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Fostering a Sense of Belonging: The Asian American Student Experience

Linh Phuong Nguyen
University of San Diego, linhnguyen@sandiego.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is twofold: to examine the ways that Asian American graduate students within the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) experience a sense of social belonging at the University of San Diego (USD) and to create a means through which their sense of social belonging may be enhanced. There were two cycles, consisting a total of three focus groups, which worked through the four phases of appreciative inquiry. Cultural themes, such as difficulty approaching authority figures, preference for ethnic subgroup identification, and experiences of marginalization by those from within the Asian American community, other people of color, and non-people of color, emerged from the first cycle. This culminated in an expressed desire for more intentional dialogues and mentorship for this graduate student community, which was then further explored in the second cycle. Recommendations include a space where Asian American graduate students can voice their unique concerns, needs, and experiences directly to faculty members and administrators, along with the creation of a mentorship program that supports them through their transition into SOLES.

Table of Contents

APPENDICES
A – Research Participant Consent Form
B – Pre-Assessment
C – Focus Groups – Script and Questions
D – Post-Assessment

Introduction

With my academic background in Asian American Studies and passion for social justice, I have a strong interest in equity and inclusion for the Asian American community. I am specifically interested in how other Asian American-identified students are able to access and succeed in higher education. Being a low-income, first-generation student, an identity that is closely linked with my identity as a daughter of Vietnamese refugees, I struggled with navigating my way to college. After entering my undergraduate institution, I continued to struggle with finding my place in higher education and had to constantly negotiate my identities and the ways that I am perceived in order to find a sense of belonging. I felt that the expectations placed on me as an Asian American woman did not match my reality and that I was at fault for this dissonance. This process of negotiating my identities and the ways that I am perceived has returned in my graduate experience in ways that I am sure I am not alone in—ways that I believe would be beneficial to unpack as a community.

From personal experience and previous research, we Asian American students are often dismissed or forgotten when it comes to conversations around diversity, race relations, and minoritized identities. There is an assumption that Asian American students do not need support, because we are already successful (Suzuki, 2002). There is also an added assumption that graduate students do not need as much support, because they have already been through the undergraduate process. However, these assumptions are harmful, especially in a context where there is little Asian American representation in faculty and administration who may have a better understanding of what resources the Asian American graduate student community needs to succeed. Since entering a predominantly white institution, I have found that my need to have a sense of social belonging has been exacerbated by the lack of representation, support, and

community. This has led me to wonder how other Asian American graduate students experience predominately white institutions (PWI) like the University of San Diego (USD).

The Asian American community is often viewed as one, cohesive group when "Asian American" actually encompasses at least 30 ethnic subgroups—all with their own complex histories of immigration and needs (Suzuki, 2002). While there are services at USD, which support students who happen to identify as a part of this community, there are no services that support students *because* they identify as Asian American. For example, Asian American students may be offered support through Student Support Services, but this is contingent on them also identifying as low-income, first-generation college students. Student Support Services is also an undergraduate-specific program; there are few services for graduate students, much less ones that specifically support Asian American graduate students.

While programming and services may take longer to institutionalize, using my action research to create a space where Asian American-identified students may have authentic dialogues about their experiences within SOLES and the greater USD campus can be a form of support for this community. My hope is that my research will eventually lead to the development of programming and services specifically for this often overlooked student group. This has led to the formation of my research questions: How do Asian American graduate students from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences understand and experience a sense of social belonging at a predominantly white institution, such as the University of San Diego? And how can I support them in strengthening their sense of social belonging?

Literature Review

Strayhorn (2012) defines "sense of belonging" as "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about,

accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)" (p. 3). This support is critical to the college student experience and takes on increased significance in environments that individuals experience as foreign and during instances where they feel marginalized or unsupported (Strayhorn, 2012). These environments and instances are not uncommon for students of color at PWI's, and it is important to explore how students of color can thrive and belong at institutions that were not built for them. Sense of belonging can enhance commitment, connections, and even retention, while an absence of it can lead to diminished motivation, impaired development, and poor performance on assignments and tests (Strayhorn, 2012). The effects of experiencing sense of social belonging are explored through my research project.

While there is the commonly held belief that Asian American students are successful and do not need support, research indicates otherwise. In his work on college access for Asian American, first-generation students, Museus (2011) found that these students exhibited significantly lower educational expectations and matriculated into universities at lower rates. Four themes, in particular, emerged from his research as salient challenges to their pursuit of higher education: anti-college cultures, financial constraints, feeling alone in the application and choice process, and excess pressure. While the four themes are focused on how they impact students' pursuit of higher education, they may still be present even after admittance into a graduate program. Financial constraints and pressure, in particular, can worsen. These themes speak to the experiences that Asian American graduate students may hold before coming to USD and the support that they may need to gain a sense of belonging on campus.

The model minority myth, the belief that Asian American students are successful and do not need support, has been linked to negative consequences for Asian American college students.

Suzuki (2002) found that Asian American students were subjected to unrealistically high expectations, which led to psychological problems that could be further exacerbated by instances of racial harassment. However, since it was assumed that they do not need help, student service programs tended to exclude them. This also led to a lack of Asian American counselors and culturally competent, non-Asian counselors. This meant that their problems would go largely unrecognized, and they would receive little help coping with them. This research speaks to what difficulties Asian American graduate students may face during their time at USD (and within the larger white context) and why sense of belonging can be a concern for this community. Lack of programming and student services for this student population is not uncommon on college campuses across the country, and this emphasizes to me how my role, as one of the few Asian American student affairs practitioners on campus, is important in creating meaningful dialogue that explores how SOLES and USD can better support Asian American graduate students.

Liang, Tracy, Kauh, Taylor, and Williams (2006) conducted a study on mentoring relationships experienced by Asian American female college students in comparison to their European Americans counterparts. They discovered that Asian American students were less likely to report a current mentor relationship, less likely to report having a mentor of the same race, and had lower levels of satisfaction with their opportunities to form a mentor relationship. Liang, et al. reported that cultural differences may explain these results, but potential mentors could be more proactive in initiating mentor relationships with Asian American students, while students may also be coached in how to identify potential mentors and how to develop mentor relationships. This research shows that while social support may be available for Asian American students, they might not know how to navigate barriers like cultural differences to access it, which can lead to feelings of marginalization and exclusion. This can impact an Asian American

graduate student's sense of belonging, especially in predominantly white spaces where more barriers may be in place.

Context

The organizational setting for my research is the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) at the University of San Diego. Founded in 1962, SOLES contains four academic departments: Leadership Studies, Learning and Teaching, Counseling & Marital and Family Therapy, and the Naval ROTC program ("History and Facts"). The mission of SOLES is "to engage with students and our communities to continuously learn through inquiry and practice that supports social justice and effects meaningful change in our diverse society" ("SOLES' Abbreviated Strategic Plan, 2016-18"). Whether or not graduate students see this mission lived out within SOLES is critical to explore, and this research provides an opportunity for that.

USD reported that in Fall 2016, Asians comprised 8% of the total student population. The White, Black, Latinx, and Native student populations came in at 51%, 4%, 19%, and less than 1%, respectively ("Race/Ethnicity of Fall 2016 Students: Federal Reports," 2016). SOLES reflects similar numbers with Asians comprising 6.3% of the student population. The White, Black, Latinx, and Native student populations came in at 48.6%, 5.1%, 23.9%, and .2%, respectively. Along with being predominantly white, USD is also a private, Roman Catholic institution with core values including an "inclusive and collaborative community" and the "physical, spiritual, emotional, social and cultural development" of students ("Mission, Vision and Values," 2016).

