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Abstract: This article highlights the capacity of an Asian American, Native American and Pacific Islander Institution (AANAPISI) to serve as an institutional convertor—by addressing challenges commonly associated with marginalized students—for low-income, Asian American and Pacific Islander students entering college. Through an in-depth case study, we explored the extent to which an AANAPISI-funded program, the Full Circle Project, improved students' ability to overcome barriers. We found that this program—an extension of the institution—acknowledges students' circumstances, thereby helping them to plug into an otherwise inaccessible, rough college terrain. We conclude with a discussion and implications for theory and practice.

When traveling internationally, it is often necessary to use power converters in order to plug into and access the unique outlets designed by various countries. These converters allow visitors to the country to tap into the electrical circuit that they would otherwise be unable to access. In much the same way, institutions of higher education function as entities with particular types of outlets through which students can plug into and access courses, student support services, social opportunities, and professional development among other offerings. Many of these outlets are designed for a particular type of student, commonly referred to as "traditional" college students, or those who are "more familiar with higher education from listening to family members' academic histories" (Collier & Morgan, 2008 p. 430). Given the rapidly changing demography of students in U.S. higher education across race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and sexuality, a looming question emerges: what about students who cannot simply plug into the traditional postsecondary outlets? As the population of non-traditional students—racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, students working while enrolled, students who delay matriculation—grows, the need to account for their unique characteristics becomes even more urgent. As longstanding, tradition-bound entities, colleges and universities remain rooted in practices and policies that contribute to racial disparities in college completion. Based on an in-depth case study derived from a larger national study on Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), this paper highlights the efforts of California

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State University-Sacramento's (Sac State) Full Circle Project (FCP) and its capacity to serve as a converter—to address challenges commonly associated with non-traditional students—for its low-income Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students. Rather than forcing students to adapt to the conditions and expectations set forth by the institution, the FCP represents the effort of the institution to acknowledge circumstances that shape students' pathway to degree by responding to their unique needs, and helping them to plug into an otherwise inaccessible, challenging college terrain.

Sac State's focus on AAPI students is particularly noteworthy in higher education as Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In California specifically, AAPIs comprise 15.9% of the state's population. Additionally, California has the largest AAPI population, at 5.9 million, compared to all other states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Indeed, this growth in population is also reflected in an increase in AAPI college enrollment. From 1979 to 2009, AAPI enrollment grew five-fold, and college enrollment for AAPIs is expected to increase 35% over the next decade (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2014). Broadly speaking, where California is not an exception, AAPI college students are often perceived as academically high achieving and overrepresented at the most elite universities, while boasting some of the highest rates of persistence and graduation among all students. Unfortunately, the model minority myth—the misperception that AAPIs experience unparalleled and universal academic and social success (Chou & Feagin, 2008)—is associated with the Asian racial category, but does not represent the diverse experiences of all subgroups under this umbrella term. This misunderstanding of AAPI students' educational circumstance can lead to detrimental outcomes for students, particularly if faculty, administrators, and elected leaders are uneducated and uninformed when making important policy and pedagogical decisions.

In 2007, when Congress passed the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, the rising awareness of the struggles confronted by AAPI students lead to the implementation of a new MSI designation: Asian American and Native American, Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs; Park & Chang, 2010). As the newest MSI designation, the AANAPISI program, like its Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Tribal College and Universities (TCUs) counterparts, is housed in the U.S Department of Education and provides federal funding for colleges and universities. The main purpose of the AANAPISI program is to "support institutions of higher education in their effort to increase their self-sufficiency through two-year grants to improve academic programs, institutional management, and fiscal stability" (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). To be designated and subsequently submit a proposal for funds,

institutions must be accredited, enroll at least ten percent AAPI student population, meet a minimum threshold of low socioeconomic status (SES) students, and have a lower than average education and general expenditures per student (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2012). Over the past six years, AANAPISIs have increased in number, with over 20 institutions now designated and receiving federal funding (CARE, 2013). Almost half of the institutions that received AANAPISI funding are located in California (CRS, 2012). Sac State is one of California's 11 AANAPISIs where AAPIs comprise of 20% of the total student population (see Table 1).

Given the concentration of low-income, AAPIs enrolled at Sac State, where 49.9% of AAPIs are Pell Grant eligible (Office of Institutional Research, 2015), the AANAPISI-funded FCP is a critical addition to the campus. The FCP demonstrates the valuable impact that AANAPISIs—with culturally relevant and ethnically responsive approaches—can have on nontraditional students who are often overlooked or forced to navigate the academic path on their own. To spotlight FCP's function as an educational converter and the relative impact on students, the study is guided by the following question: How does the FCP foster the positive adjustment to college for low-income AAPIs, and in turn, improve the match between what Sac State offers and what students need to succeed?

Through a nuanced exploration of the FCP, our findings speak to how institutions can better embody and put into practice actionable equity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby improving the cultural mismatch with their students. This investigation builds upon a limited number of empirical reports and conceptual papers (CARE, 2014; Park & Chang, 2010; Park & Teranishi, 2008) that discuss the role of AANAPISIs in higher education and evaluates their effects on students, thereby leaving the qualitative process in which AANAPISI funded programs mediate student outcomes unexamined. As such, this study contributes to the existing empirical literature on MSIs as well as provides opportunities for future lines of inquiry on AANAPISIs and their impact on AAPI students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Students in Higher Education

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students are a highly misunderstood population, in part because educational research continues to ignore the vast diversity within this broader community by refraining from questioning the assumptions that boast AAPI communities as universally successful (Museus & Kiang, 2009). This simplified notion is captured under the "model minority myth," an enduring narrative of social and economic achievement that thrives on the politics of identifying AAPIs as evidence

TABLE 1.
ENROLLMENT AT CALIFORNIA BASED AANAPISIS

Institution	Control	Total Enrollment (N)	AAPI Enrollement (N)	AAPI Enrollement (%)
California State University-East Bay	Public, 4 Year	13851	3444	25%
California State University-Sacramento	Public, 4 Year	28539	5736	20%
City College of San Francisco	Public, 2 Year	30106	10460	35%
Coastline Community College	Public, 2 Year	9381	2580	28%
De Anza College	Public, 2 Year	23833	8565	36%
Laney College	Public, 2 Year	11387	3114	27%
Mission College	Public, 2 Year	9879	4532	46%
Mt. San Antonio College	Public, 2 Year	28036	5222	19%
San Jose State University	Public, 4 Year	30448	10030	33%
Santa Monica College	Public, 2 Year	30254	3526	12%

Note: N reflects the number of students enrolled Source: IPEDS, 2012

that success in life is solely dependent on self-perseverance and hard work (Chou & Feagin, 2008). The myth ignores the structural forces that play a powerful role in constraining AAPI access to resources and opportunities required for upward social mobility. A dangerous consequence of sustaining this concept to explain AAPI educational outcomes is the exclusion of narratives that reflect the rich cultural, historical, and linguistic diversity among AAPI ethnicities and that shape the manner in which students from these communities achieve *and* struggle in postsecondary education. This is amplified by the failure of many institutions, government agencies and research organizations to collect, utilize and report disaggregated data by ethnicity, which cultivates dubious conditions to pursue research on AAPI students struggling to succeed (CARE, 2013; Hune, 2002; Museus & Truong, 2009; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Chaudhari, 2013; Suzuki, 2002; Teranishi, 2010).

