine credit hours, three classes, three binders and three scheduled evenings on campus.

The week before, Zaf and I had ventured out in the summer heat to stroll the campus grounds. Zaf was now a veteran, having walked the pavements of campus for one year, so it was only apt that he show me around my new environment.

With a class schedule in hand we headed towards the College of Education building and walked up the two flights of stairs to each of the classrooms that would be my evening dwelling for the next four months. Zaf was insistent that I become familiar with the campus, so we continued after our visit to the classrooms to look at where other prominent spots were. There was the Student Center, the Bookstore, the Library and the parking structure. Quite an extensive map to commit to memory, but it didn't take too long before I knew my way around and noted the landmarks. I was now ready to be launched into this new world.

My very first day as a college student in a graduate program began on a Monday evening in late August. It was still really warm outside on the first day of that fall semester. The sweltering Southwest summer heat followed students as we made our way into the classroom. But the cool air that greeted us at the door of the classroom was such a pleasant and welcoming gesture.

I looked around at the room set up and was surprised at how different it was; there were long rectangular tables that seated five to six students, instead of the usual individual desk that I was accustomed to. Feeling uncertain of where it would be strategic to sit in these new surroundings, I resorted to picking the back table. This way, I thought I could get a better sense of the environment and not be uncomfortable or awkward.

Students started streaming in, one at a time, and I watched as a few Asians made their way in. They too looked around probably in similar contemplation of where to sit, and a few of them did what I did, picked the back table to join me. I smiled and nodded to acknowledge them. As we waited for the professor to make her entrance, I wondered how the course would be taught; this was a new experience, but I was sure everything was going to be fine.

Dr. Gomez made her entrance at 4:40pm. She walked straight to the front of the class, pushed several buttons on the podium console and dimmed the lights. And as she greeted everyone, with her warm reassuring smile, the screen behind her scrolled down slowly, and then came to a halt. On it was a display of a YouTube video clip, all ready to be played. *Wow*, I thought to myself. This is really interesting; I'm going to truly enjoy being in college.

Reflection

From that very first day, my Asian friends congregated at the back table as if it was a normal practice. It was to be that way for the rest of semester. Even in the

different courses that we took, somehow, we would gravitate to find each other and sit together. There was Alex, Yoon, Claire and Chen. Strangely enough, we had never met and knew nothing much about each other, but sitting together seemed like it was the most natural thing to do.

Over the course of the next three semesters, we became good friends: we studied together, met up for coffee from time to time and reminded each other of deadlines and assignments. On our own, we developed a strong support network that took all of us through our Master's program.

For me, all I knew when I waked onto campus the summer of 2007 to register for classes was that I was to become a graduate student. I started college life with a fiery enthusiasm that was fuelled by excitement, realizing that I was finally fulfilling my parents' wishes. My only anxiety about getting into a program had diminished once I got through the application process and was accepted. I knew I missed the college environment and had always wanted to be on a college campus ever since I left my university teaching position in Asia. So being back on campus was a long awaited desire of mine.

It's hard to conceptualize the emotions that ran through me as I proudly walked amongst the droves of students on campus, all the young eager faces that walked in a fast brisk pace, chattering and laughing as if there was no care in the world except to be a student. And when an ex-colleague asked me about my new environment, I explained that being on campus felt exhilarating; it was as if the flow of academia and the physical presence of a goal driven population radiated a sense of power and upliftment.

That first semester became an intense period of adjustment. So much had changed since I was on a college campus as an undergrad; so much seemed familiar, yet at the same time different. On the pavement, around the library and student center,

students were being students, hanging out and conversing, but in the classroom technology had an important role.

Instructors used power point, video clips and held group discussions as if it was second nature. And then there was Blackboard, a new dimension of the technology world that needed to be mastered. The younger Asian students were quick to maneuver their way around Blackboard and the Web, and they were all too eager to help me, so I learned from them the intriguing aspects of the cyber world that were way beyond my grasp. Zaf was helpful as well and so was my computer engineer husband. So my initial transition into college life was heavily scaffolded by friends and family.

The Initial Experience

Grades are a Reflection of Hard Work and Perseverance

Excitement never fails to cause stirrings that create unsettling feelings. And in graduate school grades always kept me on edge. I knew to go above and beyond in my course work, but there was always that concern of not succeeding, that pokes its face out once in a while. This was the dreaded B grade. That first semester, I had proudly mastered navigating the college website and at the end of the semester, became obsessed with checking grades. So far, I had attained two A's. *Great*, I thought to myself. *Now just another course and I should be on my way with a 4.0 GPA. That's the plan.*

Every evening I turned on my computer and searched for the final grade and finally on one evening, the last day that grades were to be submitted, there it was - my other A. Three straight A's. I announced to the family at the dinner table teasingly, trying to compete with Zaf. "So how many A's did you get for this semester Zaf?" I asked. Zaf was too tired to entertain my query but still gave me the thumbs up, "Good for you Mom," he said.

After dinner that night, I logged on to the college website. I was still curious about the details of my grades and how I had fared in all the assignments. Somehow I had hoped to get a perfect score, not that it would make any difference to the letter grade. But nonetheless, I knew I was a little too much of a perfectionist and was driven by self-imposed overzealousness that made me my own worst critic.

As I perused through the grade details on Blackboard, everything looked fine until my eyes were drawn to the participation column. The number I saw jumped out at me and caused a loud "What on earth!!!" exclamation that could be heard by others in the house. Zaf came running out from his room with a concerned look, "What's wrong?" he asked. I looked at him in disbelief as I said, "I got 49 out of 50 for participation; how

could this have happened?" With his forehead scrunched and his eyebrows lifted, Zaf, looked at me in total disbelief, "Really Mommy? Didn't you get an A in that class?"

I nodded, and yet I could feel the anxiety rising in me and my face becoming warm as I answered, "Yes, I did, but what was the reason for the deduction of points? I participated, so why this?" Zaf, turned around to go back to what he was doing and as he walked back to his room, he said, "You got your A; I really don't see the fuss. Stop stressing yourself, will you?"

My whole evening was dampened with an unsettling feeling. I could not shake the thought of being judged for something I perceived as unfair. The A did not seem to mean as much as the fact that my instructor had an opinion of my performance in class. What really upset me was that I really did try to be involved in the activities. I knew better than when it came to grades; I never left anything to chance.

As I tossed and turned in bed that night, I knew I had to do something about it. As insignificant and irrelevant as it was to others, I knew I could not dismiss something like this so easily. It mattered enough that the next morning, I sent an email to the instructor, politely asking about my participation grade.

When the instructor finally emailed me back, she commented that I did really well in small group discussions but was not participating as much in class discussions. Class discussions! *What was she thinking?* I thought to myself. Four students who would not stop talking in class dominated class discussions. How could any of the rest of the twenty other students even get a word in when the instructor encouraged those same four students to carry on with their relentless comments week after week? Not only did we have a small chance of piping in, some of us were actually quite intimidated by those four who at times came back with sharp rebuttals. Was the instructor that oblivious?

I was not being dramatic, but I had misgivings about how I was judged and evaluated on something that had no rubric in the course syllabus? It made me wonder if

this had anything to do with preconceived presumptions about ineptness on my part since there had not been any clarification at the beginning of class of what the instructor expected from us.

I knew I had chipped in a few times during the intervals when those four went momentarily quiet or had no opinions to offer on topics that were more familiar to me. I knew how to contribute when I had something to say about what was being discussed and the atmosphere was less intimidating. But to pass judgment on my not knowing enough to share was blatantly unfair. I can only guess that I was probably evaluated on how effective my contribution was.

And what did she mean by class discussions? How many times were we supposed to contribute? At what length were our contributions viewed as worthy? And was credit given only to discussions that appeared relevant? I had to wonder what compelled the instructor to differentiate a student's ability to perform in class? I was still disturbed by the passing of a judgment that I felt was laced with too many unknown factors. It wasn't the one point that disturbed me, but it was what I perceived as discriminatory evaluations that bothered me.

Yes, I had my A, 99 out of 100 points, but I still felt ill at ease. For a few days, I went around griping about it, until the family got tired and said that I should just focus on my grades and not about the evaluation. Zaf just couldn't understand my thought patterns. "Who cares about one point?" he said. But unfortunately I did.

Soon I too came to realize that I had to let it go. I could not allow what seemingly looked like an innocent evaluation to affect me. Even if it was an unfair practice, I had to move on. But it was a lesson learned, a lesson about how identity played a role in a college classroom.

Reflection

I am not a whiner nor am I unreasonable in my expectations of others. I have very little understanding of entitlement. But in the circumstances with this particular instructor, I felt disempowered and disappointed with the judgment that was passed.

If this was to take place in a school classroom, it could have probably been justified as a teacher merely exerting her control. However in a college classroom, students should not be treated as if they are lacking a certain level of cognition. This was what bothered me, the fact that an instructor could impose her whims without prior discussion.

This was the very first time I felt I needed to speak up, and I did it not because I wanted that one point, but more to alert the instructor that I was paying attention. I may have been perceived as a meek individual, but I was not lacking in confidence and I had the capacity to express myself without difficulty.

I am not sure what impression I left with the instructor; my only hope was that she was more careful in judging students' commitment to the course learning.

The Director

Who You Know Matters

As I sat facing the director of the Ph.D. program, a sense of anguish tugged at the insides of my stomach. Dr. Hill was not only the director but also my advisor. I was still in the first year of my Master's program and being in his office was nothing new.

But today I was there for a different reason. The previous night I had sent an email to Dr. Hill requesting an appointment. He was prompt in his reply and for that I was thankful.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling being there; on one hand I wanted to hear some reassuring remarks from him, but at the same time I felt I was let down by the only person that was supposed to be supportive of my educational pursuit.

"So what can I do for you today, Rina?" Dr. Hill asked with a smile.

"I didn't get into the program," I said, "and now I'm not sure what to do," I continued.

I wanted to conceal the overwhelming disappointment and devastation I felt, but I knew somehow bitterness echoed through my voice.

"You didn't?" He said quizzically as if this was news to him.

"Let me pull out your application and we'll take a look," he said as he turned around to look for the folder.

Waiting there in my own thoughts, I recalled how he had coached me over several sessions on how to prepare my application. We had talked about my letter of intent, and with every draft I was there sitting across from him, getting feedback and taking notes. I never questioned any of his suggestions. Obediently, I had followed his words to the T.

Through the numerous conversations we had had before, I even shared with him my excitement about pursuing a Ph.D.; and yet here I was now sitting across from him

as I had in the past, and he spoke as if he was ignorant of the fact that I didn't get in. This made me all the more agitated.

What else could I have done differently, I wondered? I knew I had done my best in my Master's program: I had maintained straight A's, had vast teaching experiences, and received full support from my instructors when I told them about wanting to apply for the Ph.D. program.