When I transitioned into the Higher Education Leadership master's program at the University of San Diego, I found myself struggling with my values of equity and inclusion. I did not see many students, faculty, or staff members who looked like me, and in conversations

around minoritized identities, Asian Americans students were often dismissed or even forgotten. As a graduate assistant at the United Front Multicultural Center, I found that even when it came to diversity work with students, Asian American students were not part of the conversation. As a center, we have created or at least collaborated in programming for the Black, Latinx, and Native student populations. This made me wonder why Asian American students at USD, in particular, are underrepresented in programming, how they perceive this lack of inclusion, and whether it affects their sense of belonging as a part of both SOLES and USD.

At my undergraduate institution, the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), I constantly met staff, faculty, and students who also identified as Asian American. This community made me feel like I truly belonged and that I had a network of people to rely on when I needed it. I came across many mentors who looked like me and validated my experience as an Asian American woman. Being a first-generation college student and daughter of refugees, I needed more support than I anticipated in unpacking my various identities and being successful in my own right. I did not know how to seek out a mentor or that I could even have one; it came to me through UC Davis' environment. This mentorship and the community I found from the Asian American Studies department were crucial to me connecting my passion for social justice and advocating for marginalized identities to the work that I do now in student affairs. I want Asian American students at USD to have the opportunity to find social support and to feel validated within the identities that they hold.

My roles as a graduate assistant and co-president of Asian Students in Alliance puts me in a place where I have access to resources that could be used to support Asian American graduate students. I hope to use my positions to engage them in conversations around their identity development as Asian American graduate students and how they have they can improve

their experiences at SOLES and USD.

Significance

When I first interviewed for my assistantship at USD, I had the opportunity to meet students who were in the Higher Education Leadership master's program at the time. I remember asking several of the current students, "Are there any resources on campus for Asian/Pacific Islander students?" I received responses, such as, "There probably are. I just don't know about them" and "I think there's a center for Asian students?" This was my first indication that there was a lack of support and knowledge of Asian American students at USD. I found this concerning in the moment and believe that other current SOLES students and future admits may feel a similar way.

Through my assistantship at the United Front Multicultural Center, I was struck by the lack of programming and other forms of support for Asian American students at USD. As I participated in conversations on Black Lives Matter, served as the advisor for the Latinx community's large-scale events on campus, and participated on a planning committee for an event for the Native community, I felt that there was a lack of concern for my community. I felt that my racial identity and experiences as a minoritized student were invalidated at USD.

I discussed this with other members of the professional staff, including my supervisor, the Director of the United Front Multicultural Center. I used individual meetings and staff meetings to bring Asian American issues into the conversation and to inquire what we have done and can do for the community. While the consensus is that we have not provided programming for the Asian American community and that we should, no one has taken up the work. I have also spoken with several professors from the Ethnic Studies department to gauge their perspective, and they have all acknowledged that the campus does not provide enough support

for this community.

Research Methods

I used a modified version of appreciative inquiry (AI) that incorporates Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005). Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based methodology that creates purposeful change by identifying the best of "what is" to pursue the possibilities of "what could be" (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). Yosso (2005) frames community cultural wealth as a critical race theory method of shifting from a deficit view of communities of color to one that honors the array of "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups" (p. 69). By using both AI and the community cultural wealth model, I attempted to capitalize on what I identify to be the strengths of the Asian American graduate student community to empower them to advocate for more support and services at USD.
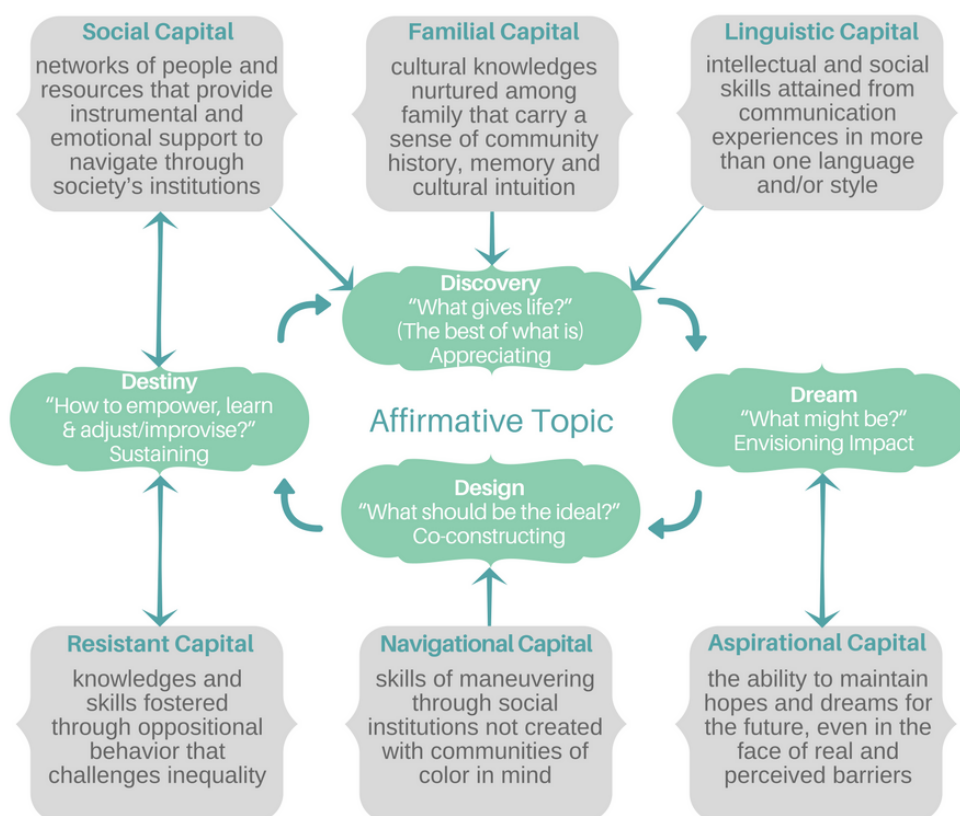

Figure 1. Depiction of research cycle based on Ashford & Patkar (2001) work and Yosso's

community cultural wealth model (2005) developed by the researcher.

The first step of appreciative inquiry, Discovery, involves storytelling and allows participants to reflect on the object of inquiry (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). For this project, students reflected on the concept of belonging and what it means to them. More specifically, students thought about when they have felt a sense of social belonging on campus and identified what support made them feel that sense of belonging. They also identified how their sense of social belonging relates to their identity as Asian Americans. Linguistic capital, social capital, and familial capital were used for this purpose. Linguistic capital includes the "intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Asian American students may arrive to SOLES with language and communication skills that are not part of the mainstream campus culture but are nevertheless an asset to diversity. Social capital includes networks of people and community resources, while familial capital refers to "cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community, history, and cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). All of these capitals can affect the way that these graduate students relate and find community with others who identify as Asian American and with non-Asian American campus members.

The next step, Dream, challenges participants to use their shared aspirations to imagine what it would look like for the group to function at its peak in relation to the object of inquiry (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). This project created a space where students could envision a campus community that provides them with an increased sense of social belonging. Aspirational capital, "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77), is crucial to this step. According to the aforementioned literature, Asian American students may face a lack of support, cultural barriers, racial microaggressions,

and other barriers to their sense of social belonging on college campuses, even when they are not in the minority. However, to create positive, lasting change, there has to be hope that such change can come to fruition. By participating in this step, these students both used and further developed their aspirational capital.

In the Design step, participants were asked to use their deepened understanding of their strengths, core values, and clear vision of the future they desire to form an action plan (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). This encouraged students to plan steps and collective actions they can take to advocate for better institutional support for Asian American graduate students at USD. Navigational capital, or the skills of maneuvering through social institutions not created with communities of color in mind (Yosso, 2005), provided deeper insight for this process. The resources and skills that have helped them navigate USD can be used to inform the development of institutional practices that will serve Asian American graduate students students.

The last step, Destiny, sees the action plan being implemented (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). Students had the opportunity to reflect on whether any interventions were effective and how we as a community can use our strengths to advocate for ourselves. In implementing an action plan as a group, the students had the opportunity to use and increase their social capital. The group, in itself, can function as a social network. Taking action also required the co-creation of resistant capital or "the knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). This lead to enhanced resistant capital for participants.