However, when analyzed as a single group, AAPI students in postsecondary education appear to succeed at every traditional measure of academic achievement (e.g., degree attainment), when compared to all other racial groups (CARE, 2013; Hune, 2002). For instance, AAPIs make up 44% of the adult (aged 25 years and older) with a bachelor's degree or higher, nearly 20 percent greater than the U.S. average (CARE, 2008). These data present a picture of collective social progress, but they also hide the unequal distribution of barriers across different AAPI groups. For example, whereas 24.4% of the U.S. population aged 25 years and older possess a bachelor's degree or higher, only 7.5% of Hmong, 9.2% of Cambodian, 7.7% of Lao, and 19.4% of Vietnamese communities find themselves with a credential necessary to access opportunities in the workforce.

AAPI students face additional challenges associated with low SES (Museus & Vue, 2013, Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004). According to Museus and Vue (2013), not only do SES disparities exist within the AAPI community, development "of expectations for, applying to, and matriculating in college" (p. 68) are positively associated with higher SES AAPI students, echoing the broader literature related to SES and postsecondary education outcomes; students from lower SES are less likely to witness similar levels of academic and professional success (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Laureau, 2011; McDonough, 1997). In a seminal study based on a national representative sample of AAPIs, Teranishi et al. (2004) observed how ethnicity and SES shape the college choice process across the different ethnic groups. Larger portions of Chinese and Koreans chose to attend highly selective institutions than Filipinos and Southeast Asians (Hmong, Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese). The latter two groups also had the greatest representation of students in the lowest income bracket attending a four-year public institution. In fact, "Southeast Asians (29.5%) were also most likely to choose a college because of low-tuition" (Teranishi

et al., 2004, p. 538). Findings from these study highlight the nuances of SES in the college choice process across AAPI students and how these differences influence their performance in college, especially those students from AAPI communities disproportionately living below poverty (CARE, 2008). Researchers have attributed these disparities to how the structure of many postsecondary institutions can encourage and constrain opportunity and progress, often privileging White students from middle- to upper-class backgrounds (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Karabel, 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2007; Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008).

In *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) observe and document the experiences of several young, White women at a single mid-west, public flagship institution, all of whom were admitted on the same academic criteria but experienced college differently—some favorably, and others not—because of their SES. Students from more affluent backgrounds were suited for the culture and opportunities espoused by the university, whereas students from more working class families found themselves out of place and unable to translate the benefits of college into the workforce; a few even dropped out of school entirely. The authors argue that access to college does not necessarily lead to success in and after college because low SES students typically stem from backgrounds incompatible with the manner in which colleges are structured—course offerings and availabilities, access to majors associated with lucrative salaries, and social events that are tailored to amplify elite dispositions and sensibilities. Although the claim that institutions operate to sort and stratify populations is well established (Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008), what is less understood are the efforts to alter these structures—even slightly—to suit the needs and to improve the outcomes of underserved student populations. The current study examines what it means when traditional structure is altered to improve the cultural alignment between low-income, AAPI students and Sac State.

Minority Serving Institutions and AANAPISIs

Within U.S. postsecondary education, a significant effort to improve the educational attainment of racial minority and low-SES students can be located within the nation's 651 Minority Serving Institutions (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions, n.d.). MSIs—including HSIs, HBCUs, TCUs, and AANAPISIs —are federally designated not-for-profit, two- and four-year private and public institutions committed to the achievement of their respective target populations. Whereas HBCUs and TCUs emerged out of compensatory rationale, AANAPISIs and HSIs grew out of major demographic shifts in the AAPI and Latino populations, respectively. Our approach to understanding how AANAPISIs embody their designation is distinct from investigating HBCUs and TCUs. Whereas many of the HBCUs and TCUs were built for and led by their own communities,

AANAPISIs are formerly predominately White institutions (PWIs), many of which continue to maintain former—and durable—structures that better suit traditional (i.e., White, middle- to upper-class) students. The empirical investigation brought forth in this study captures this unique distinction and critical challenge to examining MSIs as similar institutions.

Empirical research on MSIs finds that target students accrue significant benefits during their tenure in college. They can provide an institutional environment that is attuned with and supportive of students' backgrounds and cultural attributes (Guardia & Evans, 2008). Students have a greater likelihood of finding same-race faculty (Hubbard & Stage, 2009; Perna et al., 2009) and staff (Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006), who are sensitive to students' needs. They have been known to provide students with the rich social capital needed to understand and navigate collegial norms (Brown & Davis, 2001) and opportunities to engage in culturally specific events and activities that reaffirm their sense of belonging (Davis, 1991; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). In a national study (Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, & Williams, 2007) comparing African American and Hispanic students at HBCUs and HSIs, respectively, to their counterparts enrolled at PWIs, African American students at HBCUs had greater engagement with both academic and campus life as opposed to African American students at PWIs. There was no significant difference, however, between Hispanics attending an HSI or PWI. Researchers have attributed the lack of an effect to the fact that many HSIs were initially PWIs, and some have yet to wholly embrace their HSI identity, both in theory and practice (Contreras, Malcolm, & Bensimon, 2008). Cueller's (2014) study comparing HSIs, emerging HSIs, and non-HSIs indicates that Latina/os students enrolling at HSIs start their college tenure with the lowest level of academic self-concept, yet "develop a stronger sense of their academic potential in the following years" (p. 518). Other studies demonstrate that attending an HBCU or HSI does not offer any substantial advantages or disadvantages as it relates to graduation rates (Flores & Park, 2013; Kim & Conrad, 2006) and learning outcomes (Kim, 2002). Despite the burgeoning research on MSIs, AANAPISIs are the least represented in empirical work as they are the newest addition to the federal program.

AANAPISIs are split between two-year (n = 12) and four-year (n = 9) public institutions with a total of 21 institutions currently participating in the program (CRS, 2012). According to Fall 2012 enrollment data from IPEDS, the 21 AANAPISIs enrolled a total of 85,699 AAPI students, representing 6.5% of the nation's total AAPI undergraduate population. It should be noted that AANAPISI funds are generally granted to open access institutions (CRS, 2012). Nonetheless, there are 146 institutions that are eligible to apply for and receive AANAPISI funding (CRS, 2012). Most AANAPISIs translate these goals into three objectives (Teranishi, 2011):

(1) *Academic and Student Support Services:* increase access to and utilization of academic counseling, learning communities, financial aid counseling, and tutoring programs, which help students to be more academically engaged and improve retention and degree attainment.

(2) *Leadership and Mentorship Opportunities*: provide students with leadership development and mentorship opportunities, which increase academic and social engagement among AAPI students and improve their academic and career trajectories.

(3) *Research and Resource Development*: improve the quality of statistical information on AAPI students. This more accurately reflects the variations that exist between AAPI ethnic subgroups and develops better systems for tracking student progress and degree-attainment rates. (p. 153)

The need to examine AANAPISIs complements the growing literature on MSIs and addresses a distinct gap that exists in higher education research. Additionally, AANAPISIs are critically "important for the AAPI community because it encourages campuses that serve disproportionately high numbers of low-income AAPI students to pursue innovative and targeted strategies that respond to those students' unique needs" while signaling "a national commitment to the AAPI community, rightfully acknowledging low-income AAPI students as a population that faces barriers similar to those of other minority groups" (CARE, 2014, p. 8). Indeed, the important work that AANAPISIs are actively engaged in generates a need for rigorous empirical investigations that examine the effectiveness of AANAPISIs and their federally funded initiatives on improving AAPI student outcomes.