I also recalled how Annie had shared with us in a linguistics class that she had no intention of pursuing her Ph.D. but her advisor had invited her into the program. From the way she spoke I gathered she was admitted without having to go through the rigor of a selection process. And here I was, proving my capability as a student with my academic success, but apparently straight A's was not going to get me far. I was curious about what Dr. Hill had to say.

Dr. Hill turned to face me, holding my application form in his hand. "Everything looks good here; I wonder what happened?" he said, then paused and added, "Your recommendation letters were not strong. The professors who wrote them are not tenured professors and that may have been the reason."

I was speechless, *What was he talking about?* I thought he of all people could have put in a good word for me; after all he was the director of the program. Tenured professors??? No one told me that was a criteria, and even if it was, how was I supposed to get letters from professors whom I didn't know? All my letters were written by my instructors whom I thought could attest to my academic capability.

"I see you had Dr. Curtis write a letter," he added, "She is certainly not a person to get a letter from." Dr. Hill said nonchalantly.

The more he said, the more I felt nauseated. I could not believe what I was hearing. Dr. Curtis had talked about how she was an outcast amongst faculty; how her

frankness had gotten her into some really hot water, but I did not realize that the way she was perceived could affect others around her.

Dr. Hill continued, "I'm sorry you didn't get in; you can apply again next year."

I was beyond speechless. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him why he had not supported my application. Was I not good enough for the program? Did he not see any potential in me, unlike Annie, whose advisor had a high opinion of her?

But there was no point in even asking; I was totally disgusted with the feedback that had transpired. At this point I knew that my commitment and hard work in striving towards good grades and a high GPA, did not seem to matter. It was who you knew and how you were viewed that could get you in.

Out of curiosity I then asked, "Who were the people who got in? "

"A few students from out of state and some international students from Korea and China," he replied.

That was interesting, I thought to myself. Were they scrutinized as I was and did it matter who wrote their recommendation letters?

"If you're still interested in getting into a program here, I would suggest that you apply to other universities. Sometimes when you are accepted at other colleges, your application looks stronger. And you also need to find tenured professors to write your recommendation letters," Dr. Hill added.

I listened but my mind was racing. Why would I apply elsewhere when I am not mobile, and why should I spend time and money looking into other colleges just to look good in my application?

What Dr. Hill was saying to me was beyond my comprehension. I thought proving myself in an academic program would open up opportunities. And I felt let down by Dr. Hill's absence of concern. I was foolish enough to think that all advisors were like Annie's who wanted to open doors for their students. It was a lesson learnt. Sometimes,

advisors were just there to do their jobs; nothing beyond that. I was done listening. I thanked Dr. Hill and left. Little did I know that I was never to return to his office again.

Feeling utterly desolated and devastated, I walked out of the building and sat on one of the benches under a shaded tree. It was late in the afternoon and I needed to think clearly for a while. At times like this I wished I had someone at the college to talk to and offer other alternatives.

With Dr. Hill, I had sensed an attitude of distance. I felt he was not in any way interested in my future aspirations and goals.

It didn't take me long to gather my thoughts as I headed back into the college of education building and walked straight up four flights of stairs; I knew exactly whom I wanted to see in this time of duress.

As I walked into the main lounge of the Teacher Prep program, Haley's back was turned towards me. She seemed engrossed in whatever it was that she was doing. I waited a couple of seconds for her to turn, and finally when she did, I asked if Dr. Clyde was available.

"Yes, she is," Haley replied, "You can knock on her door to see if she can see you now." *Really*, I thought to myself. What a blessing to have someone like Dr. Clyde available to have people just stop by like that.

I knocked on the door and waited. Even when her door was ajar, I wasn't sure if I should poke my head in to greet her. Dr. Clyde came to the door and with a warm smile said, "Rina, how are you? It's good to see you again. What can I do for you today?"

Dr. Clyde was my literature instructor the previous semester and through knowing her in class, she made me feel like her door would always be open if ever I need someone to talk to.

"Well, can I come in? Do you have some time now? I really need to get your opinion on something and I know you're the best person to talk to."

Dr. Clyde looked a little concerned and said, "Is everything alright? Sure, come in and have a seat. Tell me what's going on."

And with that welcome, I sat and talked to Dr. Clyde for over an hour. Whatever disappointment and frustrations I had came spilling out and when I was finished, Dr. Clyde gently said, "Let's do this. I'll get you a new advisor who is the Interim Dean at the college and both of us can guide you with getting yourself prepared for a Ph.D. program. I'll talk to Mary and I'm sure she'll be willing to take you on as her advisee. Don't worry."

"A new advisor?" I asked, "But I'm graduating next semester, and what do I say to Dr. Hill? Won't he be upset?"

"Who cares about Dr. Hill?" Dr. Clyde answered, "Apparently he doesn't seem to care much about you. And I know Dr. Leslie will be good for you."

"Are you sure this will be okay?" I asked uncertain about how I may be causing unnecessary ripples that might harm me in the future.

Dr. Clyde looked at me reassuringly, "Yes, it will be alright. With someone guiding you better, you can reapply next semester into a Ph.D. program."

I finally saw some light at the end of the tunnel. That was what I needed to hear; I could still submit an application later on without having to dance around the system.

"Why don't you look at other departments, maybe sociology, communication, why not some other Ph.D. programs, why stick with education?" Dr. Clyde said. I knew she was not joking, but education was in my blood and I still wanted to be within the field.

So, I had finally found someone who was willing to help me along my journey. I was not completely lost or things were not as clouded as they had seemed. But even then the process was not straightforward; I submitted two more applications to two different Ph.D. programs; in the mean time, I enrolled in courses taught by tenured professors and subsequently got letters of recommendations from them. And I even went to talk to the program directors, *just to put a face to a name*, as I was advised by one of the program secretaries. I jumped through all the hoops as people say. And I ended up being admitted into one program. Grades do not carry much weight, as I found out. It is who you know that gets you places.

Reflection

I was fortunate to have supportive faculty who stepped up to assist me when I needed it most. Sometimes, we mistakenly assume that people are looking out for our best interests, but in actuality not everyone has another person's interest at heart.

Dr. Clyde knew me as a student; she was familiar with my commitment to learning and my aspirations for the future. Dr. Hill on the other hand was there to do his job, which I thought included mentoring. Dr. Hill never communicated with me on any intellectual level and I know that in the brief conversations we had about my program of study, the thoughts he expressed were above the level I was functioning at. This may have left an impression on him, an unfavorable impression of my intellectual capability, I can only assume.

I had come in as a graduate student from my position as a middle school teacher. The discourse I frequently used related to schools and children so I still had a long way to go in climbing up that scholarly ladder. Instincts had alerted me to the fact that Dr. Hill thought very little of me, and I know now I was not far from the truth.

It is strange how people are so quick to judge others without giving them a fair chance. I realized that my communicative Discourse affected the way I was perceived;

unfortunately, I needed time to learn the proper American academic Discourse, to prove myself worthy. But without someone alerting me to the expected norms, it was taking me longer to become proficient. Thus on the exterior, it was highly likely that when I opened my mouth to speak, I sounded relatively elementary.

However, behind every cloud there is a silver lining and it was by sheer chance I became acquainted with Dr. Clyde when I took her course. She was one of the true gems of academia who listened attentively when students communicated. She saw beyond the Discourse barrier and recognized potentials and aspirations when she saw them. When I needed guidance, she was there to urge me on. I was one very lucky student.

A Letter to My Grandfather
The Lessons To Last A Lifetime

Dr. Smith walked in and greeted everyone, but today something was different about her, she seemed a little more relaxed. Nowhere in sight were the usual straight to business mannerisms that had accompanied her when she entered the classroom over the last three weeks of classes.

Today was our final class meeting and the atmosphere exuded a celebratory energy. Tables had been pushed along the classroom walls to hold the different potluck dishes that all of us had brought in. The air was filled with the pungent aroma of Mexican food, sweet buttery vanilla tinged baked goods and smoky dark roasted coffee scents, all amalgamated together, reaching out to senses to awaken ravenous insides. Dr. Smith had planned for this last class meeting a breakfast while we presented our final pieces.

Once all formalities of the classroom had taken place, Dr. Smith told us to make our plates and sit down. Chairs were placed in a circle in the middle of the classroom, providing adequate space for us to get up to get food but also to provide each of us with a clear visual of one another.

As everyone settled down with their breakfast plates and waited for presentations to begin, I looked around to take in the ambiance of the classroom. It seemed overly peculiar to present our final piece in the atmosphere of a food court. The strong smell of food had by now permeated the entire room and was a little overpowering and subsequently distracting, but soon enough, as presentations began, these aromas disappeared into oblivion.

There was no particular order in which we were to do our readings so I waited a while to hear from some of my classmates. Their stories were beautifully crafted and emotionally tugging as vivid images of their life histories were unraveled. As I listened, I knew my work was in pale comparison to what I had heard so far and at one point, I felt

overcome with a slight panic attack and contemplated sneaking out of the room. *Maybe Dr. Smith wouldn't notice*, I thought to myself and even if she did, I did not mind having points deducted from my grade.

But I knew I had to go through with the presentation and walking out was not even an option. And so somewhere, halfway through class presentations, I raised my hand to volunteer to go next.

Let's hope I can do this without any emotional display. I heard myself thinking. *Just read it as if it was another text*, I said to myself. *Read it as if it were someone else's words.* I was trying so hard to psyche myself up so that the reading went smoothly. Over and over again I was saying in my mind, *It's just a piece of class work with no real significance to me.*

I was trying really, really hard to calm my nerves when I heard Dr. Smith say, "Rina, are you ready?"

I looked at Dr. Smith and nodded, this is it, there was no turning back. As my hands held the typed piece of paper in Lucida Calligraphy font, I began reading... *My Memoire, A Letter to My Grandfather....*

My Dear Grandfather,

Forgive me. Months have gone by and I have not written. I walked past my desk a thousand times since I last wrote, but I could not halt, even for a while to sit down and write to you. A while would not suffice to pen down my inner thoughts, my deep emotions that face every challenge with such tornadic stirrings. You know me.

You would be proud of me, my desk is clean and on it sits the silver embossed pen with my name engraved on it, your gift for my graduation. I know you took your time to pick that particular one, with the rose design, you know my taste and you always pay attention. The onion skin grey papers lie quietly awaiting in my leather folder, another gift from you. You expect me to write, the more so now that I am away on my own, in this unpredictable world. My refuge is in the words that I pen down on the paper

that travels the vast distance between us. And your prompt reply is what comforts me, consoles me, strengthens me and warms my heart.

You know me.

Grandfather, I have met some wonderful people, kind, generous and ever so protective of me. You would like them. Their spoken words are lined with tenderness and concern. Their embraces wipe away the tiredness and aches that we all hold on to after a long day at work. And their conversations... awaken my mind and fill the room with energy and laughter that reverberate through the thickest of walls. In their midst, I am alive, enlightened, strong and I am able to go out and paint the world with my vibrant colors and sketch the atmosphere with strong dark lines. I thrive when I can contribute and make a difference.