According to Strayhorn (2012), sense of belonging is relational and there is a "reciprocal quality to relationships that provide a sense of belonging" (3). One of my epistemological assumptions is that we are most effective in creating change when we are collaborating with others. Appreciative inquiry supports this, as it focuses on collective action. Instead of using a

deficit-based approach, it also encourages the discovery of what the Asian American graduate experience at USD can become. This also relates to my epistemological assumption that culture is significant in the development of an individual. In combining AI and the community cultural wealth model, my intention was to motivate students to use their strengths and initiate the changes that they want to see, instead of feeling that their culture as only a deficit.

Pre-Cycle

Participants were recruited through e-mail listservs and word of mouth. My pre-cycle was an e-mailed pre-assessment, which collected demographical information and their initial thoughts regarding the concept of social belonging. By inquiring what ethnic identity they identify with, I wanted to ensure that I was capturing a wide representation of Asian American graduate student voices. To protect the identities of my participants from the small Asian American population of SOLES, I will not be providing a table and will instead share this data in separate statements.

Participants

I had a total of six participants. Two participants identified as "female," one identified as "woman," and three identified as "male." Two participants identified as Vietnamese, one identified as Filipino, one identified as another Southeast Asian ethnic group, and two identified as mixed. In total, there were five participants from the Leadership Studies department and one participant from the Counseling & Marital and Family Therapy department. Five participants identified as 2nd generation Asian American, meaning their parents had immigrated to the United States. However, one of those participants also identified as 3rd and 4th depending on the parent. The last participant identified as 3rd generation, meaning their grandparents immigrated to the United States, and their parents were born here. Four participants identified as first-generation

college students. In terms of involvement, one person said they were not actively involved yet. Everyone else listed their employment on campus and extracurricular activities.

The last question of the survey was posed as: "What does it mean to you to belong at USD?" Responses are as listed:

"Being an active member of the community."

"Opportunities and support."

"I don't feel like I belong. I feel like an outsider that is at USD temporarily."

"Belonging at USD means feeling like this is my home and like this place is meant for me. Like I am meant to be here. Sometimes I feel like I belong, other times I don't. When I begin thinking about what it took to get here and what it takes to succeed here, I do wonder if feeling like I belong is worth the money, time, and energy."

"Have a community who guides and supports me."

"Having a seat at the table."

While there are common themes such as community, support, and having a voice in these responses, there is also this early notion of not feeling a strong sense of belonging on campus. Even though my intention is to use Yosso's community cultural wealth model to shift away from a deficit view of Asian American culture, it is imperative to unpack the ways that these Asian Americans graduate students are not feeling a strong sense of social belonging and how that may relate with their Asian American identity. I am particularly interested in the response of feeling like an outsider and its potential relation to the concept of the perpetual foreigner, which is according to Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz (2011), when ethnic minorities are "denied the American identity" and treated as if they were foreigners (p. 2). This is supported by the implicit belief that one must be White to be American. Since SOLES and USD are both microcosms of a

society that perpetuates the perpetual foreigner stereotype, it is entirely possible that the perpetual foreigner stereotype impacts the ways that Asian American graduate students feel a sense of social belonging.

Cycles

Overview

My first cycle after my pre-assessment included two focus groups that progressed through the appreciative inquiry steps of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. These focus groups lasted between one to two hours each and explored experiences that provided participants with a sense of social belonging, ways that sense of social belonging could be improved for all Asian American graduate students in SOLES, and tangible steps the group could take to address their own need for a greater sense of belonging within SOLES. My second cycle consisted of one focus group that was a joint meeting with administrators that lasted about an hour. This focus group cycled through the first three steps of appreciative inquiry but did not quite achieve Destiny. After each focus group, participants spent time journaling to record their reflections.

The most challenging aspect of conducting this research was finding times where most of the graduate participants were available given their own research and other commitments. While I had four participants in my first two focus groups, only three participants were able to attend my last focus group. I was intentional in sharing themes that emerged from the previous focus groups in the beginning of the second and third focus groups to also provide continuity and cultivate a shared understanding. Participants who were in multiple focus groups could elaborate more on the themes and their personal experience of previous focus groups.

Cycle 1: Focus Group 1

My first focus group was focused specifically on Discovery and what the Asian

American graduate student experience is like within SOLES and USD. I had two sessions for this focus group to ensure that all six participants could participate. The first session had four participants, while the second session had two. I had people introduce themselves; they shared where they were from, their ethnicity, and their connection to the Asian American identity and Asian American communities.

The participants were first asked why they chose to attend USD. I chose this question as a means to create connections that were not explicitly about the Asian American identity between the participants. Three of the participants mentioned being San Diego-bound and choosing USD because of their partners. This is also similar to my own narrative and may speak to the tendency of Asian cultures being relational. In addition to this, there were also connections to the content of their respective SOLES programs. Elaine offered, "When I started to learn about the program a little bit more, the leadership aspect of it really stood out to me. I was a little apprehensive about the campus culture, but decided to take a chance anyways." Michelle shared that she had gone to visit another campus and that at the other university, "everyone just seemed like they hated it much more than people hated it here... Out of the two options I had, this one was better, and I thought it would be worth even the increased amount in tuition." It is apparent that the environment and uniqueness of SOLES' programs are important and appealing factors when it comes to potential graduate students choosing SOLES. However, there is still the question of what the Asian American graduate student experience is like after they decide to attend.

The second question I posed was whether there were any perceived differences between SOLES and the rest of USD. All six participants identified race as the main difference. Michelle elaborated,

"When I go to Bert's in the day time, it's just all white students, and it looks very different

than when I go right before my night classes. Bert's is really the only place I know to go… so when I'm here early, I still just go there. It's my first place that I think of to go. And I'm like, 'It looks really different in here. This feels weird.'"

Natalie explained that while she mostly spent her time at Mother Rosalie at night, she had been to the opposite side of campus on several occasions. She commented, "When I do come, this side is a little different. It's a little more homogenous in comparison to my cohort."

There seems to be a strong distinction between SOLES and the rest of USD. This makes me wonder how we can better support our Asian American graduate students in SOLES but also encourage them to become integrated in USD as a whole. If Asian American representation or support is unavailable through SOLES, there may be other avenues available in other colleges and departments (e.g. Ethnic Studies). However, if the only image Asian American graduate students have of the rest of USD is that it is homogenous, they may be discouraged from exploring these avenues.

My next question was focused on the Dream step of appreciative inquiry and Yosso's social capital, as I asked participants to reflect and share what communities they consider themselves to be a member of on campus. Participants referenced their positions on campus, extracurricular groups, and their program cohorts. John mentioned that in his cohort, he started off as the "token Asian guy" in the group. In particular, there had been an instance where people would mistake him for another Asian male of a different ethnicity in the cohort. He cited an example of when someone did this multiple times and said to him, "I'm such a bad person. You must think I'm racist." His response was, "No, I just think you're bad with names." While John spoke of it as a comical incident, it is indicative of the marginalizing experiences of Asian Americans in SOLES. Racial microaggressions are defined as, "brief and commonplace …

indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 72). I have also been on the receiving end of this microaggression multiple times during my time at SOLES. While calling someone by the wrong name may seem like an accident, this particular microaggression represents the minimization and denial of differences that exist between interethnic groups and suggests that Asian Americans all look alike (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009).

Michelle mentioned that she had been experiencing an internal feeling of not having her ethnic-specific community at SOLES. She spoke about an instance where one of her classes had only one other Filipino student, although she was unsure if that particular student was actually Filipino. She then shared, "It's very weird not having that [Filipino community], especially being in San Diego, because there's hella Filipinos in San Diego." This concept of the Asian American community being diverse and participants relating more closely to their specific ethnic group was a common theme in both sessions of this focus group. Kevin had shared in the other session that he had used the campus directory early on and searched for typical last names from his ethnic group but could not find anyone else. It is evident that the desire to connect with others who hold shared identities is important to Asian American graduate students but disaggregated data regarding the Asian American population at SOLES would be needed to see if that ethnic representation exists within SOLES.