Despite the very recent struggle for and creation of AANAPISIs, the limited research that exists demonstrates positive associations between AANAPISI programs and improvements in academic success. A study conducted by CARE (2014), used propensity score matching to generate treatment and control groups to examine the effects of interventions across three, two-year AANAPISI institutions. Findings showed that at each campus, AANAPISI efforts are positively linked to short- and long-term academic outcomes. Of the three institutions, De Anza College specifically recognized the need for targeting efforts at particularly vulnerable AAPIs. Using culturally relevant, critical and engaged pedagogies and wraparound services, De Anza College's AAPI learning community (LC) students experienced a higher rate of transition from developmental to college-level courses than their non-LC peers (CARE, 2014). Students involved in the AANAPISI LC were also more likely than the control group to graduate with an associate's degree or certificate. Similarly, Coastline Community College's (CCC) implemented programmatic interventions, including their seven-level English as a Second Language (ESL) program, mentorship program, and efforts to integrate

Vietnamese language and culture into their highly immigrant and refugee. The Vietnamese and ESL populations on this campus have shown signs of success (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2014). Three years into their AANAPISI grant, CCC has exceeded their objective to increase transfer to and enrollment in degree-applicable courses. These foundational studies suggest that AANAPISIs, when given sufficient funds, are effective in serving their target student populations. According to CARE (2011), AANAPISIs "acknowledge how campus settings can be mutable points of intervention—sites of possibilities for responding for the impediments AAPI students encounter" (p. 12). The current study builds upon this work in three significant ways by: 1) qualitatively assessing the influence of a Title III funded program on AAPI students, 2) highlighting the voices of Southeast Asian students within college, a population typically ignored within education research, and 3) examining how institutional structure can be altered to suit and contribute to the cultural values and knowledge that students bring into college.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines the way a single AANAPISI supports the achievement of underserved AAPI students. The benefits of attending an MSI point to a common culture of validation that affirms students' potential, intelligence, and sense of belonging (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). As such, Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory shapes the inquiry and design of the study. Embedded in research related to low SES, racial minority and first-generation students at PWIs, Rendón (1994) discovered that the key to their success—navigating the unfamiliar terrains of college to earn their degree—was validation. To preface, Rendón's (1994) research repeatedly demonstrated that students from disadvantaged backgrounds reported feelings of loneliness and confusion, being dismissed and discouraged by faculty, and being disconnected from the curriculum and classroom pedagogy. This culminated in greater failure in classes and attrition from school. In other words, the challenges these students encountered had little to do with academic preparation and competence, and more to do with the influence of their interactions with institutional agents, both in- and outside of the classroom. According to Linares and Muñoz (2010), "validation refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of class agents (i.e., faculty, students, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment" (p. 12). Validation in this sense can be academic or interpersonal. Academic validation speaks to the ways institutional agents (e.g., faculty and staff) encourage students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). Interpersonal validation takes form

when the same agents work toward "fostering students' personal development and social adjustment" to campus life (Linares & Muñoz, 2010, p. 17). Accordingly, Validation Theory is a framework in which to understand how institutions and their agents (i.e., faculty and staff) "work with students in a way that gives them agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation" (p. 17).

Research related to the influence of MSI enrollment on student development and achievement (Allen, 1992; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008) would argue that the elements of Validation Theory are largely mirrored in the institutional practices and policies included in their studies. We would concur, and also hypothesize that persistent validation by faculty and staff (i.e., institutional agents) helps explain the success witnessed by the institution in this study. However, the application of this theory, especially to the current study, is not without its limits.

Validation Theory centralizes the responsibility on institutional agents. Although this acknowledges the critical role these individuals play, it does not capture the gaps in institutional responsibility that must also be addressed to fully capture how students adjust to and navigate their college experiences. We believe that validation is just one step in supporting students, but the process that provides students with the knowledge and resources for sustained success is much more complicated. By recognizing these limitations, this study is guided by the fundamental backdrop of Validation Theory and seeks to test and stretch its theoretical boundaries by examining an AANAPISI funded initiative, the FCP.

METHODOLOGY

The current investigation stems from a national study on MSIs and student success. The national study was designed on the basis that the higher education community could glean useful insight from a sector of institutions (i.e., MSIs) that enroll and are dedicated to supporting racial minority and low SES students. Taking a constructivist stance, qualitative data were collected from a total of 12 institutions allocated across four types of MSIs: AANAPISIs (3), HSIs (3), HBCUs (3) and TCUs (3). Because there is a history of researchers from PWIs constructing damaging narratives of MSIs without the inclusion of perspectives from those actually enrolled or working at MSIs (Gasman, 2006; Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008) we designed the study to center our participants' realities—in which they assign meaning to the world around them—knowing fully that multiple truths exist and are needed to make sense of how the FCP meets the needs of its students (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with students (n=144) and faculty and staff (n=120) directly associated with programs developed to support the target student population (i.e., AAPI students at AANAPISIs). Since

this study is focused on examining a specific phenomenon, namely how an AANAPISI's federally funded initiative promotes AAPI student adjustment to college, the case study method was the most appropriate choice to explore this inquiry and expand our understanding of these initiatives' role in U.S. higher education (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

Research Site

Located in a metropolitan area, California State University, Sacramento is one of 23 four-year campuses that make up the California State University system. In 2011, Sac State received $282,593 from the U.S. Department of Education to develop and implement the FCP in order to serve a student body that was 20% AAPI (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). At the time of the study, the average graduation rates for AAPI students were 4% and 8% less, respectively, than the university's average 6-year full-time, first time student graduation rate of 44% (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As such, the program operates from the premise that—despite the prevalence of the model minority myth—many AAPI students struggle and are in need of services that address the circumstances that bear on their potential to succeed. FCP has four primary goals: "(1) increase AAPI freshman and AAPI transfer graduation rates by at least 10%; (2) increase the number and percentage of AAPIs engaged in Student Organization & Leadership programs to equal the percentage of AAPI undergraduate students at Sac State; (3) enhance and expand service learning opportunities for AAPI students through our nationally recognized 65th Corridor Community Collaboration Project; and (4) institutionalize comprehensive data gathering on AAPIs at Sac State and throughout the CSU system" (Full Circle Project, 2015). Since Sac State is the only four-year AANAPISI serving the most northern region of California, and the FCP supports such a high proportion of Southeast Asian students, a population rarely highlighted in educational research (Teranishi, 2010), we found this particular case to be a compelling, empirical investigation.

FCP students begin their academic year in learning communities structured around two courses, introduction to Asian American and Ethnic Studies. During this time, their classroom learning is supplemented by student support services (led by dedicated FCP staff and faculty), social events, and leadership opportunities connected with campus and off-campus organizations. Students also participated in community-based learning through the 65th Street Corridor Community Collaboration Project, which was developed to support the academic achievement of youth from local, disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Data Collection and Analysis

Four research members visited Sac State for a three-day visit during Spring 2013. We worked closely with the FCP director to identify students (n=9),

staff (n=7), faculty (n=4), and senior administrators (n=2) that could speak to the role of the FCP on AAPI student success. All the students (5 males, 4 females) interviewed were enrolled full-time and identified as first-generation students and Southeast Asian. At the time of the interview, every student had completed their first year and could speak about their experiences in the FCP. A total of 16 single interviews (13) and focus groups (3) were conducted and audio recorded with participants' consent. Two of the focus groups were with students, as we were told that they would be more comfortable in the interview room with their peers. The third focus group included one faculty member and two staff whose schedules precluded them from our initial request for single interviews. Interviews lasted 45–65 minutes. Following Yin's (2003) recommendation in ensuring construct validity, multiple sources of evidence were collected to triangulate our findings. First, our interview participants included those not directly associated to the FCP. Meeting with external staff and senior administrators corroborated our understanding of the academic struggles confronting their AAPI population and the role FCP plays in addressing such challenges. Second, we collected programmatic and institutional artifacts—program and campus brochures, course syllabi, and a list of events sponsored by the FCP, as well as the number of FCP student attendees at each event—to confirm the extent of FCP's commitment in supporting the AAPI student population.