You know me.

Grandfather, the last few weeks have been tumultuous. Storms appear over the horizon daily. The sun shies away timidly, behind dark, fierce, angered clouds that storm in and take over the skies. I shudder at the sight of such rage but the ferocity that is meant to shatter any feeble soul does not shake me, for you have given me the strength to walk in heavy downpours, steady, unperturbed and light in my footsteps. For I know that storms are nothing but a passing of uncertainties that will come to comfort themselves. Storms do not flail me, for it was in your arms that you led me through such violent stirrings, holding on tightly to my youthful arm, reassuringly, showing me how not to fear.

You know me.

Grandfather, at times I find myself sucked into the pool of foolishness and trivialities. I resist and I struggle to rise above the currents that hold me down and demand my engagement. Sometimes I falter and I get pulled in, like the net cast upon the fishes that have no means of escaping. And just like the fishes that violently flip and hop and jump in their panic stricken state sensing their impending doom, my inner self turns and fights and screams out in protest and turmoil. And then I find myself quiet, and accepting, not like those fishes that lay still and motionless. For me, I have escaped and I have found my inner strength, my peace and I have overcome.

You would be proud of me Grandfather. You taught me well and for all the lessons of life that you have embedded in me, I thank you Grandfather. I am surviving as I have survived under your watchful eyes. I will continue to make you proud Grandfather. Rest assured that I am well in this new place and worry not my Dear Grandfather for in me I know you, your gentleness, your kindness, your strength and I

will walk this journey of my new life in your footsteps and in the shade of your shadow and I will be fine.

You know me Grandfather, you know me.

And Grandfather... had it not been for the way of this world that indiscriminately chances life and shifts tectonic plates deep within the core of our existence, displacing, uprooting and destroying the balance of our domain, you would have known me. For in your presence I existed in those early days of my infant life. As I protested and adjusted to my new world, gasping air in the discomfort of reality, you were there as well, complacent, calm, and watchful. And as you unknowingly took in your shallow breaths, me in my crib, and you in your bed, we shared the same air, you in your ending and me in my beginnings. You must have known Grandfather as I lay there in the midst of my new world, in your presence, even for those unjustly miserly numbered days, as you teased me, cuddled me and held my gaze in yours that something Magical was happening between us. You knew me my Grandfather.

And Grandfather, in the unfairness of our journeys that you were forced to partake in your sudden departure while I had to linger on behind, I know you. For in those glorious outstretched days that we spent together, you planted the seed of your existence in me, an existence that has spanned over my lifetime.

I know you Grandfather, through all the corridors of memories of those who knew you. I was taken into and I walked patiently, slowly pacing my footsteps, to truly extract the magnitude of who you were. I am enlightened, strengthened and beautified. And through the stories of your daughter, my mother, I grew to love you, admire you while I wrapped my arms around you to be held tightly in the embrace of your memory, I know you my Grandfather.

For it were the stories that cast your presence in me. Stories of your gentleness, your generosity, your beauty and your caring heart. And it was through the shadows that you left imprinted in your children that I saw you and honored you.

As my silver pen leaves its markings on this paper, I leave you with a heart filled with love and appreciation. Thank You Grandfather. Thank you for all that you have done for me. Thank you for being my Grandfather.

*With All My Love,
Your Grand Daughter*

When I finished reading, I avoided eye contact with everyone in the room. I felt totally embarrassed and waited for a while with my head down and my gaze to the floor until I heard the next person read. Slowly I raised my head, relieved that I was no longer the center of attention.

Reflections

This was the very first time I had performed in front of an audience of total strangers. None of us in that room had any connection to one another and yet there we were revealing some of the most intimate aspects of our private selves. This was unfamiliar territory for me, unfamiliar and never again to be treaded on ever again in the future.

I had ended my reading after pausing several times to steady my quivering voice. I dreaded the presentation, but with all things, it came to pass and was soon over. My concern about enunciation had diminished and was overpowered by my anxiety of sharing. I was relieved that the ordeal was now a thing of the past but I was taken aback at my own embarrassment.

It was fine to witness my classmates choke up and shed tears as they shared their stories, but that was not supposed to happen to me. I should have been more in control of my feelings and not allow them to spill over into my professional environment. It was hard for me to concentrate for the rest of the class period.

My Asian friends always talked about how a show of emotion was a display of weakness and since I was familiar with this understanding, I chided myself for being silly. This was not how I wanted to present myself. Emotional displays are rare for Asians: we are strong people, nothing bothers us, no obstacle too overwhelming; we have the tendency to always distance ourselves from dwelling over issues.

But there I was demonstrating weakness. After all it was just a piece of written work. What had happened to me? Could it have been the struggles that I was facing in

graduate school that evoked such emotions. Graduate school was more than just course work and I knew I was caught in the dilemma of trying to reassure myself that who I was, was acceptable. It did not help the situation that I was also at the crossroads of identity.

I wanted to be valued for the strong person that I was raised to be.

Unfortunately my environment was informing me that I would not get that validation.

Whatever it was that I was struggling with, this particular assignment brought about a new realization, that no matter what people thought of me, it did not matter. I was okay.

Graduation

I Have Fulfilled My Duty

It was a cool December morning and excitement was in the air. I was finally graduating with my Master's degree, an accomplishment that seemed almost impossibly remote since it had taken much too long to go back to school. But here I was on graduation day.

If felt strange making that walk into the stadium by myself. All these years, I was part of the family, everything revolved around them but on that particular day, I stood alone, in the midst of thousands of unknowns. I was lucky to have Claire and Alex also graduate at the same time. Knowing two faces did make a difference. I only wished I had completed the program in spring when Chen and Yoon had graduated; that would have been more exciting.

The adrenaline rush of the procession was new to me; it was exciting to hear the crowd cheering as we made our way to the front of the arena to the tune of Edward Elgar's Pomp Circumstance March 1. However, the experience was all too brief. Within thirty seconds, the glory of being on stage and receiving recognition was all over. That was how quick it was to mark the toil and hard work for a year-and-a-half.

As I sat in the commencement ceremony and took in the energy of the event, I couldn't help but reminisce over the memories of this journey. It took me 26 years before I went back to school for a graduate degree. Twenty-six years of holding off an ambition imposed on me by my father. What had kept me back, I wondered? And yet what had kept me going?

Too many reasons, or no reason at all. For one thing, what had kept me back was my complacency with life. I had worked as a teacher and instructor; raised two boys and dedicated my life to the family; beyond that there were no other grand plans. I took great pride in my children's accomplishments and had been there to support them in

their learning, to guide them toward their goals, and to console them when things got tough. My life seemed complete.

Yet I was compelled to go back to school even when I had no plans for anything beyond the learning. I had had a career in teaching and had taught at different levels of the school system, and had also previously held a position as a college instructor; but that was where my journey seemed to reach a crossroad with no clear directions.

Too many times upon meeting my professors, I was overcome with embarrassment when asked about my career goals. I had to constantly conjure up some intelligent explanation. At times I would talk about my interest in working with English Language Learners; at times I shared my interest with working at the international level; and at times my explanation was just as simple as becoming a university professor.

My future was still undefined. All I knew was that I was in pursuit of my degree for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. I was in school to learn and be more informed of the issues of education; beyond that I had no plans. This was difficult for people to comprehend and for the most part, I kept it hidden. Without a clear career goal, I knew I was not going to be respected for my accomplishments.

As I walked out of the arena with my black degree folder in hand, Claire and Alex were nowhere in sight. I wanted that morning to last just a little longer. I wanted to hold on to the feeling of exhilaration. It was nice to be acknowledged even if it was for just a brief thirty seconds on stage, amongst thousands of strangers in an arena on a cool December morning.

Reflection

I was now a graduate with an M.Ed. It took me one and a half years to complete my program, although I would have liked to graduate within a year, I decided against it since I wanted to take more courses. By now I realized that I was my own worst critic, I

seemed to always set up personal challenges for no apparent reason. So instead of one year, I stayed on for another semester.

I had more knowledge now. I was beginning to feel that I belonged in this new environment. I enjoyed studying and learning about issues that were new and interesting. I was at home with college life.

That morning as I left the commencement ceremony with my son's high school friend, I recall telling her that the Master's degree did not mean much to me as I was still hoping to do my Ph.D. At the back of my mind, the anxiety about not knowing if I was accepted into the program marred my excitement. I had to wait for a whole semester before I would hear back about my application. And in the meantime I chose to stay within the campus environment as a non-degree student. I had become accustomed to the lifestyle and could not imagine doing anything else.

So I stayed on, hoping that everything would work out in my favor, and it did.

PH.D. Student

A Special Friend

Finally, after months of waiting, I received an email that stated I was accepted into the Literacy Ph. D. program. There it was on my student webpage, a green checkmark in the box that showed my application into a Ph.D. program.

By that time, the scars from the challenges of my journey, the initial rejection, being told that my application was not good enough or that I may never be able to get into the program of my choice, accompanied with the uncertain anticipation, had dampened my spirits, I could not help but feel a little disappointed and drained. In addition, there were program changes taking place in the College of Education and so the wait for the acceptance came really late in the spring semester. I had become more anxious, thinking that I was going to be rejected this time around again.

Over the last two semesters, I seemed to have been given the run around. I was told that this was due to the new changes being adopted at the university. I may not be the only one who was subjected to such an experience, but I was unprepared for not getting answers about my application. No one seemed to know what was going on.

At times I had to step back and wonder whether my ethnicity played a role in some of my struggles. I was unfamiliar with pushing forward and being assertive. I had foolishly thought that one's hard work automatically deemed a person eligible or at least stood a winning chance.

Finally, I was now going to be a Ph.D. student. For one semester I hung around campus taking non-credit classes, waiting to hear back about my application. But it has paid off.

Being in the College of Education building held bittersweet memories for me. At times I was reminded of the rejection; the judgment that I would never be good enough no matter how hard I tried. And at other times I was reminded of people like Dr. Clyde

and Dr. Leslie who went out of their way to be a mentor to me. That was what I needed. People to tell me what it was that I was not doing right or enough of.

But both Dr. Clyde and Dr. Leslie had retired by the time I started the program and try as I would to feel reassured, I still felt my world crumbling around me. Here I was once again alone, on my own, having to start the process of making connections once again.

One summer afternoon I was on campus to sign some paperwork, and as I walked up the stairs to the third floor, slow and heavy in my steps reminiscing about the past, I heard a voice call out to me, "Rina, I heard you got accepted. Congratulations."

I turned to look and it was Karen, a student who had been in my sociolinguistics class; someone whom I saw but never got a chance to become acquainted with. I was surprised that she even knew my name.

"Thanks Karen," I replied.