Michael commented that he was interested in becoming involved with the undergraduate student organizations on campus, particularly one that represents a specific part of his mixed Asian identity. He shared, "Out of all of my identities and all of my ethnic backgrounds, that's one area that I haven't really explored much throughout life, just because I never had the

opportunity to…" While there are not many Asian American graduate students in SOLES, there is a considerable amount in the undergraduate population, increasing the potential for ethnic matching. There are opportunities for collaboration, community building, and potentially even mentorship focusing around shared ethnic and/or racial identity.

Cycle 1: Focus Group 1 - Activity

For our activity, I had the participants from the first session create calming jars. Calming jars are a mental heath tool that can help relieve stress and anxiety. I supplied various colors of glitter and asked everyone to identify a color for each of these groups: faculty, staff and administration, and peers. They then spent time thinking of their social capital with these groups and used the glitter to represent the amount of support they felt from each group. While I was not able to replicate this activity in my second session due to time constraints, I still asked those participants the same questions.

The first group they spoke about was faculty members. Faculty can have a huge influence on graduate students' experience of SOLES and USD in general, as they may hold multiple roles in the lives of these students as professors, advisors, and supervisors. Elaine shared,

> "I feel like I get very little support from faculty members. I get access to them, which is nice, but I haven't felt like any of them show an interest in me. I feel like there's some folks … that have other identities that faculty are more drawn to spend time with."

While she agreed that faculty do not actively reaching out, Michelle also spoke to how in comparison to her undergraduate experience, faculty are more accessible. John agreed with this and references his positive experiences with faculty members. However, he also had negative experiences with one faculty member who he found to be largely inaccessible. He shared,

> "And then there's one who I just think is the worst person to ever have as a faculty

advisor or for guidance. She just doesn't respond to e-mails. You have to track her down.

It's a pain, and if that's the person you get stuck with, I would imagine you would have a

very difficult time being here at SOLES."

Natalie also shared her experience with faculty, commenting, "I do kind of agree that there are

some students where I feel like the [professors] favor them more and sometimes, it feels really

clique-y, and like, it gets me a little anxious."

There is this sense of faculty not being interested in the Asian American identity, and this

may be due to the lack of Asian American faculty members in SOLES. Whether or not this

assumption that faculty members are more interested in folks of other identities is true, the fact

that students feel this way shows that their sense of social belonging is being negatively affected.

According to Twale, Weidman, and Bethea (2016), the lack of faculty of color can pose trust

issues with students of color and negatively affect their socialization. Without a critical mass of

diverse faculty and peers in graduate programs, students of color struggle to find advisors and

mentors. This leads to students of color having unequal skill sets, abilities, and resources, as "not

everyone admitted to a given program possess the time, capital, and savvy to access these

competitive advantages" (Twale, Weidman, & Bethea, 2016, p. 82). SOLES does not have a

critical mass of diverse faculty. The majority of participants in this group have negative

experiences with the faculty they do have, which is a disadvantage to their educational

experience. The lack of trust and competition for resources referenced in participants' responses

is further explored in the next section.
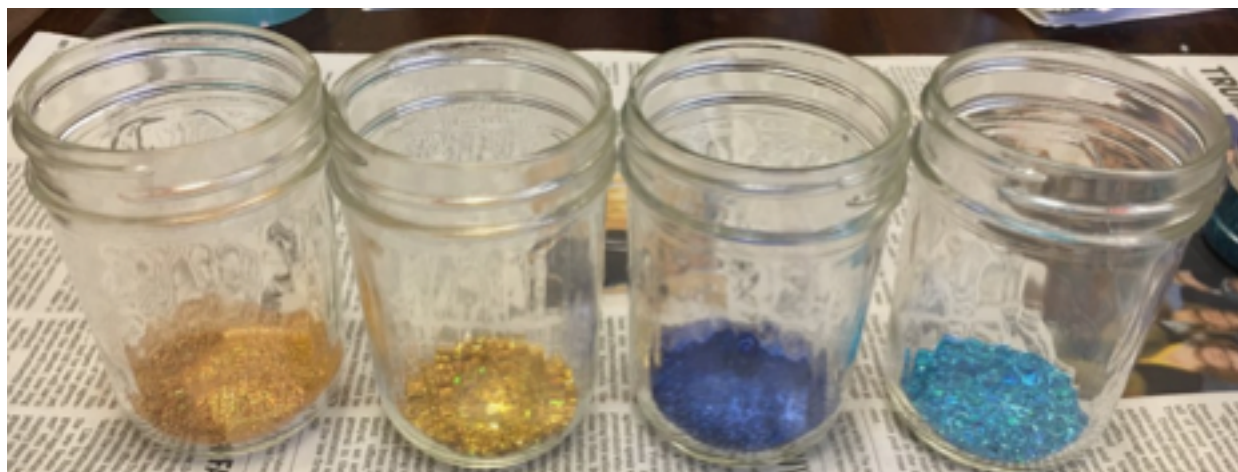
Figure 2. Picture depicting first round of calming jar activity. Different colors were used to depict levels of support from faculty, staff, peers, and administrators.

The next group was staff and administration. From when we first apply to our graduate programs to when we request approval for graduation, staff and administration are an integral part of our graduate journey. The way that these tasks are handled can really affect the way that graduate students experience SOLES. Whether or not graduate students have interactions with them beyond these standard needs may also affect their sense of belonging on campus. Elaine spoke about staff in her office at USD being very supportive, but not so much the rest of USD. She stated, "I'm not sure where that disconnect is. Part of me feels like it's a little bit of a popularity contest between offices on USD's campus."

Coming from an undergraduate institution with a huge population, Michelle pointed out that by being at a smaller school, the distance between herself and administration is a lot smaller, allowing her to interact with them. However, she also spoke to the effort she had to put in in order to participate in these opportunities.

"I do feel like I purposely have to schedule my life around going to those events… Things do happen where they're available and can offer me really good insight and support and take my feedback even, but literally when I read every newsletter e-mail, I'm

like, 'Okay, I have to put that in there and adjust my work schedule for the week,' and I

do this probably once a week... And it's stupid that you have to dedicate the time to doing

that, but that's how the system works."

John shared two examples of staff and administration he found to be particularly supportive. This

included his supervisor and President Harris. He shared his individual experience with President

Harris and what it meant to him:

"We walked around campus for a good 40 minutes, getting our exercise, and having a

good heart-to-heart conversation. ... This is like a pivot point to doing something bigger

in my life. I would love to have better support, and I've just been lucky that the two

people I can think of have been very open in saying, 'Yeah, let's make it happen.'"

Michelle observed,

"Stereotypically, the authorities at school are the boss and you listen to them and do

whatever they say, but you don't seek them… It's like you don't want to speak to them to

tell them to notice you, you want to… be so amazing that they notice you and commend

you… and that's not how the game is at all, and no one told me that… It's just culturally,

you shouldn't ask for support and help… you don't want to seem needy."

In response, John shared,

"I'll say something really stupid to the professor, administrator, or staff, and I'll walk

away, and it's like, 'What the fuck did I just say? That was the worst gibberish ever.' This

is exactly why I don't ask for support, because I'm going to mess up. I'm going to repeat

myself over and over again, because we never got the practice and because it's also weird

for us to ask for help."

This initiated a deeper conversation around jealousy and competition for the attention of

authority figures, as they could name instances where others in the group had experienced

favoritism by faculty, staff, and administration in some capacity that had invoked a jealousy in

them created from that need to be noticed.