The interview protocol was shaped by both the literature on AAPIs and MSIs, as well as by our theoretical framework. Interviews focused on understanding the role of the FCP in improving the success of AAPI students. In order to achieve that aim, our protocol included questions that pertained to participants' histories, their perception of the campus community and the challenges faced by the AAPI student population, and how the FCP program—and its many components—mattered in the lives of students. Moreover, the purpose of our study was to identify and understand the FCP's qualitative attributes that mediate the success of its students. The interview questions encouraged participants to reflect critically in how the FCP provides resources and information to improve student outcomes. Students were specifically asked about the roles of faculty and staff and the extent and manner in which these groups validated their background, belonging in college and abilities to succeed.

We took a grounded theory approach in analyzing the data because the literature on AANAPISIs and AAPIs in higher education is limited. This approach "seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions" (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p. 5). The assumption undergirding our inquiry lays claim to the belief that "strict determinism is rejected" (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p. 5) and that multiple social realities (Charmaz, 2006) are required to capture the complex process in which the FCP and its

many dimensions operate to improve students' adjustment to college. Using NVivo qualitative analysis software, we employed open coding of the data. Open coding is suggested to bring about "new ways of thinking about or interpreting phenomena" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). This approach related well to the study topic because, although we know relatively more about HBCUs, HSIs, and TCUs, we did not want to assume that the prevalent ideas related to these MSIs would be applicable to AAPI students and AANAPISIs. Open coding was the most appropriate choice to guide our analyses because it encouraged us to critically weigh our evidence against preconceived notions about MSIs and minority student achievement in higher education.

Each researcher participated in all stages of the analysis, which allowed us to reconcile discrepancies among varied interpretations and to establish confidence in our findings. This was a particular critical dimension of our study's design as we acknowledge that our experiences, beliefs, and identities shape both the collection and analysis of the data (Milner IV, 2007). As researchers of MSIs and of race and ethnicity, we recognize the importance of how our positionality shapes the quality of our inquiry about the FCP. We maintained this level of awareness throughout our analyses and discussion of our findings.

In accordance with Corbin and Strauss's (1990) open coding approach, our first wave of analysis developed 81 emerging concepts, or codes, that captured explicit components of the FCP, such as Asian American and Ethnic Studies curriculum, support services, and activities and events, as well as participants' recollections of life events before college and of interactions between students and faculty. From there, a second wave of line-by-line coding was conducted to compare these concepts to each other, giving way to the formation of 17 categories, or themes, that captured more abstract ideas and relationships. In our final wave of analysis, in which we compared the 17 categories to each other, our deliberations lead to the construction of three primary categories that characterized how the FCP promotes the adjustment to college for low SES, AAPI students by: 1) Using Ethnic and Asian American Studies to engage AAPI students academically and to validate their belonging on campus, 2) Acting as a hub that helps mediate student relations across campus, which in turn builds their ability to develop meaningful social ties, and 3) Shaping and widening their aspiration for forward planning. By this stage, data saturation was achieved as researchers' deliberation on both old and new concepts and their relationships to the broader categories did not bring forth any new theoretical insights between prior research, Validation Theory and the FCP (Charmaz, 2006; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Through these three primary categories, we argue that the FCP operates as a converter—improving the link—for students, giving them a reason to be (more) engaged, helping them (to better) understand the expectations of, as well as

navigate through, the university, thereby addressing cultural misalignments between the two parties.

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FINDINGS

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Asian American and Ethnic Studies and Students' Sense of Self-Worth, Belongingness and Potential for Contribution

A core element of the FCP is the incorporation of courses from the fields of Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies: student exposure to the histories and approaches to studying Asian communities in the United States lays the fundamental groundwork the FCP's strategies are based upon. Interviews of faculty and students indicated that the specific nature of Asian American and Ethnic Studies was a critical component in addressing students' academic engagement, sense of belonging, and potential for contribution to their communities as well as society at large, both during and after college. The courses that students are required to enroll are: Introduction to Asian American Studies, Introduction to Ethnic Studies, as well as co-curricular activities that connect coursework to real community issues through site visits and hands-on practice.

Asian American and Ethnic Studies as a Mechanism for Academic Engagement and Sense of Belonging. Asian American Studies, which can be organized under the academic discipline of Ethnic Studies, or housed independently, critically examine the histories and experiences, as well as centers "the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in that group's lived experiences and intellectual scholarship" (Sleeter, 2011, p. 8). This field of study arose to account for the ongoing marginalization of scholarship by and about AAPIs, as well as to acknowledge "the dominance of Euro-American perspectives in mainstream," whereas "research finds that the overwhelming dominance of Euro-American perspectives leads many [students of color] to disengage from academic learning" (Sleeter, 2011, p. vii). In our meetings with faculty, they attested to the positive impact Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies have on the development of FCP students (Halagao, 2004, 2010). There are many benefits to incorporating Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies into the curriculum—including, according to Ken, a faculty member specializing in Asian American Studies, connecting students to an inclusive narrative, which affirms their individual life experiences, and ultimately, engaged them academically:

> I teach Asian American Studies. [The FCP curriculum] includes Introduction to Asian American Studies, Introduction to Ethic Studies and…what I think is really important for what we're doing compared to what other groups are

doing, at least my sense, is a lot of focus on other APIs…is on remediation. It's getting the low achieving, and I understand that. I get that. But for us the focus is both academic and leadership together. So the students do have that perspective of understanding their own individual experiences but also really connecting it with the broader Asian American studies, Asian American movement.

Faculty members were keenly aware of the low-SES and first generational backgrounds of their FCP students, many of which began their career at Sac State in remedial courses. Lower performing students, especially from low-SES backgrounds, can express doubt in their belongingness in college, both academically and socially. When Asian American and Ethnic Studies is central to the FCP program curriculum, students can see how their backgrounds are favorably received and affirmed at Sac State. American higher education, by and large, has always reflected the traditions, values and cultural practices of the majority—mainly, White, middle- to upper-class men. With an Asian American centric curriculum in their first year, FCP students can experience college from a position of familiar value and importance legitimated by their institution.

Faculty members believed in the positive relationship between Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies and students' identity development. Ken shared:

For me, part of it is self. Self-awareness, positive self-identity. Many of them do not have positive self-identities. Many of them are embarrassed, by their parents or their grandparents, but once they learn a little bit more of their own history and the questions they get in class and the exchanges, and their research papers, I can tell from one semester to the next that a level of maturity has developed in terms of one's self. I don't think you can be a possible community activist or participant if you yourself individually are not on solid ground, and so that is part of what we try to do in the classes.

Ken highlights the point that many of his students are entering college with a poor view of their family background in light of their transition to college, hence their feelings of embarrassment. Such feelings can indicate students' perception that college—its day-to-day practices, traditions and values—views their racial and ethnic identities unfavorably. Often, high school coursework excludes the experiences of students of color (Sleeter, 2011). As one Hmong student, Bianca, noted:

In high school you barely get to learn about yourself, and that's based on if during high school your teacher would at least allow you to learn about yourself to the whole class… So for me, I did the Hmong background, so I got a little bit deeper into my history. So this is, this program actually helped me, especially to my history background, know my identity.

In an effort to cultivate positive self-perception among its students and provide them with "solid ground" to move forward, Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies operates as a lever to aid in them in their academic transition.