"If you have any questions, let me know. I'm in the same program as you and I'm a year ahead, so any time you need any help, just holler," Karen continued.

Wow, I thought to myself, this is totally unexpected, someone actually reaching out to me.

"I will Karen," I said, "I will definitely get in touch with you."

"Hey, Rina," Karen continued, by now we were facing each other at the corridor, "we have the same advisor, Dr. Lopez, she's really awesome, you're lucky to have her."

"That's good to know," I said. "I have actually had classes with her in my Master's program, so I know who she is," I added "but it's nice to know that she'll be a great mentor."

"You don't have to worry, you're in good hands" Karen assured me.

"Thanks," I replied, feeling a little more positive than when I had entered the building.

"By the way," Karen continued, "I'm looking for people to teach this course that I'm helping coordinate with Dr. Lopez. Are you interested?" Karen asked.

"Teach a course?" I repeated after Karen, wondering whether she was serious. Was she actually asking me?

"Yes," Karen persisted. "I saw how you presented in our sociolinguistics class, and I know you have a lot of experience teaching, so you'll be a perfect instructor for this course."

Talk about things jumping out at you from nowhere. I was truly surprised that someone had actually paid attention to me without my knowledge. Here was Karen, a classmate who noticed my strengths and recognized my potentials and had actually kept me in mind as a good candidate to teach in her team. I was amazed that there were such kind people around who were looking out for me.

The challenges that I had endured over the last year seemed insignificant now. Karen had lifted the burden from my shoulders and I felt excited once again. With Dr. Lopez and Karen there on campus to help me along, I was going to be okay. I still had Dr. Clyde and Dr. Leslie who said that I could contact them any time I needed to. Things were looking up for me.

Sometimes murky waters do not stay murky for long - given time, sunlight will penetrate through.

Dr. Neely

When Respect Supersedes Personal Intent

Spring semester had ended and there was a quiet stillness on campus as I made my way to the College of Education building. I had an appointment with Dr. Neely, my final appointment with him since Dr. Neely was retiring.

The place was deserted; no one was in sight as I walked up the three flights of stairs, making my way into the blue painted corridor of the faculty offices. Even the corridor seemed ghostly quiet that day even though it was a familiar place for me. Over the last two years I had frequented Dr. Neely's office.

As I knocked on his door and waited, I realized that he was not there. A panicky feeling rose in me as I thought, *Not again. Could he have forgotten our appointment this time too?* If this was true, I knew that I would probably not see him again.

Dr. Neely had in the past forgotten appointments, not that he was in any way inconsiderate; he merely had too much going on and became too overwhelmed at times, and it didn't help that he relied on emails for his calendar.

Wondering what I was going to do next, the thought of not seeing him to get a signed copy of his book in my possession, bothered me so I decided that I would wait for a while, in case he showed up.

And indeed he did show up. A few minutes later, Dr. Neely came down the corridor apologizing. He had gone off to lunch with his teaching assistant, David, and had lost track of time; but nonetheless, here he was.

"Not a problem Dr. Neely," I said, as we walked into his office.

As I sat down across from Dr. Neely, I looked around at the now empty shelves that once held volumes and volumes of books and DVDs that Dr. Neely had accumulated throughout his teaching career. The shelves spoke to his decades of scholarship and

experience. But now they lay bare, void of any representation of this esteemed professor who sat across from me.

The room was now filled with stacks of boxes that lay on the office floor against the walls, a temporary residence for the scholarly knowledge that belonged to this professor.

"This place looks so different," I said, " I guess there's no way you can be persuaded to stay on just a little longer until I graduate," I joked, trying to make light of the situation.

I was still never quite sure how to be speak to Dr. Neely. He had a sense of humor, but I could never gauge when he actually saw humor in what I said.

"Oh no." Dr. Neely replied as he shook his head, "I'm well on my way out the door; I am done here. Everything is almost packed and I will be gone," he laughed.

That I knew. Dr. Neely had been talking about retirement for the past year. He often joked about how we would still be sitting in the classroom while he sat around on the pristine beaches of his island, away from the world of academia. His days of being a scholar were coming to a close and he expressed his excitement for doing something different. I smiled and nodded in acknowledgement.

"I'm here to pick up my paper, and could you also please sign this for me?" I said as I handed him my copy of his book *Beyond the Classroom*.

Dr. Neely reached for the folder on his desk where he removed a stack of papers. He thumbed through them and pulled out my paper and then handed it to me. As I thanked him, I handed him the book.

While he wrote in the book, I managed to cast a glance at my paper. What I saw was an A- inscribed on it. A-! I was not expecting this since I had completed all the extra credit assignments and had also rewritten several drafts before the final paper, each of which had indicated that I was on track and was doing well in class. For my first daft I

had received a B, but upon resubmission, my grade was changed to an A-. So how did I end up with an A- for the course?

Dr. Neely handed me the book. I took it and placed in my bag.

He then said, "You did well in the final paper, but I still could not quite grasp what your curriculum stand was; it wasn't very clear to me."

His remarks reminded me of some of the comments I had heard about Dr. Neely. There was word that he was a hard grader and it was not easy to get an A in his class. But I had taken three courses with him prior to this class and in all of them, I had obtained A's.

In this curriculum course students had talked about how he was uncompromising in his comments, not holding back in stating how some papers were 'total rubbish' or made no sense. But I never saw that side of him.

I did not pay too much attention to what I was hearing, I felt I knew Dr. Neely's expectations too well and did not need to worry. At least I thought I had comprehended the course materials and had demonstrated my creative knowledge in my final paper. That was what we were told to do; but I guess, my attempt at creating a curriculum that impressed Dr. Neely fell short of his expectations.

I was too fond of Dr. Neely to ask him about his grading and how points were allocated. But I was quite certain with the extra credit work that I had completed, it should have pushed my grade to an A. Upon more contemplation, I reminded myself that this was a professor I highly respected and I was sitting in the midst of closure to the life he had lived for over four decades. This was neither the time nor place to ask about justifications to my final grade. Grades did not matter. I guess I had not mastered the course materials and what seemed clear to me came through as undefined to him.

My history with Dr. Neely spanned over two years of my Ph.D. program. The first class I took with him was a research course. My first impression of him reminded me of a

nutty professor, someone overly intelligent but all over the place. He would come into class complaining about the inconveniences of technology and voice his disdain toward it. And his recurring challenge was forgetting to take attendance when he had allocated twenty five percent of our grade toward it.

So after a few classes of him expressing his frustrations about attendance taking, I approached him during class break one day.

“Dr. Neely, would it help if I took charge of passing out a sign-in sheet every week?” I asked. I felt it was a little bold of me to step up like that since I hardly knew Dr. Neely, but I too was an educator and wanted to help out.

“Yes, that would be helpful,” he replied. “You know I don’t like it when I forget to have my sign-in sheets, but I just seem to forget every week. Yes, yes, that will certainly be helpful,” Dr. Neely reiterated.

I had made myself the class monitor; I made sign-in sheets and passed them around during each class meeting. And this went on in all the four classes that I took with Dr. Neely. Although I was careful not to overstep my boundaries and I allowed the first few classes to begin with Dr. Neely being mindful of the sign-in sheets; but it never failed, a few weeks into the semester, Dr. Neely would be overwhelmed and would chide himself openly about forgetting to take attendance, and this is when I would step in once again.

There were very limited communications between Dr. Neely and me other than the words of gratitude about helping out and feedback on course papers I had written. I found it relatively challenging to get to know him. He was one person that intrigued me as it almost seemed that there was more to the person than what we were allowed to see.

In class he would often share movie reviews; one in particular made his all time favorite list. He spoke of the movie being an incandescent masterpiece that illuminated overpowering messages and symbolism. My curiosity led me one day to rent the DVD.

I sat through the movie waiting for the dramatic awakening, the illuminating epiphany that would transform me and suck me into deeper insights of people and life. But as the movie came to an end, I thought to myself, *Was that it? Where were all these scintillating messages that I was supposed to witness? Had I missed the essence of the entire movie?*

As Dr. Neely continued to talk about the brilliance of *The Hurt Locker* in other subsequent classes, I realized that we were worlds apart; we viewed our worlds through different lenses, and we witnessed the same things miles apart.

That spring day, I was there to show gratitude to a professor who I had high regard for, and as I thanked Dr. Neely and wished him all the best for his retirement, Dr. Neely insisted that I read the message he had written in the book. I was at first hesitant, and told him that I would read it at home, but as he continued to insist, I relented and took the book from my bag and turned the pages to the title page. In black ink, Dr. Neely had written, *To Rina, A Wonderful Student. All the Best for the future. Tim Neely*

I was at a loss for words. I never knew Dr. Neely even remotely noticed me beyond the formalities of being his student. What more had formed an opinion of me? And I didn't know how to react.

As I looked up from the book to make eye contact with Dr. Neely, I was greeted by a warm smile. All I could do was say "Thank you Dr. Neely. That's so kind of you."

Dr. Neely shook his head and insisted, " I really mean it."

I had to smile back and thank him again. For the first time in my program I felt I was floating on air. That to me was a powerful acknowledgment.

Reflection

It never fails to puzzle me how simple, unassuming words may lead to disparities in understanding. When in class professors use words such as design, create, and have a platform to an Asian student, these connotations are as unfamiliar as snow is to a child on a tropical island.

How does one design something? Designing belongs to the craftsman; as students we are learners with minimal skills to craft something. We read and we memorize and over time, as we reflect, we grasp a deep understanding of concepts that will become lifelong knowledge.

But tell us to be creative, and we will be stumped. What is creativity, what denotes the essence of creativity? To an Asian student creativity lies within the concepts of leisure or personal endeavors. I can be creative in decorating my living room but I have no background knowledge of bringing any form of creativity into a classroom setting, what more a curriculum. On one hand what may be perceived as a form of creativity to me may make no sense to an instructor.

This is what I sensed happened in Dr. Neely's class. I could regurgitate information pertaining to the different types of curriculum, such as linearism, holistic, laissez faire, to name a few, but to put together a curriculum that demonstrated my curriculum platform was beyond my reach, or at least the reach of impressing Dr. Neely.

At times I wondered if some of our foreign cultural capital may actually stand as obstacles in our journey as a student in the west.

I was educated within a linear curriculum; it worked well for me and the vast majority of people in my home country, but I knew Dr. Neely had a negative opinion towards linearism as he often discussed during the course. So I wonder now if my preference towards a particular concept may have shed a negative light on the work I

did. Are we influenced by our biases, even in the classrooms and are we less willing to use another culture's lenses to validate what others value.

What is it that defines clarity? The experiences of my friends and I were frequently clouded by uncertainties of what was expected from us. What was obvious to others could sometimes be fragmented rays of understandings for us. We struggled with conceptualizing the complete picture; things were never in full view.

I regret now that I never had the opportunity to have such conversations with my professors. We were all either too focused on the course demands or too overwhelmed with other expectations.