In Asian cultures, it is assumed that authority figures are deserving of respect and that

one should listen rather than speak to them. The concept of deference to authority is also in

alignment with Asian cultural values (Kim, Atkinson, and Umemoto, 2001, p. 573). This affects

the way that those who espouse Asian cultural values, including Asian Americans, may choose

to interact with authority figures. There is this hesitancy to speak to authority figures in a way

that does not express humility, and every participant in this focus group resonated with this need

that Michelle named—the need to be noticed by authority figures while not directly asking for

attention. Several participants also spoke to how their focus should have been on the conditions

that created this sense of competition with their peers, rather than how jealous they felt of their

peers for being noticed and commended by authority figures. These conditions and environment

are not conducive to a strong sense of social belonging, as it discourages community building.

Figure 3. Picture depicting second round of calming jar activity.

The last group I asked about was peers. For all six participants, peers provided the most

support, sometimes in the face of faculty, staff, and administrators. Elaine shared,

> "I get a lot of support from my peers… I feel like I can talk to them, and they hear me out
> for who I am, and they challenge me… I feel like we, as a cohort, look out for each
> other… I think that's because that relationship is less formal than a staff, administrator, or
> faculty relationship, but just as important."

Natalie shared that she initially had difficulties connecting with her peers, citing it as a cultural

difference between being from the South and being from the West coast, which is how she

perceived many of her peers to be. However, once she made more effort in creating those

relationships, she found that they have been the biggest form of support for, because of their

shared experience and "having each other's back especially when it sometimes feels like faculty

or the program is against you, because sometimes it feels that way..."

This "us versus them" mentality has been a common theme. Even though faculty,

administration, and staff are here to serve and support graduate students, these participants feel

that they need support *because* of them, and this may relate back to that feeling that these

authority figures are not interested in their identity as Asian American graduate students. For all

of the participants, their cohorts seem to be the strongest form of support. In his work on cohort

models, Teitel (1997) found that students saw the benefits of the cohort model as, "supportive

environment, networking among members, opportunities to share strengths, weaknesses,

concerns, accomplishments" (p. 69). He also found that the close connection between cohort

members could challenge the power in relationships with faculty members. By presenting a

united front, students negotiated curriculum and express their concerns more easily (p. 74). This

seems to be in alignment with Natalie's experience of her peers supporting her whenever she has

difficulties with her faculty. This also presents the potential of using close relationships found

within SOLES' cohorts to ask for more support.

Figure 4. Picture depicting final round of calming jar activity.

Figure 5. Picture depicting completion of calming jar activity.

After the activity, I still had a couple of questions. The first of which was about how their Asian American identity affects their sense of belonging on campus. Elaine shared her experience with a peer who does not understand why she is involved in social justice:

"They don't understand who I am and don't get why I champion issues of social justice and race as an Asian person and feel like I am that model minority stereotype that I've had an easy life so why should I be complaining… So I feel like that's really shaken my

sense of belonging. Not only do white people not necessarily give me a free hall pass right away… but also other people of color tend to group me and make assumptions about my identity even just based on what they know about stereotyped Asians."

Natalie commented that in researching about Asian Americans before, this reminded her of how Asian Americans are the "in between, because it is that stereotype of the model minority, but you're not white enough and the other group doesn't accept you either, so you're in that weird purgatory."

These experiences may be explained through Kim (1999)'s model of racial triangulation of Asian Americans. Racial triangulation occurs when a dominant group (whites) praises a subordinate group (Asian Americans) relative to another subordinate group while at the same time constructing a narrative of the first subordinate group as "immutably foreign and unassimilable with whites" (p.107). This establishes a hierarchy where Asian Americans are seen as superior and closer to whiteness than other racial groups but still be marginalized by the dominant group. This also pushes Asian Americans into the position of being wedges against other communities of color where these communities are made to feel that since Asian Americans are successful, it is their fault and not the fault of systemic oppression that they are not as successful. Elaine's experience with her peer is indicative of the Asian American experience as wedges, as her peer focused on the positionality of Asian Americans rather than the systems that enforce said positionality, preventing coalition building. In this case, Asian Americans are made to feel as though they do not belong by all racial groups, and this is an experience that carries on from greater society to within SOLES.

Michelle also shared that she does not naturally gravitate towards the Asian Americans in her cohort, which is unusual for her. She commented,

> "Maybe it's because... even geographically, we're not all really from the same area. But I have found myself explaining a lot when I'm talking, having to justify, not in a big way, but just like, 'Oh yeah, I'm Filipino, and we do this' or 'This is why I think this' … I feel like I spend more energy and time doing that instead of just saying what I need to say and people understanding it."

This speaks to the complexities of identifying as Asian American. Even though those who identify under the umbrella term may have shared experiences, ethnic-specific groups have their own unique cultures and needs. This presents additional challenges to the ways that SOLES, should they elect to do so, could incorporate a means of improving sense of social belonging for the Asian American graduate student community.

My last question was about what other identities affect their sense of belonging. Kevin spoke to his identity as a first-generation college student and how his socioeconomic status makes him feel as though he does not belong at USD.

> "Seeing all of these nice places, seeing all of these nice cars, seeing undergrad students or even grad students wearing nice clothes, I'm just kind of like, 'Wow, I shouldn't be here' … Sometimes you just feel out of place... It's an ongoing cycle to see these things happening. I think about the poverty treadmill… No matter how fast I run, I will always see this trend of me being lower class and not fitting in…"

Michael resonated with this and spoke to the intersectionality of being both Asian American and a first-generation graduate student in what is seen as a less common field for Asian Americans.

> "We don't fit their perception of the Asian Americans they [the white population] see who have found success in this country, who are working in tech and things like that… It's kind of an uphill battle, because we're fighting this perception that the general

population has of us being in the program we're in, but at the same time, we don't really

have anyone to turn to except for maybe the people in this room...”

What Kevin and Michael shared challenges the model minority myth and the misconception that

all Asian Americans are successful in both financial wealth and education. When we look at the

data, there are significant disparities between ethnic-specific groups in both areas. For example,

while Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans full-time workers made an average weekly

income of $1,333 and $1,256 respectively, Vietnamese Americans made only $955 (U.S.

Department of Labor, 2016, p. 12). The invisibility of these disparities can reinforce the

expectation that these Asian American graduate students should be successful, negatively

impacting their sense of social belonging, as they are made to feel as if their socioeconomic

status and field of study are not indicative of someone who is Asian American.

Cycle 1: Focus Group 1 – Reflections

There was a shared experience being spoken to within the focus groups where

participants could relate to one another and provide similar examples of their experiences at

SOLES. Kevin reflected,

“As I participated in the first session, I realized that there hasn't been a group or an

opportunity to discuss sense of belonging. Just participating in the first session, I got to

connect with API [Asian Pacific Islander] colleagues, learn more about them, and hear

their story. I really feel like I have a supportive community in a short time span.”

While this affirms my intention of creating a space where Asian American graduate students can

connect and share their experiences, this disconnect between participants and the Asian

American identity also surfaced. There was both a dissonance, as some participants did not feel

that the Asian American identity was necessarily enough to connect them to other Asian

American graduate students, and an element of unpacking past trauma and negative experiences in Asian spaces. Even if one does not identify strongly with the Asian American community, they are still perceived and treated a specific way because of how they physically present. This can negatively impact their sense of social belonging. In her journal, Natalie reflected,

> "When I talked about my past traumas with [an Asian organization] in the past, I did tear up a bit. Just feeling that reminder of feeling rejected... I do feel like I hold some of that sadness and at times loneliness or isolation… I know it was something of the past, but a part of me has not felt that sense of closure."

We cannot be sure of the experiences that Asian American graduate students have before they start their program in SOLES. They may or may not identify strongly with their Asian American identity. They may or may not even want to be a part of the community. This reminds me that as someone who works within diversity efforts at the university, I need to be cognizant of my preconceived notions of how people identify and the expectations that arise from that. Also, in attempting to create efforts around improving Asian American graduate students' sense of social belonging, I am already falling into the trap of categorizing them as Asian Americans and holding notions of what their experiences may be like.