Asian American and Ethnic Studies and Commitment to Social Change. Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies in the FCP program encourage a commitment and desire among students to contribute to social change. Ethnic Studies can strengthen agency and promote students' feeling of optimism towards engagement and contributions to society (Sleeter, 2011). Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies reimagines a U.S. history that at its core is a narrative of AAPI communities struggling for acknowledgement and equal civil rights. Faculties believe and teach students that their personal and familial history is important, valuable, and included in the American context. According to Jason, a faculty member in Asian American studies and an original organizer of the Asian American Movement:

> You are your history and it's part of the whole Asian American experience. Asian American history is American history. Ethnic history of different groups is American history.

Whereas the purpose of the FCP is to improve students' self-worth and belongingness in relation to the Sac State community, the Asian American centric curriculum also serves to support students' sense of personal agency. Students are reminded of their communities' active roles in eradicating racial and ethnic injustices. According to a Filipino student, Shana:

> So what I really liked about learning about [their own community's history] is you learn about how all of the other ethnicities made a difference in the world, like during the Civil Rights. But what I really liked is learning that as Asian Americans we also made an impact in the world, within the higher institution too.

Learning of ones' history can provide students with feelings of empowerment and agency (Tintiangco-Cubales et al, 2014). When asked about the impact of their FCP coursework on their college experience, Hmong student, Binh reported:

> We're in college and we can make the difference. It's (up to) us to make the change and stuff like that. Full Circle really emphasizes that. They put us into the classes to learn about it. In one of our classes we actually went to Oakland and we met the mayor of Oakland, which is Mayor Quan. She's the first Asian American mayor. We're not just in classrooms […]. We're learning outside of class and I think that's what really, that's what drives me.

Binh felt the potential to contribute, not only to her campus, but also to the larger community. Additionally, Binh and her FCP peers developed a drive

and passion to make change that positively impacts society, much of which is driven by the Asian American Studies curriculum and the faculty that teach it. Jason, a faculty member, expressed the importance of taking formal education outside the class:

> We also take them on the Oakland Chinatown field trip where they actually have the opportunity to experience the culture firsthand… And for them, that's major because for many of them, they haven't been outside of their own communities and been exposed to politics and those kinds of things. So we try to not only have them learn in the classroom and build leadership out of the classroom, but also go out and be in the culture and in another culture.

In essence, one important goal of the FCP is to instill the feeling and potential of students to contribute significantly to the world. As succinctly stated by Ken, a faculty member:

> I don't care what career they're going to be. They can be a dentist, a lawyer, a teacher, work for government, whatever. I don't care what their major is but I think they're better off having been through our program and better off having some experience about understanding of their role in society and their role in social change.

The FCP curriculum and co-curricular design helped students to develop a sense of personal agency, manifested in their commitment to civic engagement and community service.

The Hub

Undeniably, achievement in college for low SES AAPI students can be stymied by a difficult period of adjustment, a result of an unfamiliarity of a traditional college culture (Teranishi, 2010)—its rules, norms and expectations—and "the uneven rewards dominant institutions bestow[ed] on different types of strategies" (Lareau, 2015, p. 1) to succeed. FCP represents a hub in which the challenge of adjustment—associated with the transition from high school to college—is directly addressed. For our AAPI student participants, the degree of difficulty in adjusting to college reflected a cultural mismatch between their background and the values, traditions, and assumptions of the institution, pushing them to the periphery of the campus community (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). As a hub, the FCP *centralizes* its students within the campus community, helps broker their way throughout campus and cultivates the skill of building social ties as a means to improve student success.

Easing the Adjustment to College. Four-year institutions operate under a set of traditional assumptions about whom they enroll, which continue to determine who has the financial, cultural, and social means to persist and succeed (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, Stephan, Foran, & Schuetz, 2015). More

often than not, four-year institutions speak favorably to students that come from homes with a college-going culture. For our student participants, FCP, through its staff support services, represented an opportunity for them to gain an understanding of the policies and practices that regulate students' pathway to degree, as well as improved feelings of ease in navigating this new space. Kou is the middle-child among of 11 in his Hmong family. His older siblings have had mixed-results in their pursuit of postsecondary education, with two successfully earning their baccalaureate degrees from Sac State. In spite of his siblings' achievements, he recalled the fear he felt at the start of his freshmen year:

> It was a big step coming straight from high school to college. We're scared, we don't know what's going on but I really feel Full Circle has helped me a lot with my growth in college. Full Circle is just one of the biggest parts. I've built my whole first year around it.

For Kou, participation in the FCP helped alleviate his fears about college and even encouraged his sense of self-growth. FCP also became the center of his collegial life, shaping the contour of his freshmen year. According to Kou:

> It's just really amazing how one little thing could become such a big change and how one little new project or program could really expand our knowledge and teach us how to network and how to put yourself out there as freshmen in college or as new students in college. It's just really different from high school to college and it really gives us that transition to develop a better or a more advanced understanding of the campus and how to approach our project or how to complete a project.

In speaking about the project related to the Leadership Initiative, Kou explains how it extended his knowledge about college and encouraged him to be more proactive in engaging with the community by guiding him on how to establish relationships to be successful. The FCP clarified to Kou how the campus operates, a necessary stage before he decided to engage with it.

Kou's peer, Tooj, expressed similar sentiments in describing how participation in the FCP gave way to understanding the daily minutiae at Sac State. Tooj entered college as an engineering major and soon realized that it was not a path he wanted to continue. He stated:

> So I went undeclared and Anthony helped me, the counselor for the Full Circle Project helped me to go undeclared, delete all of those computer engineering courses…my challenge was like I really didn't know what this campus, I didn't know the policy or how it works here. So FCP helping me, it helped me delete classes and it helped me kind of know the campus, know the policy, know the catalog, know the general electives, know your major, and how you like kill two birds with one stone, like overlapping classes.

In Tooj's case, the policies that govern one's ability to switch courses of study, meet the requirements for a given course of study, and employ strategies to efficiently complete the said requirements were elusive to him. He attributes his understanding of this structure to the support of the FCP staff member, Anthony. Tooj stated, "Full Circle Project…helped me understand the catalogue because that's a very important here at Sac State. If you don't know your catalogue, then you're very out."

Role of Social Ties. Student participants discussed how the FCP gave them valuable skills to engage with campus life. More than a depository of information, the FCP is structured to cultivate in students meaningful skills that are the keys to navigating dominant institutions, such as colleges and universities. As the central hub for its student participants, the FCP—through the leadership initiative program component—encourages and facilitates student coalition building with on- and off-campus organizations. Through a required group service project, students learn firsthand what is needed to see a project through fruition.

Tooj's approach to familiarizing himself with the campus, including its many student organizations, was initially passive. It was not until the spring semester that his work and leadership role for a cultural event for the Hmong Student Association—via the FCP—increased his level of student engagement and gave him the opportunity to recognize the tools that he had acquired in his first semester, such as "leadership skills" and "time management," as useful in organizing events. Tooj shared, "So one thing that was important for me to learn, this experience, was organizing, because I never, in high school I never knew organizing." Although Tooj was not explicit in describing what "organizing" meant, his role with the Hmong Student Association connected him to another dimension of campus life and reinforced the skills that he had learned participating in the Leadership Initiative program. June, the program adviser, stated:

> And I think there is a level of…general social competence around attending college that some students, especially for students that are first generation, don't know how to navigate the system, so the involvement in the LI and the exposure to resources also helps them to develop that just general competence about how to get it done right, how to do college, and I think that is, I don't think about that often, but I think that is also a really important part of their ultimate success, is just learning the system and knowing the resources and having to communicate not only with each other within those coalitions, which obviously helps to develop those communication skills in other things.

In describing the experience of first-generation students, June alludes to the cultural mismatch between them and their institution. She explains how the LI program helps in addressing this challenge by exposing them to available resources and cultivating "communication skills" to "get it done right, how

to do college." Put differently, the LI component of the FCP seems to encourage the alignment of student knowledge and experience with institutional values, norms and policies by helping students develop relationships with other organizations and giving students the skills to maintain them.