But it would be beneficial to have such conversations, where we can ponder over issues related to skill sets and background knowledge and biases and cultural capital. This to me is how scholars are groomed to learn from unknown territories rather than be confined by what is known.

Maybe one day, if in the unlikely event that I do bump into Dr. Neely, I will ask him about this. But the probability of this happening is almost remote. Dr. Neely is probably basking in the warm sun, sitting on his beach chair under a colorful sun umbrella, sipping cold lemonade and watching the tides roll in, on his glistening white sand island.

Seminar

You Have Membership

As I sat listening to Dr. Taylor explain the ropes of graduate school during my second year of Ph.D. seminar, I took mental notes of some of her suggestions. Dr Taylor said, "Attend conferences and when you run into scholars, be bold. Approach them and introduce yourself. You'll be surprised at how friendly they are and how they will reach out to you." *That's simple enough*, I thought to myself; I will definitely keep that in mind.

The very next semester, I was presented with such an opportunity. Our university was hosting a conference and some of the presenters were scholars whose works we had read and discussed in our courses. *What an opportunity*, I reminded myself. I might just run into some interesting people and be able to network.

It did not cross my mind to approach any of the presenters, but as I sat listening to some of them speak on the second evening of the conference, I was inspired and felt compelled to make the move that Dr. Taylor had suggested.

As Dr. Adams wrapped up her presentation, I felt inclined to approach her. She gave the impression of being a person who was not only warm, but was committed to her field of study and I was hoping to make her acquaintance for future work.

By the time she got off the stage, I had made my way towards the front of the hall. She was already encircled by a group of chatty people who had questions lined up for her. Waiting patiently behind them, I started to feel a tinge of nervousness. I was unaccustomed to being overly confident, feeling as if I had every right to hold a casual conversation with a scholar. This was a little nerve wracking, but I had to pursue this as part of my graduate growth. And I calmed down after reminding myself of what I was told in seminar, that as a graduate student I had privileges, there were no boundaries.

I stood waiting, wondering if the people in front of me noticed me standing behind them and as their conversation dragged on, I began to get a little worried that I

would lose the opportunity to talk to Dr. Adams since the next session was to commence in a few minutes.

Finally, they walked away and I was left facing Dr. Adams. I made my way towards her, extended my hand and said. "Hello Dr Adams, I am Dr. Garcia's student and we have read numerous publications that you have written. I am truly impressed with the current research that you just shared with us; it sounds extremely interesting. I am a Ph.D. student and I hope to use some of your concepts in my dissertation. I was wondering if you could recommend any outstanding dissertations that you are familiar with that I could look at to guide me with my dissertation writing."

Dr Adams looked at me unimpressed. She didn't seem warm or friendly and did not appear to be in any way interested in my queries. But what she said next totally caught me off guard.

"Why don't you just look up dissertations on the Internet; you can probably find some that are related to your topic." And with that, the conversation ended. I thanked her and walked away.

The Internet! I muttered under my breath. I know how to do that. did she think I was dumb! Why would I wait in line to ask someone about something that even I knew.

So Dr. Taylor was wrong after all. My graduate student status did not warrant me any passageway into the scholarly world. I was disappointed, but I had to wonder what it was that made me appear insignificant. Did I ask the wrong question? Was I not scholarly enough or did I not know the proper discourse of networking?

I don't know and I never will. I walked away totally disillusioned with no intention of ever taking that initiative again to introduce myself to someone I didn't know. The humiliation was not worth the effort.

Graduate Funding

The Silencing of Voices

It was the last year of my Ph.D. program. I was planning to graduate in three years as the effects of the economic downturn had spilled over onto college campuses. We were told to be prepared for the worst. Tuition had been raised twice in the same year and colleges were all experiencing budget cuts.

At the College of Education, we received an email informing us that funding for graduate students beyond a certain number of years in the program was no longer available.

I was safe. I had only been in the program for two years so whatever cuts that were going to take effect were not going to affect students like me. I did not worry, knowing that I was going to be funded.

In class on a Wednesday night, the week before Spring break, I had arrived early to finish up my reading when Sarah came in and excitedly asked if I had received the email informing students of their teaching assignments for the fall semester. "No," I answered Sarah, "what email? I didn't get any email," I continued.

Then Lilly came in and sat down beside me. "Rina, I didn't see your name on the list of TAs. Did you get the email?" "No," I replied with puzzlement. "I'm sure I'll get the email; it must be a mistake that my name is not on that list. I still qualify for funding, until at least next year," I added.

Even though I felt confident, I was beginning to feel a little concerned as I wondered why my name was not on that list? The time in class that night was unnerving; my worry had turned into anxiety and I felt as if I was sitting on a bed of nails. I could hardly pay attention or contain my thoughts all through class discussions that evening. All my friends had received emails of their fall assignments, and I was the only one in my circle of colleagues who was left out.

During break, Sarah and Lilly showed me the email they received. They both suggested that I write to the person in charge to ask about my situation. And as soon as class was over, I headed home and got to my computer to write to the graduate student Division Head.

That was the beginning of a string of emails that went back and forth between the administrators and me. The first blow I received was when I was informed that I was no longer eligible for funding. This came as a complete shock to me as some of my other friends, who were told that they had lost their funding prior to the official email were actually given assignments. To add injury to insult, I was unable to get a reasonable explanation behind my failure to be funded.

Through the correspondence I was given a multitude of reasons as to why I was not awarded funding: I was not in a College of Education program; I had been in the program over an extended period, thus no longer qualified for funding; there were staffing issues; my reviews may have been a factor...the list continued but none of these reasons applied to my situation. In the end, since I would not let up with my correspondence, the tone of the emails became terse and negative. That was when I backed off and thanked the administrator for her time.

There was nothing more I could do on my own so I talked to several instructors and friends, all of whom said that it was unfortunate, some tried to write on my behalf but at the end of the day, nothing changed. I was still not funded.

This whole process had literally drained me. I thought I was not only a high achieving student but I was dedicated to my responsibilities as a graduate TA and fulfilled all expected duties. I never missed a meeting, always went out of my way for the students I taught and took on all tasks independently. Yet, none of what I had contributed mattered. Alas, I was just a name, a foreign one that could not reflect the commitment I had invested in my graduate work.

I ended that semester totally exhausted and once again disillusioned. I felt that there was no one who could take me under his or her wings to stand up for me when I most needed it. I knew how to do academics, but I was still lost in the system. And once again, I wondered whether my communication skills were at stake and I had failed yet again.

Or was I not supposed to be assertive since my disposition was to be that of acceptance. Was that how the institution perceived me? Too many unanswered questions that I had to deal with. I left campus that semester feeling totally embittered and all I wanted to do was to finish up quickly and leave. I had no desire to be involved in unnecessary turmoil.

Over coffee during the summer with an instructor who was interested to hear about my progress in the program, we ran into an administrator with the college who asked me about my funding situation. It must have been a topic that had spread around campus about the allocation of funding for graduate student as I was told that there were other similar stories like mine. The administrator nonchalantly told me that I should still pursue the issue and copy all my emails to the Dean. I smiled, knowing that I was not interested in engaging in any more battles, after all I was just a student and I saw no sense in stirring any trouble that would bring any more attention to me.

But one thing she said in parting struck a chord and left me wondering later on about how others perceived me and others like me. As she walked away from our table she said, " You must be quite used to things like this happening to you, and you're probably able to handle these situations better."

I smiled, not quite comprehending what she was saying, until later that day when I realized how demeaning her statement was. What did she mean that I'm used to things like this happening to me? True, I've faced challenges within the program which I attributed to my own lack of experience, but what she said reflected that there was some

form of unspoken prejudice that was taking place, something that I had chosen to ignore, but was now told in my face and I was not too far from being wrong.

Reflection

No one tells you that when you become a student in an institution, you are exposed to the elements circulating within the environment. No one tells you that you need to have life skills as well as coping mechanisms to walk that journey of pursuing your ambition. No one tells you that at times you are on your own and you have to keep your own head above the water, lest you will drown.

Commitment to striving towards excelling was something I had competency and training in. Studying was a matter of dedicating time and going that extra mile to know just a little more so that in class more learning could be fostered. But having to maneuver my way through the politics of people, and institutions was not an arena I was unfamiliar with.

I was in the graduate program to do the learning, and if part of that learning was to be trained to be an instructor and to conduct research, then I was prepared. But what utterly shocked me was the manner in which students were used as pawns by those more powerful. I could not appreciate this aspect of the environment as it detracted and at times derailed me from my own personal pursuit. I was not there to fight battles or figure out the tensions that existed between people and positions; my job was to become more knowledgeable, and for this I needed a peaceful atmosphere. Unfortunately there were instances when I was dragged into unnecessary turmoil; having to question authority about my rights as a student was the most difficult experience I encountered in graduate school, and it left me overly distressed.

It took a while for me to be able to settle my own emotional upheavals, and since I played the role of a mother, what affected me at college seeped into my personal life. I realized the presence of the play of politics and people was hard on me. I was

familiar with such an atmosphere in the workplace, but certainly not in an institution where all I was trying to do was to invest my whole effort into academic pursuits. I guess, witnessing the display of unnecessary ineptness of people in charge and childishness of those in the academic field made me become more conscious of the fact that the attainment of degrees and extensive knowledge, did not necessarily make for a better individual. Within that circle exists issues of elitism, arrogance and attachment to ideals that refuse compromise.

I could do very little about the situation, but my challenge remained the same. I could try speaking up, I could try being assertive, I could even try making ripples, but that was not me. I didn't want to relinquish the values I was raised with. I wanted to be me, but being who I was meant quiet anguish and patience.

Cross Lines

Tell Me Your Expectations and I Will Abide. I Do Not Read Minds Nor Make Assumptions

My very last class and I will be done with course work. Finally, no more sitting for three hours at a stretch listening to talk. Professor Smith appeared nice, and seemed to have a following in the class, but what impressed me most was his efficiency at learning all our names. He came through as a very humble man who enjoyed the company of his students. And on several occasions, he invited students out for social drinks. I thought about joining the outings but was always too tired and wanted to get home instead, so I never went along.

"Just one paper at the end of semester and that is it," he told us. "Not to worry; all I want is for you to use some of the concepts that we have gone through in class and apply them to the topics that you are already researching for your graduate work. And, you'll all get the same grade, just a simple one-letter vowel. " He said.

That straightforward and simple, I thought to myself. But I still felt a responsibility to get insights for my proposed work. So I did what I usually do with my instructors and approached him in class to ask his opinion about my topic. "Sure," he said, "that sounds interesting." And when he asked us to sign up for an appointment, I wrote my name down as well and met him for further clarification and further insights.

Some time mid-semester, Professor Smith asked that we share our topics in class. I would usually sign up towards the end of semester so as to have a better idea of how such presentations are done and I did the same this time. My turn came in early November.