Cycle 1: Focus Group 2

My second focus group was focused on the appreciate inquiry steps of Dream, Design, and Destiny. I started by facilitating an opening activity in which I asked my participants to name what words and phrases they associated with "USD." They were then asked to do the same for "SOLES." Afterwards, I asked them to identify how these words and phrases related to the Asian American identity.
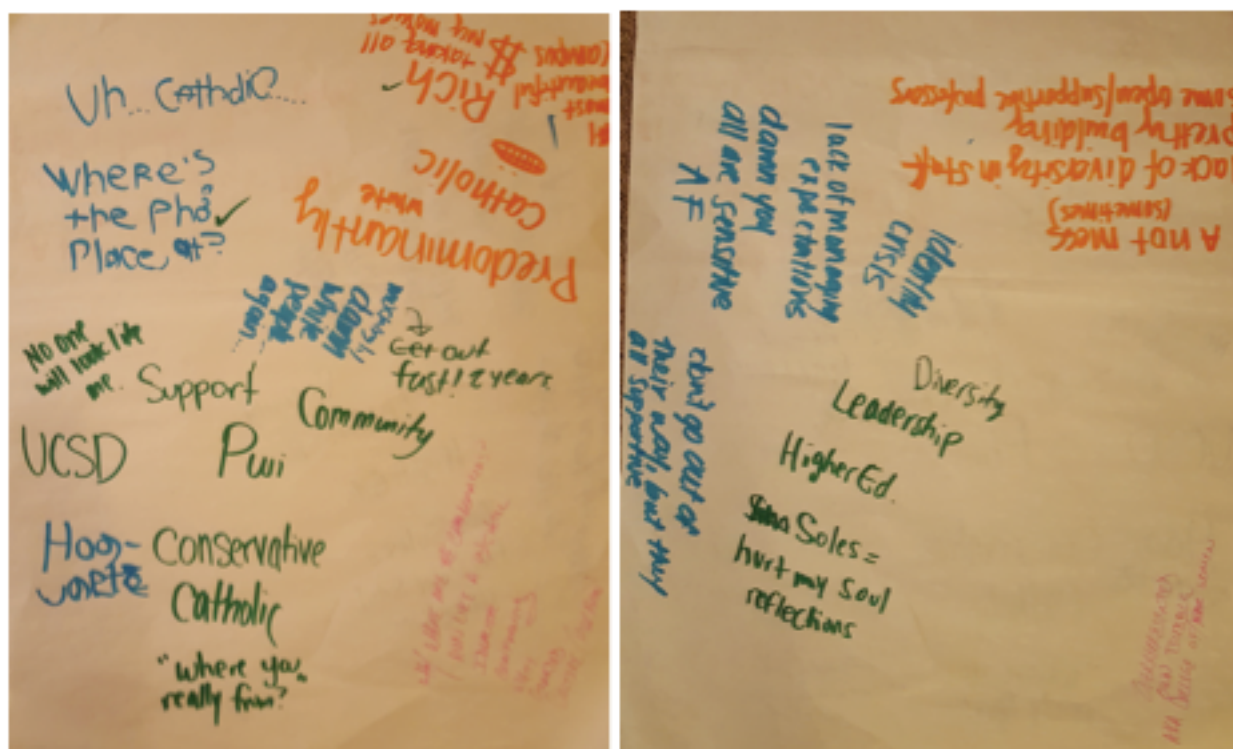
Figures 6 and 7. Pictures from activity depicting responses to "USD" and "SOLES" respectively.

In describing USD, "Catholic" came up multiple times. Natalie spoke to the experience of being a model minority and how the need to attain a closer connection to whiteness can include identifying as Catholic. Michael also commented that Catholicism was forced on some Asian countries and that he felt this sense of selling out and whitewashing his own identity by giving into a system that "perpetuates the colonization of our people." In response, John shared that being at a predominantly white institution, he is more cognizant of maintaining his Asian American roots through the following: "I acknowledge that there's one part of this privilege that's going to be white, that I have to immerse myself in so that I can learn and be educated. But the second that's over with, I'm going to try to find the best pho place."

From these responses, it is evident that there is a dissonance between the institution's Catholic identity and participants' Asian American identity. Each participant has their own

reason for attending USD, which was shared during the first focus group. While there are benefits to attending this institution, they all feel they are giving up or at risk of losing some part of their identity being here, whether it is selling out, losing their ethnic-specific community, or losing touch with their roots. This has a negative impact on their sense of social belonging at SOLES. Asian American graduate students may benefit from more opportunities to explore and discuss this particular dissonance between the institution's religious identity and their Asian American identity, especially for those who also identify as Catholic and struggle to negotiate both identities.

For SOLES, "diverse" was commented on multiple times. While SOLES is known to be diverse, participants felt that Asian identifying folks are often left out of conversations and work around diversity. Michael also spoke to the disconnect between Linda Vista and SOLES where even though the institution is placed within the diverse Linda Vista community, students are known to ignore the rest of Linda Vista in favor of exploring beaches and other areas. In fact, there is a university-wide campaign called "turn left" where students are encouraged to turn left when they are exiting campus to spend time in Linda Vista. Michael named this disinterest that he sees others in his cohort having for Linda Vista as something that negatively impacts his sense of social belonging. Two other participants also spoke to their experiences growing up in similar neighborhoods to Linda Vista. For example, Kevin shared,

> "I grew up in a neighbor that was pretty diverse, but the majority of it was Black. So you learned how to survive in that environment, but once you make a left or right turn… you're in a white neighborhood. You see all of these white people, and you have to please them. So I have to be white when I get there, but when I'm back in the block, I have to be ghetto and talk slang."

Kevin's experience speaks to the linguistic and navigational capitals that Asian Americans in these neighborhoods form, as they learn how to speak what is essentially another language while maintaining their native languages and navigating both white-oriented and people of color-oriented spaces. Participants also shared how Linda Vista and the area connected to it, Convoy District, are where they go to shop for groceries, eat, and feel connected to home. When other SOLES graduate students show a disregard or disinterest for the culture of these spaces, it can easily reinforce that dissonance between the institution and where some Asian American graduate students think of as home, causing them to feel as though they do not belong.

While there is the element of having linguistic capital from navigating these different spaces, participants also spoke to the isolationism that can occur from not having that capital in academic spaces. Michael shared,

> "It's hard for me to find a group of people I can relate to, and I think part of speaking up in class or doing a presentation is that I'm afraid that I'm going to be too real… I thought I was the only person feeling a certain way or always being too sensitive... Being here, I feel like I need to filter myself or shut down, because I don't speak the same language as other people do."

Multiple participants spoke to their experiences of not understanding words, phrases, or etiquette in their courses that everyone else seemed to understand. This speaks to the ways that academia can promote classism and does not always provide access to marginalized students who already see these spaces as white-oriented. Natalie summarized this through the following: "It's a systemic, oppressive thing especially when you talk about language... Why do you have to make a separation of space?" There also seems to be this cultural norm of not asking for clarification from shame, which may connect to the model minority myth, as Asian Americans are expected

to already know everything.

"Sensitive" was also brought up in relation to SOLES. John shared his experience in a Leadership Studies course where he felt that his peers were too sensitive with "baggage" that was "continuously self-inflicted." He commented,

> "Where I'm from, and maybe it's the Asian culture, if shit went down, we just have to suck it up and move on… There's very little time to mourn… I don't have time to slow down to really acknowledge any hurt or emotional baggage, because I need to keep on working to inspire these kids to not give up."

Michael responded, "I totally agree, but at the same time, as Asian men having an impact on younger Asian men, I think encouraging them to be reflective and in touch with their feelings can also be very beneficial." This was further expanded into a conversation around the benefits of reflection and vulnerability, as well as how Asian American men are particularly discouraged from both.