Enrolling in Sac State was a financial decision for Xauv, a Hmong first-year student finishing up his second semester. As a local Sacramento resident, the path to pursue postsecondary education was only feasible as a commuter. When asked how participation in the FCP has been helpful in his first year, Xauv responded:

> Coming to college…I was going to commute back and forth. I thought I was going to come to school, go home, hours of studying and midterms and finals. But I came and I met all of these people and from the Leadership Initiative they taught me to be involved in the school so I can get to know the resources and know people, get connections. So I did that and I'm really glad I did that. I got to know my counselor very well and my professors very well. We see them around campus and they know who we are and they say hi to us.

Unlike the perceptions of more traditional four-year college students (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Clydesdale, 2008), to Xauv, college did not include the social events and activities commonly seen in mainstream portrayals of college life. As a full-time student commuting to Sac State, Xauv's initial perception of college life was limited to studying and the classroom. Participation in the FCP encouraged his involvement beyond academics and facilitated his "connections" to other resources and individuals. For FCP students like Tooj, Kou, and Xauv, explicit communication about the campus practices and policies that regulate student achievement and the connections to other individuals or groups on campus, as well as projects—such as through the Leadership Initiative—to cultivate those relationships, resulted in positive experiences in their first year. According to Ellen, Associate Vice President of Student Retention and Student Success:

> I think all students really walk in with this question of "Do I belong here?" and "How do I connect to the academy?" and once they bridge that gap of connection and they feel like they belong and they can do well, they're more likely to be successful. They know they've gone to high school and they've done what they've needed to do to be prepared or perhaps there are areas where they lack preparation, but once they bridge that gap and they feel that they can do it, they're more likely to do it.

In other words, participation in the FCP helps translates this new space for students and supports students in meeting the expectations of the institution, and in many respects, the expectations of the workforce (Rivera, 2015).

Shaping and Widening Student Aspirations

In addition to the impact of Asian American and Ethnic studies and FCP's role as a central hub for students, the program also plays a critical role in shaping students' aspirations. As limited as literature on engagement of low SES students of color is (Kuh, 2003; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian & Slavin Miller, 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005), scholarship specifically examining how institutions influence their future plans and aspirations is even more extant. Given the aforementioned cultural mismatch that many low SES students experience upon their arrival at a four-year institution, the institutional ability to support not only their navigation on campus, but to also cultivate their forward planning is critical to sustaining their success.

As FCP students, Kou and Tooj, expressed, the program was a centralized hub that helped them learn how to navigate an otherwise unfamiliar college landscape. As students began to unravel the web of the four-year postsecondary experience, the FCP—via the opportunities collaborating with on- and off-campus partners—was a key player in shifting students' mentality on the possibilities that await them post-graduation. For instance, through the Leadership Initiative, Paj had the opportunity to tutor high school students, which encouraged her to reconsider her interest in a teaching career at the secondary level:

> So I went back to Eagle High School…and I tutored. I tutored high school students and it was just like you know maybe becoming a teacher is what I want to do but it's not really what I want to do. I just have to teach out of the book and that's not what I want to do. Full Circle has taught me that I can go to college and do whatever I want and do anything I want and make it big.

Tutoring high school students informed her consideration of a teaching career, but it also challenged her pursuit of that career path. More importantly, Paj expressed how the FCP encouraged her to open her eyes to other possibilities, indicating that her vision for the future prior to college may have been less ambitious, or less aligned with her actual desires. To "do whatever I want and do anything I want and make it big" suggests a major shift in mentality about her future. She described the change she saw in herself:

> I was very, very shy in high school. I was very shy and I wasn't in any clubs. I wasn't in student leadership. I wasn't in any of that. I was very shy. I just went to class and did my homework and stuff like that and that was it. I didn't go to any after school programs or anything. So Full Circle is actually my big step. I can really say I've grown a lot and it's the most I've ever done in my life so far.

Paj may have entered college with a plan, but participation in the FCP changed her sense of personal growth and broadened her sense of possibility. For Kou, the FCP also gave him a sense of preparation for the world waiting for him after college:

> The Full Circle Project have a lot of stuff that is beneficial and I used all of them, most all of them, like organizing skills, leadership skills, [taking] initiative, being the leader […] you're going to use all these in your resume too.

The structure of the FCP is intentional in supporting and sustaining students' success beyond college. Kou further shared, "They pretty much give you that growth for the future. They give you a little taste of the future." This "taste," or glimpse of the future can be linked to the positive benefits of racial concordance between institutional agents and students and its impact on improved students' sense of belonging (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). Paj demonstrates this point, "Most of our staff are Asian Americans and seeing that, it's like your face is like my face […] so […] if you can do it, you can be up there, I know that I can push myself to get there too. I can do the same thing you're doing or get [even] higher." In other words, FCP provided support services and opportunities for students to gain critical life skills, which shaped their aspirations and sense of possibilities for the future.

Discussion

Through a case study of an AANAPISI funded initiative, we argue that the FCP operates to improve AAPI student success in college. Challenges that arise from the adjustment to college, as well as along the pathway towards degree attainment, can be attributed to the cultural mismatch between students' backgrounds and the values and practices of the institutions they attend (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2007). This study highlights the how the FCP—as a converter—improves upon this misalignment in three consequential ways: 1) strengthening student academic engagement by exposing them to Asian American and Ethnic Studies; 2) translating the campus terrain, while cultivating skills for sustained success; 3) shaping students' aspirations by widening their sense of possibilities for their futures. The FCP, by virtue of these efforts, provided the resources and knowledge to help students unlock the keys towards college success. Additionally, our findings contribute to the knowledge of AANAPISIs and their ability to support the achievement of underrepresented AAPIs in higher education, as well as highlighting the successful practices that can be reviewed and possibly implemented at colleges and universities across the nation.

Asian American and Ethnic Studies

The incorporation of Asian American and Ethnic Studies is a form of academic engagement, which can validate students' backgrounds and signal to them the importance of their presence at Sac State (Rendón, 1992). Our findings confirm prior studies that report the positive impact of culturally relevant curriculum on students' engagement, identity development, and

perception of civic engagement (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Museus et al., 2012; Museus, Mueller, & Aguino, 2013; Sleeter, 2011). Despite significant effort to develop more inclusive and welcoming campuses for all students in the past two decades, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, students of color continue to engage with their campus communities less than their White peers (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). Because this outcome is partly shaped by students' adjustment to college, a period in which students must learn to navigate a new space—one that is often perceived as unwelcoming—our findings suggest that the availability of courses that reflect the histories and contemporary experiences of students' communities can in fact facilitate improvement in students' academic and social engagement (Laird, 2005; Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). And because college can be an unfamiliar space, any evidence of familiarity—such as culturally relevant curriculum—can make the process of acclimating easier as it can even help marry or mitigate any conflict between students' academic and ethnic identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Our findings also suggest that learning about one's history and heritage can positively shape one's perception of their identity. When one's family history and lived experiences are intellectualized by a college-level course or field (i.e., Asian American Studies), there is a degree of legitimacy that carries through to how students perceive themselves, especially in relation to their college community. The perceived institutionalization of their communities' histories and experiences can communicate a message of importance and inclusivity to the students, thereby improving the ways in which institutions welcome and embrace underrepresented students (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus et al., 2012, Museus, Mueller, & Aguino, 2013). For students who enter college ashamed of their racial/ethnic background, the benefits of taking Asian American and Ethnic studies can encourage students to see themselves in a more positive light and even ignite the belief in their abilities to engender change (Maramba & Palmer, 2014).