I was still nervous reading in the midst of an American college classroom, especially when I felt everyone else was way ahead of me in his or her scholarly growth. So when it came to my turn, I read my two-page narrative with a slight quiver in my voice, annoyed at myself that I still appeared nervous even after four years.

There was complete silence for a few seconds, before Professor Smith remarked how engaging the piece was. " You're a good writer I can see...I can't wait to read the rest of your paper." He added. Although I smiled and felt a sense of accomplishment, my thoughts were in panic as I realized that I now really had to fulfill his high expectations.

Over the course of the semester, some of us started asking each other about our final projects. There were no guidelines, and everything seemed open ended. I always sat with Lee, Yumi, and Anita in the same corner of the classroom. Since I was always there early I saved spots for all of them. Once when I was a little late and could not save a seat, Yumi came to class the next week and quietly whispered in my ears, "They're not that friendly over there. It feels good to be back in this corner."

Even Professor Smith noticed and once remarked about our little Asian enclave. But as we tried to figure out the final paper, we were stumped. " I guess he's not that fussy," I said. "So we'll just use some of the concepts and insert them into our topic." And that was it. Simple and straightforward.

Professor Smith wished us luck and bid us farewell on the last day of class. Papers turned in and I was finished once and for all with coursework.

Yes, grades still mattered to me but after four years and winding down to the end of the program, I had begun to relax a little. I was still bringing in the A's and was still averaging at a 4.0 GPA, nonetheless I was still concerned about how my work was evaluated.

We took a short family trip to California and I had quite forgotten about my final grade until we got back. One morning, I felt the urge to check it. Professor Smith had told us that we would all be getting A's so I wasn't too excited, but I was still curious.

As I looked at the final grade tally, A- jumped out at me. A-, what did that mean? Did I miss something? Why A- when Professor Smith had told us that everyone would be receiving the same grade?

It was in the middle of the summer vacation when I emailed Professor Smith asking for an appointment. I was unsure of his whereabouts but I was hopeful that he was in the country and he would be able to see me. Within a week, I heard back from him.

As I made my way into his office with my final paper in hand, I was overwhelmed with a certain sense of uncertainty. I wanted his feedback but I was also puzzled about my grade and didn't quite know what to expect.

Professor Smith looked drained. He had just returned from a trip overseas and was about to leave on another trip later that week. He knew I had come in to get feedback for my paper but as he explained to me his criteria for grading, I was astounded and couldn't believe what I was hearing. "What I was looking for was publishable material in your papers, and there were papers that were better than yours. So I graded them accordingly. You know how that is." He said. "Those that were excellent were given A+, then the A's and yours was just not up to the standard of it being publishable." he calmly explained.

Publishable papers? Had we been in the same classroom? Did I miss something in class when we kept asking about the papers? Not once was there any mention of publishable papers for I would have known to write one. We were given the impression that we just needed to show our understanding of the course content.

Then Professor Smith went on " The way you used this concept here is not very accurate; I don't see the connection you're making." No connection? Whatever happened to us being independently interpretive of our own work? How many times in the classroom did he allow multiple interpretations, never once correcting students or pointing out they were wrong. How was I to know how he interpreted the same concepts. I used my personal lens and I was wrong!

With no guidelines, nor rubrics, nor any explicit explanations, where was all this criteria coming from? I sat silent as I listened to his explanation. I did not want to point out that his instructions were not clear and he was imposing expectations that were masked. This was my last class, but nonetheless, it was disappointing to be told that I had not produced a better piece of work. I would have proven him wrong, if I had known what he was expecting.

He was a nice man, but as I walked out still stunned over that encounter, I thanked him politely and wished him luck in his work. Where had the communication broken down, I wondered to myself. I felt deceived and robbed of the opportunity to demonstrate my learning. Impressions were important and so was mastery. I left feeling I had failed in both.

Researcher's Notes

Rina is a mature, confident Asian woman who as a keen learner was enthusiastic about being in the graduate circle. For Rina, identity did not play such a pivotal role in college. She was able to maintain her N-Identity as an Asian and successfully maneuvered her way around the expectations with instructors and course work. She was aware of the academic world due to her own past experience working as an instructor at a college in Asia, and her understandings of the environment made it possible for her to interface multiple identities when necessary.

In the company of classmates she utilized her A-Identity (Affinity) in group discussions and class work. With instructors her I-Identity (Institutional) took charge and made her proactive to seek out additional support for her learning. The area of contention was within Discourse, whereby Rina fell short trying to take on the unexpected bends and corners in the road. She was frustrated with the challenge of constantly uncovering unspoken expectations and having at times to bear the brunt of second-guessing. Rina was intent on attaining a high degree of personal success and the blurry circumstances became unnecessary hurdles for her. With Rina, as long as the Discourse was clear, she didn't mind the challenge.

In Rina's Own Words: Being Asian in College

I know who I am. I am Asian. I have lived more than half my life in Asia and have values and norms strongly tied to the land of my ancestors. But I am also familiar with the ways of the western society. I was educated in both the British and American educational system, and I am comfortable being in an educational environment. My greatest concern when I started graduate school was if I was good enough to compete.

Compete, a word that denotes my Asian influence, since at school back home, we always had to be the very best; we strove to be the cream of the crop, and we had to bring in the highest scores.

Being the best was the only way one would receive recognition towards any accomplishment. And striving towards excellence was a means of enabling opportunities to present themselves.

We always had to prove our worth through academic success, thus entailing values such as diligence and commitment. For the Asian, no work is deemed insignificant, each task demands a personal responsibility. My experience of schooling in Asia emphasized the fact that success was within reach; it merely required dedication, hard work and always planning ahead.

Everyone in my circle of friends and family, had a college degree, and it did not matter if they lived in the villages or the cities. Completing high school was seen as a norm, and beyond that there had to be some form of higher education experience, be it an Associate degree or higher.

My parents always made it clear that we had to strive towards obtaining higher education, less would be a disappointment. So the cycle continued with my own children. That expectation had been imbedded in them since they were young.

Why I embarked on my personal educational pursuit, even when it was seen as unnecessary, was for one reason only - to make my parents proud. That was my motivating factor. Even as a mother, it was important that I fulfill the wishes of my parents. I wasn't in graduate school to pursue an illustrious career.

However, as much as I was prepared to dive into the formidable waters of life as a full time student, what caught me by surprise was the lack of guidance and collaborative work. There seemed to be broad assumptions and expectations that were unclear, yet they strongly dominated the environment.

I was simultaneously perplexed by the lack of compassion as well as sensitivity towards cultural differences. What I had envisioned as an arena for the exchange of ideas and development of deeper understandings of cultivating minds, turned out to be indoctrination of teachings. It appeared to me that there was only one model, and that model was privileged.

This is where I encountered struggles. I had to figure out discourses that were unfamiliar to me; discourses that allowed some to progress further, and discourses that had tunnel visions with no leeway. Whether it was in classroom communications, course and work expectations or general encounters with faculty and staff, these discourses created hurdles and made it seem like I was inadequate. Generally I felt that there were very limited avenues to shine or be acknowledged.

Even when I knew my way around the environment, disparities in discourse stood in my way.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Researcher's Notes

The Journey Through Murky Waters

Reflecting back I am taken to where it all started, at the Writing Center where I was a tutor where I met a number of foreign-born Asian students. Little did I realize then, as I sat listening attentively to their stories of tensions, frustrations as well as struggles, I would eventually end up researching the very same issues that plagued them. All I could do at that time was lend a listening ear and offer suggestions on how to bring up issues with their individual instructors. I hope my work now will reach the ears of others who can make a difference.

Back then, I was perplexed as to why foreign-born Asian students had such a hard time adjusting to the American college environment, but through course work and my own research, I now understand reasons underlying their struggles. These were all associated with issues that are part of Discourse, identity and cultural models.

I introduced the concept of murky waters in the beginning of my dissertation to denote the challenges faced by foreign-born Asian students when they seek clarity within the expectations of the institution. With the initial understanding of the struggles I witnessed with foreign-born Asian students in the Writing Center, I pursued looking deeper into this topic. Although the focus for the research was on my participants, Zaf and Rina, I realized as I spent time collecting data from them that we had parallel narratives and we endured similar journeys. In my graduate studies, I too experienced similar situations, and because of this I am able to relate well to the struggles encountered by Zaf and Rina to seek transparency.

Zaf, Rina and I are all foreign-born Asians and our experiences with Discourse, identity and cultural models became points of contention that propelled us into encounters of frustration and disillusionment as well as hopelessness. This study has

been an enriching experience for me as a researcher as I am now aware of my own position as a foreign-born Asian student within a U.S. college environment.

In order to understand the struggles of foreign-born Asians, I wondered if the challenges they faced were particularly associated with just identity or with Discourse or was it with cultural models? This is where ambiguity surfaces because through my research and analysis I have come to the understanding that it is all intertwined. Within issues of Discourse are struggles with identity as well as cultural models. And within cultural models are tensions with Discourse and identity. This is where the murkiness emerges.

Identity

Some of the tensions that Zaf, Rina, and I encountered were related to identity. Gee (2000) addresses the concept of identity as being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context. This was one area that was unknown to me as I could not quite figure out how we were perceived within the college environment. I constantly had to wonder what an instructors' opinion was of me. I never asked, but I would appease myself that it did not matter as I was there to get my degree and not build relationships. But as I progressed in my graduate program I began to understand the complexity of the graduate school climate. If I was not known, then my hope for a bright future was at stake. Zaf and Rina voiced the same concerns as well; Zaf even more so since he was fully invested in carving out a successful career for his future and needed to fit his identity with that of the institutional expectations.

For all three of us the I-Identity (institutional imposition) expected us to be assertive, to interrupt another person's speech if we wanted to be heard, or speak more loudly than the next person so we could get the instructor's attention. It was obvious that in order to assimilate, we had to literally take on an academic identity that was new to us. As simple as this may seem, for me as well as Rina, often when we spoke in class,

the instructors tended to say *Excuse me?* Having to repeat what we had just said was always uncomfortable and especially so when it was recurring. I knew I did not have a heavy accent, but I was not accustomed to projecting my voice. And practice as I may, my contributions in class were always met with more, *Excuse Me?*

As insignificant as it may seem for those not in our shoes, for both Rina and I, the more we had to assert ourselves and project our voices, the more we withdrew into our protected shells. It took energy and effort to be assertive and in the end, Rina and I both believed that our contributions really had no impact on how we were perceived by others. Instead we both resorted to simply focusing on our own personal knowledge enrichment. We read what we were supposed to read for courses, and we shared our knowledge within our own personal circles. It made more sense to us that we spoke of our understandings to people who were interested listeners, even though, for the most part, they were not related to the academic institution.