In their study, Lu and Wong (2013) found that Asian American males thought of restricting emotions as masculine and stressful. Because of the Asian cultural norm of suppressing emotions, Asian American males may role model this behavior to other Asian American males, creating a cycle. There are also "communicative and behavioral limitations" as a result of conforming to these norms of Asian and Asian American masculinity (p. 358). Based on his negative perspective of his peers sharing their "baggage" and his discouragement of youth from examining their emotions in fear of them losing out on opportunities, John's experience can be seen as an example of this cycle. This difference in cultural norms and values from what is presented through SOLES' courses could negatively affect one's sense of social belonging during their transition into SOLES.

The next question I asked was regarding what social support participants need to succeed at USD and within SOLES. Kevin commented, "I think this is the type of bond I wanted when I came, and I wish I would have had it sooner. It would've made my transition and homesickness better." Other participants affirmed this by speaking about needing more opportunities like this for dialogues around the Asian American experience. Michael also offered,

"I don't know to be honest with you, because I'm not used to support. I've always kind of done things myself… The problem is I think I would need to be taught or someone would need to model how I could use that support… I'm here as I am today, because of everything I did myself."

This sparked a conversation around how one could be taught how to use support and to navigate the system of SOLES, which led into my last question regarding how we can take action to address these needs. The participants started designing a mentorship program that could help Asian American graduate students with their transition into SOLES and USD in general. The idea behind this program is that even though we navigated SOLES alone, it does not mean that future generations of Asian American graduate students must. This invokes inspirational and resistant capital, as the participants do have hope that conditions for the community can change and realize that this change may require the creation of something new that opposes the expectations the institution and broader society has for Asian Americans. Natalie shared,

"I feel like a big part of the API culture is collectivistic, and you can use that culture piece to address the other pieces that we experience as Asian Americans—like having to do it on your own, being first-gen, and feeling like your own little island."

In this sense, the collectivistic nature of Asian American culture and navigational capital can also be used in the creation of this mentorship program. Other specifications for the mentorship

program include that it honor intersectionalities, as the male participants had expressed a need

for mentorship from other Asian American males. In order to achieve Destiny, we, as a

collective, decided to meet with the administration of SOLES to see what support we could

receive in forming a mentorship program.

Cycle 1: Focus Group 2 – Reflections

I found this focus group to be an empowering space where conversation flowed more

freely in comparison to the first focus group. Kevin wrote in his journal,

"This space helped me be more intentional with my interactions with API graduate

students, as we share similar challenges and struggles. I also believe as I continue on, I

should do my best to reach out and continue these dialogues about our challenges as

much as possible with my API folks."

The participants seemed more comfortable with one another, and it genuinely felt like we were

all connected around the Asian American identity. I also stepped more out of my facilitator role

to share my perspectives and experiences, aligning with what participants shared. Beyond this

study, I hope that there is the continuity that Kevin references.

In feeling more comfortable with one another, participants were also able to challenge

each another. I found that this connected to the presence of all three male participants in this

focus group. They shared different perspectives around masculinity and vulnerability within the

Asian American community, and this was done in a very respectful and affirmative way. I felt

that even as they were discussing the mentorship that Asian American males could benefit from,

examples of it were manifesting within the group.

Also, while there was an incredible amount of energy within this focus group, this meant

that there were also high expectations for the next focus group. Michael reflected, "I feel this

group, in itself, is possibly the support I had been looking for my entire life… I also see this group as a catalyst to make some changes in SOLES." This hope of creating change inspired the next focus group.

Cycle 2: Focus Group 3

My last focus group had three graduate student participants and three administrators from SOLES. I initiated the stage of Discovery by going over the main themes from the previous focus groups. This included race as a perceived difference between SOLES and USD, marginalizing experiences within cohorts, lack of intentional support from faculty, difficulties in approaching authority, and a need for connection to other Asian Americans, focusing specifically on mentorship. I then gave space for participants to share their personal perspectives and thoughts from the focus groups and to expand on any of the themes. Elaine shared,

> "I think at first I was apprehensive to join this focus group and this study… I don't always necessarily feel welcome in Asian-designated spaces for a lot of reasons, but it was really beautiful to have this time to connect with other students and realize that the things I was experiencing were shared amongst others and how prevalent is this nature to keep it as an individual struggle..."

Michael expanded on this point, "That's interesting that you bring up the fact of having a sense of individual struggle, because I didn't actually realize this until I came across it in a counseling book that I'm currently reading… I didn't realize how big of a piece that played into Asian culture… This sense of dealing with your problems yourself internally and not really talking about them with other people."

Kim, Atkinson, and Umemoto (2001) wrote about the barriers that Asian Americans face in seeking and using psychological support. One Asian value that can prevent them from seeking

help includes the "ability to resolve psychological problems," which states that, "One should use one's inner resources and willpower to resolve psychological problems… One should overcome distress by oneself; asking others for psychological help is a sign of weakness" (p. 575). While in reference to counseling services, this cultural value of not asking others for support easily translates to other parts of one's life. Elaine and Michael both spoke to their experiences of this particularly in the context of USD.

I then invited the administrators to ask questions, share insights on the Asian American graduate student population within SOLES from their perspective, and to provide suggestions. Administrator 1 pointed out that, "When we talk about 'Asian American,' we lump a whole bunch of folks together. At the same time, there are commonalities, so we want to be honoring both—the fact that we are lumping, but not to overly generalize all groups within that sub-population." They also shared that initially, they wanted to ask, "What can we do?" but they wanted to honor our experiences and not just focus on finding a solution, because that has to be "a collaborative process."

I also asked about the potential to have a mentorship component and to imagine what that could look like, initiating the stages of Dream and Design. Administrator 2 asked if the SOLES Ambassadors program might serve as an avenue for mentorship. They commented, "Usually, it's linked program to program or the part of country that you're from, and other likenesses… People find each other that way. But if that could be strengthened and population varied more with the ambassador, [we could have] a more targeted recruitment of ambassadors." Elaine responded,

> "I definitely think that is a way to use something that is already structured within SOLES
> and use it to our advantage of what we see is a need for students. I just feel like that the
> ambassador role could be maybe more intentional about asking folks to reach out based

on those connections… Maybe having it slightly more explicit... in terms of having ambassadors step up and say, 'I represent these things if you are wondering about these identities on campus.'"

Administrator 1 agreed with this idea and shared,

"What struck me with some of the data was the intentionality and that there are groups of students, in this case, perhaps many Asian American students, where reaching out is less in sync with a cultural norm. So I think part of it is perhaps creating a more fleshed out 'who are we and how do we identify.' What I'm also struck by is how we could encourage more of an intentional, direct reaching out to be more directive than passive."

Administrator 3 offered,

"We also need to be more deliberate. Just like we're having this, we could say, 'We're meeting with Asian American students' maybe every year… I think students would show up. I think students are so happy when you say, 'Look, I'm not boxing you in. I'm not saying you got to come to just the Asian one or just the Latino one. You might feel like you identify with both.' If we are more intentional, I think it also shows folks that we see them and that we are not going to enforce that invisibility. We're going say, 'Look, we want to celebrate. You're not just different in general. We don't just have multiculturalism in general. There are specific cultures in that and one of them is... so we're going to sit down with this group.'"

Natalie shared that for her program, there was a mentorship program in place where a second-year student would contact incoming students in the beginning of the year, asking if they would want a peer mentor.

"I thought it was a great idea, because they try to match you and you submit an

application. But it didn't have that follow-up piece. Of course, they're either completing

their final year or whatever… and so I thought it was a great idea, because you have

someone who's at your level and you're matched in that sense and you can get those

resources. But I don't know if there was any thought into the training behind the

mentorship program or if it was just like, 'Oh, here's a contact if you want them.' And I

personally have not seen mine since the beginning of the year. But I think it would be

really helpful, and I would be more than willing to do that for the following year..."