FCP as a hub to broker and help build social ties

Participation in the FCP aims to mitigate the inequality that is patterned along lines of race, ethnicity, and social class because it provides the "institutional scaffolding [that] can help students develop the requisite skills to thrive in higher education" (Lareau, 2015, p. 22). As we have posited throughout this article, FCP addresses a structural gap at the university that supports students' adjustment to college by providing them with a space of cultural familiarity, cultural guides (e.g., staff and faculty dedicated to the program) to translate the campus landscape and opportunities to help students build social ties across campus for sustained success (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Lareau, 2015; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). In these ways, we consider the FCP to operate as a hub—a centralized location that operates to effec-

tively facilitate students' experiences across campus as a means to address the challenges commonly associated with racial minority and low SES students.

The focus on cultural familiarity, cultural guides, and the importance of social ties represents our effort to shed light on the co-curricular factors that contribute to the ways students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, can be successful. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) found that, setting aside equal levels of academic preparedness, White female students from working class backgrounds not only had a more challenging time than their more well-off peers in finding a sense of community on campus, but they also lacked the cultural knowledge, financial resources, and the skills to build social ties to take advantage of the resources available to them. We know that equal access to higher education does not equate to equal educational outcomes. A part of this inequality can be attributed to how an organization is structured to advantage some groups of students over others. Indeed, organizational structures of institutions can discourage student success, but they can be adjusted to reverse this trend (Rosenbaum, Deil-amen, & Person, 2007). In the case of Sac State, this adjustment is realized through the FCP—its curriculum, faculty, student services staff, and Leadership Initiative opportunities provided to students. In every sense, the FCP is akin to a cultural broker, "bridging the cultural gap by communicating differences and similarities between cultures," as well as establishing trust between students and the institution and providing the skills to navigate throughout it (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2004, p. 3).

Building on Palmer and Maramba's (2015) study on college access and adjustment for Southeast Asian students, the FCP's role in helping students develop social ties confirms their findings that demonstrate the role of *caring agents* (e.g., family, counselors/teachers) and *supportive organizations and student* services in cultivating students' social capital as a means to overcome the challenges associated with college access and adjustment. Our findings also provide further evidence of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) framework that gives significance to institutional agents (e.g., faculty, staff) in empowering disadvantaged youth by providing access to multiple layers of resources that in turn can "enable lasting empowerment *via* a critical consciousness and the means by which they [students] can transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole" (p. 1098). Through the staff and faculty directly associated with the FCP, students gain access to institutional agents committed to building relationships with them as well as supporting them in developing relationships with other areas of the campus. As a result, through their service-based learning and other community events hosted by the FCP, students have learned to use those relationships to achieve their goals. Being able to acquire, activate, and build upon their social capital remains a consequential skill required for students to navigate college and other dominant institutions, especially in the workplace (Rivera, 2015). It

is important to remember that students who are disadvantaged due to their racial/ethnic and social class status are not less intelligent than their more advantageous peers. Their life's context has made it challenging for them to acquire the cultural knowledge, including tactics required to succeed in dominant institutions (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2015). Sac State—through the FCP—takes on the responsibility of providing these resources, "rather than placing the burden on students to adapt to an unalterable campus context" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 537).

Shaping students' aspiration and sense of possibilities

Students' aspirations for their futures are in part shaped by the context of their institution. In fact, as early as the 1920s the "culture of aspiration"—"the sense that the individual has the freedom and means to better themselves, to advance their knowledge, skills, and position in society" (Douglass, 2010 p. 6981)—was linked to not only entering college, but also the quality of the institution students' attended. As Levine (1988), rightly stated, "higher education became […] central to America's culture of aspiration" (p. 212). He expounded on this point, "The culture of aspiration stimulated an unprecedented demand for higher education of any kind as a symbol of economic and social mobility" (p. 21). And while a large influx of Americans sought to participate in postsecondary learning, it was the low SES and ethnic minority students who were tracked into less prestigious options, which tempered their aspirations, or the belief that they had the means to improve their social circumstance. Given the ever-widening opportunity gap that continues to plague higher education and the enduring social disparities facing low SES and ethnic minority communities, the stratification of access to quality education remains a marked problem. Accordingly, institutions of higher education—particularly less selective colleges—play a critical role in fostering aspirations, which can help to mitigate disparities in academic outcomes. Examining the achievement of African-American students between public HBCUs and PWIs, for example, Allen (1992) found that student occupational aspirations "are influenced by the immediate surrounding social context, while interpersonal relationships represented the bridge between individual predispositions and the institutional setting or context" (p. 40). Our findings confirm and build upon Allen's claims. Students' educational outcomes are certainly shaped by the experiences and knowledge—or predispositions— that they carry into college. In this case, as a function of the college, the FCP provided students with the opportunities for learning, skill building, and encouraging personal growth in order to reconcile what they know and value with a future that may include far greater options.

Expanding options, or cultivating students' aspirations, is particularly important for low-SES and ethnic minorities, like those in the FCP. However, the extant research that explores aspirations as related to race and ethnicity

has aggregated Asian Americans into a singular category, marking them as a group with high aspirations and achievements (Qian & Blair, 1999), and subsequently erasing the challenges unique to subgroups who are more likely to be low SES (e.g., Hmong Americans). Accordingly, our study better aligns with scholarship focusing on the aspirations of low-SES students. King (1996), for example, found that, "low-income students who are challenged by difficult courses not only rise to the challenge but also develop greater confidence and higher aspirations as a result" (p. 5). In a similar fashion, participation in the FCP exposed students to new learning opportunities and challenged them to step outside of their comfort zones to explore new dimensions of learning and service both inside and outside the classroom, which all worked in tandem to mediate and widen students' sense of possibility in the future. FCP, then, offers a valuable opportunity to explore how institutions can help foster students' aspirations and beliefs in their individual ability to advance upon completing their college tenure. FCP also underscores the need for more rigorous research on aspirational cultivation on college campuses, particularly for underserved student populations like low SES AAPIs.

Institutional Responsibility

The FCP is an institutional effort to support students who face unique barriers to academic success. Our study reinforces past scholarship that calls for greater institutional responsibility to low SES and racial and ethnic minority students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Purnell, Blank, Scrivener & Seupersad, 2004; Sotello Viernes Turner, 1994). Aligned with prior studies, we argue that institutions need to better recognize that access alone is not enough. There remains a dire need for institutional responsibility that supports all students arriving at their gates, and while the FCP and other specific service programs are a necessary tool for reaching underserved students, there is an equally important need for organizational shifts that wholly change the institutional relationship with marginalized students, thereby easing their transition to college. The FCP functions to help Sac State better meet students where they are—a core dimension of embodying an MSI identity (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008).

AANAPISIs and MSIs, and Asian Americans in Higher Education

The current study contributes to an exceptionally small canon of empirical literature on AANAPISIs, which is limited to CARE's (2014) studies evaluating the effectiveness of the AANAPISI funded-initiatives on AAPI educational outcomes at three two-year AANAPISIs. In contrast, the current study provides possible explanations for CARE's claims by responding to the "how" questions, examining the internal and, often, hidden processes of an

AANAPISI funded initiative, the FCP. We saw that the program components influenced students' identities, empowered them to see themselves as agents of change, facilitated their relationships with other institutional agents, and widened their vision of the possibilities after college—thereby complicating quantitative explanations of student engagement and persistence. Put differently, this study identifies and explores an actual program and its practices that define institutional participation in the federal MSI program, thereby strengthening our understanding of the role AANAPISIS play in the achievement of low SES AAPI students as opposed to attributing student experiences and outcomes to concepts such as campus climate or culture, which can blur more nuanced factors that are making a real difference in the lives of these student populations.