Being misperceived was common for Zaf, Rina, and I. We all knew that we possessed a D-Identity that made us inclined to be more reserved within a classroom environment. I sensed that the times I remained quiet in contemplation to absorb new information, I appeared passive. I often wondered, *What I should do?* Try to join in or pay more attention to the instructor's teaching? To me the learning was what I valued most, and there were instances when I was unwilling to compromise. So it was to be that for the most part I stayed away from certain participatory practices in the classroom, such as when instructors asked for comments or questions. I was contented with what was delivered in the lecture and wasn't too interested in the group or open discussions. Zaf and Rina shared how they too wanted to pay close attention to what was being said by the instructor and noticed how this made them almost invisible in the classroom.

For me what was important in graduate school was to be more of a learner. I knew how to do that well: I paid attention, took notes and did all my assignments. Nonetheless, there were moments when I wondered about my own ineptness and was rather frustrated with myself, wondering why I was not comfortable and why I was not accepted as a member of the classroom Discourse. I was quick to blame this on my personal Discourse, but over time, I began to understand that there was only so much I could do. Even when I attempted to fit in on many occasions, to offer opinions or insights and attempted to be mildly critical of the readings we did, I felt I failed more than I succeeded. My attempts seemed almost futile.

Zaf, Rina, and I experienced the tensions of juggling identities. We all understood the necessity to compromise, to adapt and to assimilate. Nonetheless, it was a huge undertaking. Taking on a different identity was not simple; it was not as easy as just speaking up more loudly. There were issues of personal background and cultural values that accompanied my identity. Without knowing these traits, the task was difficult. For me, personally, I felt uncomfortable when it became obvious that I was expected to take on new traits like challenging another person's insights or questioning an opinion. I was not used to engaging in an assertive manner and I was unwilling to compromise my own values.

The Role of Discourse

The understanding of Discourse as explained by Gee (2005) is that we are who we are through our words, deeds, actions, beliefs, values, mannerisms and an extensive array of traits that define us. In college classrooms there is a discourse (particular ways in which environments function) that is tightly related to practices that are used in K-12 schooling in the United States. For those who are accustomed to such practices, the college classroom becomes a familiar setting. I was unaware that such a Discourse existed until I took Dr. Gee's classes. It became clear to me that for students who had

undergone their K-12 schooling in the U.S. the American classroom Discourse was well understood by the time they went to college. I did not have my K-12 experience in the U.S and even though I did my undergraduate studies in a college in the Midwest, I realized that my four-year undergraduate experience was very different. The particular college I went to was particularly accommodating toward diversity and cultural differences. I was able to be myself and I was not required to learn a new Discourse. However, this undergraduate experience left me still unfamiliar with the general institutional Discourse in the U.S.

Upbringing and core values permeate one's being and create the foundation for personal Discourse. There were several areas of tension that Zaf, Rina, and I experienced, and part of it was related to our Asian Discourse. We had deep respect for learning and educators, and as students we were comfortable with accepting the teachings of learned people without question. We were raised in a society that held high regard for scholars and scholarly work and yet in an American classroom, we were told to 'tear other people's work apart'. I felt my position as a graduate student did not warrant my disrespect to those whom I considered more learned than me. My personal perception of published work left me in a bind, so I held back from being judgmental.

Although at times, I felt compelled to take part in the practice of critiquing scholarly work, this nonetheless resulted in internal tensions for me. The act of judging and finding fault with others went against my personal values and it tore at the core of my being. Time and time again, I felt a need to conform, but with every attempt I made, it did not feel right. Instead it felt really awkward. I had heard from others how Asians were perceived to be passive, thus lacking critical thinking skills. However, this passivity has been misconstrued. Zaf, Rina, and I, are inherently deep thinkers. We are keen observers with a tendency toward being analytical thinkers. This passivity allows us to contemplate and explore understandings deeply.

I was brought up to accept differences in people and practices as well as opinions. It never bothered me that there was incongruence in how similar issues were perceived differently by others. Differences of opinions were a non-issue to me. I had opinions and views, but the way I dealt with opposing ideas was to disregard what I deemed as unworthy and utilize those ideas that were valuable.

For me, no matter how long I was in the program, I still perceived the act of critique by students as blatant and inappropriate arrogance. I really did not see any purpose in such a pursuit even though I was aware that my reluctance to offer criticism was perceived as a failure to demonstrate scholarly contributions and forwardness.

Through this complex web, I wanted to find balance with the compassionate person that others saw in me and I wanted to accept new knowledge at the same time. I was adamant that my role as a graduate student was not going to change my Discourse, and I came to the conclusion that my academic pursuits had to reflect my values in the end; as such, I was unwilling to compromise what I believed in and I eventually chose to function within my own Discourse. This was true with Rina as well, although Zaf, probably due to his age and familiarity with the American educational environment, managed to find a workable balance to this dilemma of Discourse.

Another classroom expectation that became an area of conflict for me was classroom participation. What did participation mean? To me it meant full engagement during class, not necessarily verbal contributions. I perceived the act of verbal engagement as a heavy responsibility on the individual and any form of contribution in a public setting had to be worthwhile. This was another trait in my Discourse whereby I was raised to value meaningful speech drawn from deep understandings. Unless I had what I perceived as valuable to contribute, I would rather abstain from speaking. For me, it was more respectful to remain silent than to engage in empty talk. But I did make

attempts to assimilate into the classroom Discourse when I saw the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

In class during open discussion, I would raise my hand and then wait patiently to be called upon. But that did not seem to work as others would jump in and talk without the initiation of a hand raise, and at the end, I was left unnoticed, or at times too late to add my already mentioned thoughts. There were also times when people would talk over me or barge in before I could complete what I was attempting to share and that left me a little flustered. In the rare instances when I managed to share my thoughts, they were not received with much enthusiasm, but rather left hanging as if no one appeared to be remotely interested in my views.

During the times when I felt I had something of significance to share, I was often left puzzled by why instructors appeared uninterested in my responses. There was very little follow up to what I said, unlike what I witnessed as the norm with other students. I suspected that instructors could not quite relate to my ideas, thus they had no additional remarks to offer. My thoughts and insights may have seemed remotely different due to disparities in our Discourse. American students would state how my perspective was different and interesting in group discussions, but that was as far as it went. We seemed to have tangential ideas that could have been explored if the opportunity had been presented.

I spoke English well, but the disparity in the English that I spoke was evident in communicative practices. People from the region of Asia that Zaf, Rina, and I come from speak British English, which is quite different from American English. I was often left dumbfounded as to why I could never accomplish ease with communicating; I seemed to be held back by a lack of verbosity and efficiency of speech. By the time I processed ideas and wanted to share them, I was too late, and over time I took it as my being personally incompetent.

So I stopped participating and sat back and listened. These traits that I possessed clashed with the classroom Discourse. I sensed that my perceived passiveness misconstrued me as being incapable, but after a while, I stopped worrying about how others perceived me. It did not matter any more.

I did what I deemed necessary to walk the path of a graduate student in the U.S. I knew I possessed a wealth of prior knowledge but there was very little opportunity to share this. In Asia when I was an instructor at the university, we were encouraged to conduct our own research projects. On two separate occasions, I partnered up with a graduate student to present research papers at conferences. So I was familiar with the college culture there.

Now that I was a graduate student here, I presented papers when the opportunity arose, mostly at conferences held at the university; but I was always on my own. I was aware that my presentations were unimpressive by the way my small audience reacted, but I also knew I went into the presentations alone with no guidance. One can only take a sense of failure so much and after two solo presentations, I called it quits. Not that I shied away from people but whatever it was that held others back from seeing any potential in me, seemed to have kept people away.

The Implications of Cultural Models

It may seem unfathomable that a person's cultural model affects learning and participation in college, but the reality is that it does. Gee defines (1999) cultural models as "storylines, families of connected images (like a mental movie) or (informal) theories shared by people belonging to specific social or cultural groups. Cultural models exist on an unconscious level and operate on a taken for granted dimension" (p.20).

Rina and I struggled with having different cultural models since we were both educated in Asia and these occasionally contributed to our apparent ignorance and awkwardness. However, it surprised me that Zaf, too, encountered issues within the

college classroom setting. I wondered if this may have been attributed to his Asian values and personality.

I never understood why I felt left out in my classes among other graduate students who were bursting with opinions. While I sat quietly, feverishly taking notes, I seemed to become almost non-existent. I wondered whether note taking had become outdated and obsolete, but for me learning centered on holding onto the teachings of the professor; recording those words on paper for future learning was imperative.

And yet, what was taking place in my classrooms was talking, continuous talking and interruptions by students. My initial thoughts were that of annoyance, *how disruptive can some students be!* I complained to my own family members occasionally, but as time went on and this behavior continued, I realized that this was the accepted cultural model in an American classroom. I can only imagine the conversations that took place at Zaf and Rina's dinner table. They, too, must have pondered over these very same issues. During the course of my studies, I felt I was challenged and pulled in many different directions. I was more of an auditory learner, and I was intent on taking notes and being attentive as I processed information to be stored as new learning. It never occurred to me that my style of learning appeared awkward with professors in a graduate classroom.

For me, new knowledge took time to be digested. I was always more interested in listening to the instructor in order to fully comprehend the sharing of his expertise, thus I was comfortable being an active listener. I did not put as much value in what students had to share because the way I viewed the environment was that I was in the midst of an expert and truly valued the teachings of the instructor. Zaf and Rina shared similar experiences as well in their vignettes.

During the instances when we were expected to share our thoughts, it became a challenge for me. Within the span of three hours during classes I had to listen, to ask questions, and to discuss issues, all of which was beyond overwhelming. As an auditory

learner, I had to put my learning on hold while I discussed topics that were still unfamiliar to me. I knew I was not very successful during these attempts.

I was getting straight A's, keeping up with all the assignments but was not able to fully participate in class; I felt that my work was not validated; I was not seen or recognized. In addition, I was relatively in the dark about my own work, and never knew the potential I had or even if there were areas of strength that I could pursue. All I did in graduate school was read and mechanically churn out papers. There were moments when I felt that good grades did not mean much since it appeared I could not carry on an intelligent conversation with renowned people in my field and my name did not appear in widely read academic publications. I was an unknown - no one knew me. My previous degree and experiences meant very little. That was a sad reality.

I often wondered what the measure was of a good student in America? For the first time, I felt that all my hard work went unnoticed. This was also shared by both Zaf and Rina. All three of us were high achievers, and Zaf in particular took the absence of acknowledgement personally in instances when he too wondered if his work was of any value. In the classroom, I felt my identity as an Asian played no significant role in graduate school. Zaf, Rina, and I felt that we were not valued for the 'good student' characteristics we brought to class. Our quiet, attentive ears perked up and eyes in constant visual sight of the instructor were not seen as an indication of intelligence. Why I say this is only because not once did I sense any reciprocity from my instructors. Oftentime my quiet demeanor seemed to perpetuate discomfort in others.