The recent push for disaggregated data on AAPI communities represents an effort to improve understanding of the wide range of diversity that exists among the different ethnic groups (CARE, 2013). The power in this level of granularity in the data allows researchers, policy makers, and educational administrators to ask more complicated questions about the relationship between students' home context and their educational outcomes. Until such data becomes more readily available, in-depth case studies, such as our study of the FCP, provide rich detail in how school policies and practices shape the behavior and perceptions of student groups (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

This study also reinforces a long history of scholarship on AAPIs in education, particularly with regards to dispelling myths about a singular and monolithic academic experience (Endo, 1980; Hune & Chan, 1997; Lee, 1996; Teranishi, 2010). Research on AANAPISIs is not only necessary to show and understand the trajectories of AAPI students, but in doing so, focuses on AAPIs that are either assumed to be exemplary or are entirely ignored. Our findings provide further evidence that debunks the model minority myth and strengthens the call for greater attention and resources dedicated to this student population.

Theoretical Contribution

Findings from this study confirm the importance of validating students in improving their achievement in college. Because the inherent nature of many colleges and universities are structured to validate students from more advantaged backgrounds, the proactive awareness and affirmation of minority students by institutional agents continues to be an area of critical importance for educational researchers (Linares & Muñoz, 2011). On a conceptual level, validation may not seem as consequential for MSIs, like Sac State. By virtue of their designation, MSIs enroll a high percentage of minority students, and they are charged by the federal government to place special emphasis in retaining and graduating their target populations. However, it is important to acknowledge that many institutions—especially HSIs and

AANAPISIs—adopted the MSI designation *after* changes in student demographics. Meaning, despite their commitment to minority students, many MSIs continue to retain practices that reflect a past in which they served fairly White and middle- to upper-class student bodies (Gasman, Baez & Turner, 2008). The context of the current study allowed us to document that the presence of validation is both important and relevant, even among MSIs.

Validation Theory helped highlight how participation in the FCP mattered in the lives of its students. Through the program, we saw validation employed as a structured and collective effort that affirmed and transformed students. Rather than envisioning validation as a moment in which students only feel valued and a sense of belonging on campus, our findings suggest that institutional validation in the form of programs like the FCP can take it further by also shaping and enhancing student motivation, confidence, and perception of their futures. In other words, we argue that validation can be a form of institutional scaffolding required to successfully enroll, retain, and graduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Validating students is communicating to them that they belong, but it also can entail exposing them to experiences that build on that sense of self-worth and agency, providing them with the cultural knowledge and skills to understand and traverse the college terrain, and inspiring them to see themselves beyond the limits of their circumstances.

Limitations and Future Research

Researchers interested in AAPI college students are recommended to develop and further advance lines of inquiry regarding the role and impact of AANAPISIs. We hope that other researchers will address this study's limitations and build upon our findings. We list three major limitations and suggest ways to improve upon our work.

First, this study is based on a single case study in which students directly related to the FCP were interviewed. Without a comparison group of non-FCP AAPI students, it is difficult to tease out or identify other factors on campus that may contribute to student success. Researchers interested in conducting case studies should consider the benefits of a comparison group. Second, we used interviews as our primary methodology. As such, we are only able to capture a moment in time, when in fact, feelings and perceptions change, especially under different social contexts (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). We are aware that in an interview setting, participants may be biased to paint a more positive image of their status and experience with the FCP. A longitudinal ethnography would help address this limitation and allow researchers to examine the long-term effects of MSI funded initiatives. And lastly, because of its qualitative nature, the findings of the study are limited to the research site. We hope, however, that it can provide useful insight for

researchers and practitioners interested in practices that support underrepresented student populations.

With the increased growth in the AAPI population, more research is needed to empirically demonstrate student retention, persistence, and graduation as well as the role of AANAPISIs in creating environments for student engagement in the classroom, as well as through co-curricular activities. Furthermore, studying the transformation of educational institutions from PWIs to AANAPISIs will yield new understandings of organizational transformations as well as the role of diversity initiatives on impacting MSIs. Finally, new studies regarding AANAPISIs should be aligned with the interests of practitioners and policymakers, to ensure best approaches are rigorously tested, understood, and used to improve the condition of AAPI college students. Many unanswered questions need to be explored in order to better understand the role AANAPISIs play in mitigating disparities in educational achievement for underrepresented AAPI students (Teranishi, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS

Institutions traditionally approach students with a one-size fits all strategy to student learning and socialization. The FCP at Sac State operates differently; it addresses student needs, acknowledges challenges faced by students, and works with students to navigate the rocky terrain that is college for low SES students of color. The approach used by FCP has deep implications for other institutions. Although we cannot generalize about the impact of the program for other institutions, we do highlight the larger ideas that undergird its approach that we hope other institutions might consider in scaffolding their own practices, programs, and policies.

Embracing and valuing the entire student, including their background, is essential to heightened learning. Valuing students must entail that educators and institutional leaders continue to question their assumptions about the relationship between students and college readiness, as well as the ways in which institutions are structured to receive and support students. We propose that understanding the relationship between students and institutions as a cultural mismatch is helpful in questioning how institutions (embedded in a historical context in which their primary function was to educate the children of the elite to take their family's place in society) amplify the disadvantages that students bring in with them and that ultimately shape student behavior and outcomes. To improve this alignment with students, institutions need to take a hard look at how their current practices may need to be altered, and in some instances, replaced.

Centering students in the heart of the curriculum and co-curricular programming and giving them the opportunity to explore aspects of their history helps them to feel less excluded and more central to the college ex-

perience. As most four-year institutions are unfamiliar to the experiences of immigrant and low SES students, it is essential to help these individuals develop and maintain meaningful relationships with staff and faculty and encourage them to pursue new experiences that widen their vision beyond the scope of their current circumstances. And given the impact that culturally relevant curriculum and co-curricular programming have on the academic and social engagement of the FCP students, encouraging White and non-low SES students to partake in these courses and activities may help to enhance their engagement as campuses, as well as the nation, becomes increasingly diverse. Our findings encourage that the programmatic features of the FCP (or other effective, exemplar MSI-funded initiatives) should play a more prominent role in shaping the core of campus life. Following the lead of how Sac State supports their AAPI students, institutions can provide multiple pathways to degree, as opposed to expecting all students to experience college in a single manner.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we described colleges and universities as a terrain so unfamiliar to students that they would need a "converter" to successfully plug in. This is not a unique narrative, and in fact, navigating the terrains of college is commonly associated as a barrier to minority student success. The U.S. has seen great gains in minority college enrollment; unfortunately, graduation rates have not been met with similar success (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Although the gates of higher education have widened, the structure of colleges and universities remain static, enduring, and unresponsive to changes in their student demographics. In other words, equal access does not translate to equal outcomes (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Many institutions continue to primarily function in ways that mirror their original mission, supporting youth from White, elite families (Karabel, 2006; Thelin, 2011), which could be why so many racial minority and low SES students find themselves at odds with their home institution. Our findings support the need for greater equity—intentionality, effort, and resources—in higher education to address the difficulties that arise along the pathway to degree for minority students.

AANAPISIS, and other MSIs, represent forms of actionable equity that model effective practices and policies to support minority students within a highly stratified system of education. By virtue of their federal designation and funding, MSIs are in this unique position to critically think about how higher education can better be altered to address the cultural mismatch between institutions and students who are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

If U.S. higher education is serious about the achievement of all students, they can look to the growing role of MSIs as a step toward innovative change in student success.

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