During my Master's program, I could always count on being with my Asian counterparts in class. With them, I was at least considered another fellow learner. But in my doctoral program, every semester, I would walk into a classroom, scan the room around me to see if I knew anyone, and even when I recognized faces, I could tell from the blank stares I got back that not too many people recognized me. There never

appeared to be any purposeful connection beyond sitting together in the classroom for three hours at a stretch.

There were times when I had to take a moment to ponder over how I was progressing in the program. I made acquaintances but not really good friends. Part of the problem was that as graduate students, we were not given the opportunity to truly become acclimated to the environment. I noticed how other students in the program knew their way around the graduate environment; they skillfully fostered strong relationships with their instructors and seemed to have a rapport that supported their participation in the program that would take them further in their career pursuits. Zaf and Rina talked about these issues at length and how frustrated they were with not knowing how to make this vital yet necessary connection.

As I watched and listened in on students who talked about their collaborative work with professors in publications, research and conferences, I wondered how they had that door of opportunity opened to them. What was I lacking that left me out? Whatever I did, I had to establish it on my own. I was independent and persistent in my own pursuits, but I also felt that I was an unknown. After four years of graduate school, and attempts to reach out and make the necessary connections, I feel I have done my part even if I was unsuccessful.

Even though I may have sat in quiet attentiveness in classes, I pursued making connections with all of my instructors as much as I could. I always approached them in the classroom and made sure I took time to stop by at their offices for insights into the course materials or discussions about my writing.

I can attest to the fact that not a single professor did not get to know me by the end of each semester. But even with the effort I invested in trying to establish myself within the graduate community, I did not seem to leave any strong impressions. Try as I may, there always seem to be a barrier in the student/professor relationship. Something

was missing; I did not feel like I was welcomed or that I belonged. And I did not feel that I had the door open to me to establish any form of professional relationship with faculty.

Zaf, Rina, and I recognized that traits such as independence were a strength and perseverance was an asset but in graduate school we all needed to be connected, to build bridges. If we ever wanted a career, we needed to have a network, the names that we could associate ourselves with to gain recognition, access and respect.

It was not easy to gain access into this world. Zaf, Rina, and I, all tried, we did not hold back, but somehow we did not seem to have the necessary know how. I tried, on several occasions to establish a good impression of myself, but something was missing, and I didn't know what it was. No one seemed to be too interested in my abilities; no one seemed to place any value on what I could bring to the academic arena.

As foreign-born students we each felt that we were not given the opportunity to learn how to conduct ourselves in the manner in which we were expected to. Zaf, Rina and I desperately wanted to be part of the learning community and yet, we felt not only unaccepted, but that we didn't belong, and the sad part was that we didn't know how to belong.

There were times when we felt true isolation and that we were invisible. No one seemed to recognize our potential. And unless we were able to express ourselves, no one would know these understandings we had. We all wondered, at various points in our academic journey, who we were in the midst of the program? Was being a good student sufficient?

Through my research with Zaf and Rina and my own personal reflections, I am now more informed of the issues that impact Asian students' success in college.

I visualize when I walk away from the commencement ceremony that I will walk with a single piece of paper that recognizes my participation in graduate school. As with

Zaf and Rina, I too have invested my sweat and toil and in my own way. I have established my own library of understandings and journals of knowledge.

I leave the institution with memories of the people who were instrumental in my learning, those who provided invaluable insights, those who challenged me to become stronger and those precious few who offered their unconditional support. As my academic pursuit comes to a close, my place in academia is still unknown but for now my journey is complete. Zaf, Rina, and I waded through the murky waters. Our labors did not offer absolute clarity, but through it all, we succeeded in defining our individual personal clarity.

I am who I am, and because of all this I know I have accomplished.

Closing Chapter

Recommendations

When I started on this quest of telling the stories of my foreign-born Asian counterparts, I did not anticipate the magnitude of misperceptions that existed within the college environment. Over and over again I came across stories of cultural misconceptions that could not be rectified. Over and over again I heard tales of frustration and disillusion that went unnoticed. But the most troubling aspect of the foreign-born Asian students' reality is the misguided perception that they are inferior and no matter how hard they try, they can never be good enough.

As I read through research and literature to gather insights into my dissertation work, I was perplexed over the discrepancies that existed within the scholarly community. On one hand there was overwhelming literature written about the model minority phenomena and the great success of Asian students. However, I found sparse literature that addressed the issues and struggles faced by the foreign-born Asian student population. This, I think is attributed to the fact that that Asian students are grouped together as a homogenous group under the misguided assumption that all Asian

students, even though they are from a multitude of countries and provinces with distinct cultural differences, are part of the model minority cluster.

I recommend that institutions recognize the reality that Asian students are a heterogeneous group as a first step towards rectifying this problem. It is imperative that past erroneous perceptions pertaining to the model minority stereotype be dispelled since inaccuracies have resulted in generalizing assumptions of Asian students' capabilities.

For students, being in college is a life adjustment, but this is especially true for those who are adapting to a new environment. I noticed how issues of not knowing how to maneuver the college environment was brought to the surface when I listened to my foreign-born counterparts, and I also saw this in the data I collected from my participants. Teranishi et al (2011) address how challenges faced by Asian college students correlate to "adjustment, isolation, and poor self-efficacy" (p. 164). It has also been noted that students' experience with the academic community impacts a sense of belonging and a positive outlook of oneself within the education process (Tinto, 1987; Astin, 1993; Pace, 1984).

I suggest that institutions actively involve and respond to the needs of students to address this by fostering a collaborative effort to provide support services that involve counseling as well as faculty mentoring (Teranishi et al, 2011). This could be achieved through scaffolding which involves supporting foreign-born Asians learn about their new environment gradually in the least complex manner until they are able to navigate themselves independently. The goal towards scaffolding is to facilitate the creation of a safe environment within classrooms that encourages peer support and informal counseling "whereby students can converse with and learn from each other" (Teranishi et al, 2011, p.16). I foresee the building of collaborative relationships, such as peer mentoring, as well as additional course tutorials with instructors, within a supportive

learning community as a means of reaching out to especially foreign-born Asian students who struggle with clarity and fostering relationships.

So much of what is expected of these students in mainstream American society is not apparent to Asian eyes as it is to American students. While American students are familiar with instructional and classroom Discourses, other students may become disoriented due to the lack of experience and/or knowledge of the appropriate Discourse used within American classrooms. The danger with this unfamiliarity is that it may result in misconceptions related to the participation and intelligence of foreign-born Asian students. Here I propose that institutions assist by making implicit practices explicit through supportive coaching programs where program counselors are made available to provide insights into expected Discourse patterns, as well as classroom support skills such as techniques for studying, note taking and test taking skills. These practices are supported by work done by Szelenyi and Chang (2005).

As I witnessed the struggles of my foreign-born Asian counterparts, I could not help but feel a heavy burden of helplessness for them. I knew that no matter how hard they tried to share the wealth of knowledge and experiences they possessed, it was likely no one would be interested. On the contrary, what others focused on were their inadequacies or lack of mainstream cultural capital. These foreign-born Asian students seldom received recognition for their efforts and diverse insights. When what they had to share was different, it was viewed as incompatible with academic standards.

Because cultural differences can affect students' learning styles, participation in class and interaction with faculty and peers, I propose that there be transparency within institutional practices and expectations. Through designing programs that offer mentorship throughout the course of their study, foreign-born Asian students can be mentored by faculty and staff on how to navigate their way through different classroom Discourses and institutional tasks. College expectations extend beyond course work and

one of the areas that impacts student success lies in effective communicative practices. It is here that students are usually left to tread murky waters on their own, oblivious to communicative norms that lurk within the U.S. college culture. The need to assist students in this area is vital since failure to achieve a positive relationship can lead to students misrepresenting themselves with instructors, resulting in doors to open communications being closed when students are perceived as being 'rude' and demanding.

But students are only half of the equation towards academic success. Here I task institutions to offer programs that train faculty about the diversity of foreign-born students, their learning styles as well as ways of communicating. A one-size-fits-all classroom Discourse needs to be reevaluated in order to encourage institutions and faculty to develop strategies for teaching effectiveness tailored for a diverse student population. This is supported by Otten (2003) who cites Hurtado (1996) in advocating that there should be greater attention devoted to helping and motivating faculty and teaching assistants to develop a repertoire of instructional methodology that respects cultural differences and addresses vast learning styles. This is in line with the understanding that utilizing diverse teaching methods and varied models of course assignments allows students to apply different skills of knowledge (re) production which can be more applicable to the typical American problem-solving based learning (Otten,2003).

In conclusion, I think it is important that institutions develop a campus climate that is inclusionary. This is possible with the collaboration of the office of international students that needs to reach out to the different colleges for sensitivity training that strives to inculcate a positive college environment which welcomes and holds high regard for diversity. For students and institutions, the real challenge is to come to a better understanding of how both groups can work together to address the needs of students.

In this world of merging cultures and educational aspirations, it is timely that institutions come to recognize the vital role they hold in assisting and providing all students with adequate support and services to provide clarity and transparency within the higher education environment.

Show us how to be better students, teach us the appropriate academic Discourse and guide us towards becoming successful within the college environment. We are lifelong learners; all we want is to be shown the way so we can continue on our educational journey independently. We do not expect help; what we need is guidance. These are the echoes from the voices of foreign-born Asian students within a U.S higher education institution.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- When you first entered college, what were some of the perceptions you had about how you would experience college, pursue your academic work and foster relationships?
- As an Asian, what were the greatest challenges experienced in college?
 - were you accepted by peers and instructors?
 - did these struggles prevail throughout your time in college?
- How did your Asian identity affect:
 - how you presented yourself to others
 - how you think others may have perceived you in college
- When and how did you become aware of the concepts of identity, ways of communicating and being as well as differences in your cultural model with that of the institution?
- What role has your Asian roots played in your schooling career?
- Do you think it is important to affiliate with other Asian students? Why or why not?
- What are some of the circumstances that helped you during the times when you faced challenges related to classroom and institutional experiences?
- What gave/gives you the purpose to pursue your goals?
- How do you account for your academic success in college?
- What relationships were of significance to you and supported your educational journey?
- Were there individuals or programs that assisted you in pursuing your goals?
- What insights can you offer that could assist Asian students like you in their college experiences?

APPENDIX B
GUIDED QUESTIONS

The following are the second set of guided questions:

- Why do you think you struggled with being recognized? Was it just the lack of social skills or was it related to your racial identity?
- Describe:
 - some of your experiences with instructors/ classmates, if there were difficulties in communicating
 - what you thought about your own identity, were you upset with the system, did you feel alienated, were you self-conscious?
 - your personality and your positive attributes
- Why do you think you could relate to some of your American friends? Was it due to similar values, view of life?
- How much did you reflect on your own accomplishments in college and felt successful, if not explain.
- As you reflect on your college experiences, would you have done anything differently without compromising your identity and cultural values?