Administrator 2 offered that these types of mentorship programs are really dependent on multiple

factors like the mentor contacting the mentee, the mentee responding, and the mentor following

up, which can be a lot for graduate students. Administrator 3 suggested that there could be

specific events like a mentor and mentee lunch or pizza night that more intentionally brings them

together and provides a space for them to connect. The focus group ended after this due to time

constraints.

Cycle 2: Focus Group 3 – Reflections

This focus group generated a lot of ideas around mentorship and creating spaces for Asian

American graduate students to connect with administrators beyond this focus group. One

participant wrote in their journal,

"Though I feel the research was taken up by them [the administrators], I thought it was

odd that very little direction was given by them. Perhaps this was not the space for that,

nor was it a role that they needed to fulfill, but my expectations, based on my own

interactions with authority, were not met."

Many themes surrounding authority have emerged from these focus groups, and I have found

that it is difficult to define our expectations of authority, as well as how we would like our

relationship to them to look like. My participants and I seem to have been hoping for some type of action to occur as a result from this focus group, but it did not quite get that far. This speaks to the work that still needs to be done and to the potential of this work in creating a strong relationship between Asian American graduate students and administrators. Another graduate student reflected,

> "I think out of this whole experience, I feel activated to find that support / be that support for our future generations… I felt a lot of love, support, and of course, strength in hearing the other participants present. I hope that our discussion of wanting to increase diversity efforts, but also specifically, Asian American voices, is also heard—and all the intersectionalities of those voices. It felt productive in a sense that we were all able to lay out a foundation, but I also feel it necessary to keep pushing forward. To keep having these discussions and continue finding ways to better support one another and our very diverse community."

This reflection is closely aligned with my own feelings after the focus group. As I mentioned earlier, I realize that I had been hoping to achieve Destiny through some sort of action or at least action plan. However, I now realize that would not have been possible. More time is necessary for Asian American graduate students to share their unique needs and stories. There can be more opportunities to be in dialogue with faculty and administrators, and I genuinely hope that my participants now feel empowered to take up those opportunities. Another participant shared,

> "… I felt very aware of what I was doing with my body, how I was presenting myself, and my words, which I think draws connection with the Asian construction of asking for help. I felt nervous that what we were saying would not be validated and the findings would be taken as not as pressing as other matters. I realized that those worries may have

been just myself perpetuating thoughts I have had in the past and the past messaging I

have received. When they replied, it was nice to feel validated around our concerns, and I

tried to resist feeling like what they were saying was just lip service. I wanted to believe

they equally bought into the work and were willing to think of solutions. It was nice to

hear their words, and I hope in the future, something becomes actionable or that the

Asian identity is more salient to them [the administrators]."

I think that this focus group was very much needed based on participants' feelings and

perceptions of authority figures expressed in previous focus groups. There was almost this

expectation of not being understood or of being invalidated by those in power who do not look

like them. There will most likely still be this unease in interacting with authority, but I believe

that this dialogue was a step toward fostering a stronger relationship between Asian American

graduate students and administrators where the administrators now have a better sense of the

unique needs of this community and the students know that they have allies within the

administration whom they can be vulnerable with.

Post-Cycle

I sent out the post-assessment via e-mail soon after the final focus group had taken place

and received responses from five participants. I asked three questions to gauge whether

participants felt that their sense of social belonging changed through the focus groups and what

actions could be taken next. My first question was in regards to whether their initial thoughts on

sense of social belonging at SOLES and USD changed since participating in the focus groups.

Responses include the following:

"Yes, I definitely feel more socially connected to USD. Having the shared experience or

even being able to hear the experiences/share my own experience as an Asian American

graduate student has made me feel more naturally connected. Being a grad student, it is so easy to feel disconnected with the rest of the university, especially being placed so far away from the 'action on campus.' But having some dialogue with others who I felt like I could really relate to helped to change that around."

"Yes. I realized that there are different levels of sense of social belonging. Culturally, between those identified as API, I feel more at home. There's a common narrative that many of us shared. The unspoken bond makes other API like a second/third family."

"I have such a sense of validation and relief since being in the focus groups and I feel like my sense of connectedness toward Asian American individuals in SOLES graduate programs have strengthened significantly. I feel like my sense of belonging at SOLES and USD as an Asian American continue to be undermined by interactions in the classroom setting or general USD relationship building among faculty and admin…"

While it was wonderful to receive such positive and affirming feedback from participants, the last point shared is also really significant and speaks to work that still needs to be done. Through my action research, I intended to get a sense of whether other Asian American graduate students were having similar experiences to myself and then create a means to which sense of belonging could be improved for this community. However, while participants were able to connect and feel a greater sense of belonging within the focus groups, it became even more apparent to me that this space was so important because of what they were experiencing through SOLES and USD. The community building, support, and validation experienced through the focus groups do not necessarily change the factors that were negatively impacting their sense of social belonging in the first place. There are still significant barriers; while my research is SOLES-specific, these graduate students' sense of belonging is still impacted by the rest of USD. More people and

spaces across the campus need to be involved in the work of including Asian American graduate students.

For my second question, I asked if there were benefits and challenges to participating in these focus groups. Responses include the following:

"The biggest benefit was feeling like a part of a community. I definitely felt that sense of social isolation most graduate students feel, and being a minority within the university with little visibility, it made it feel even more isolating; however, having this welcoming and open minded group definitely was therapeutic for me. The only challenges I would say was the naturally fluctuating schedule of a graduate student. Especially for those who have other work commitments, family commitments, etc.…"

"I think that I will continue to feel a sense that these spaces on campus do not fit me well, I appreciate that they exist and to participate in them, but they still don't feel mine. I also get the sense, after meeting with [the administrators], that the direction for recommendations moving forward don't speak to what I need as a person of mixed identity and Asian American identity. The recommendations will call to some students, but without the explicit message that folks with mixed identities are also called to join, I will always feel a hesitation to do so."

Both of the challenges presented in these responses need to be considered in future programming and services provided for this graduate student community. While we can create multiple means to improve sense of social belonging through SOLES and on campus, it is up to the individual student to prioritize these opportunities and to participate. However, it becomes much more difficult for graduate students to engage when they have other commitments, including their own research, marriages, and fulltime jobs, which were all reflected in the participants. Also, when

programming and services are created, they need to be intentional when it comes to representation and explicitness. We cannot be sure of what experiences and traumas students have had before coming to SOLES, and while there are no "one size fits all" programs or services, we can endeavor to make them as open and as inclusive as possible. Otherwise, graduate students may choose to self-select out of these opportunities without an explicit invitation that validates their identities and experiences.

For my last question, I asked if they plan on taking any actions to enhance their sense of social belonging on campus and if so, what actions. Responses include the following:

"I definitely would love to follow through on the mentorship piece. I think for me that is something that I would have loved to have, whether it is having a handbook… having dialogues/mini socials with current or alumni, sharing contact information of alumni, etc. I think it is so important that we leaders should step up to help the next generation of graduate students… just because we had to struggle, it doesn't mean that we should put others through that same gauntlet... Instead, I would definitely rather add another rung to the ladder so the generations behind us can continue to build up."

"Yes, I want to be more intentional about my interactions with my API peers and try to find time to reconnect and continue to have meaningful dialogue."

"I would like to be a mentor for future API grad students if possible."

"My plan of action is to continue to authorize my voice in Asian spaces and not take myself out of participation in anticipation of microaggressions or exclusion. I would like to make a larger effort to connect with social justice aimed programs and Asian identity."

From these responses, it is apparent that there is momentum around offering mentorship to incoming Asian American graduate students. There is also an expressed desire to create more

spaces for meaningful dialogue where participants can show up authentically. This speaks to both navigational and resistant capital, as there is this hope to use what they have learned in navigating this institution to challenge the lack of support for Asian American graduate students that they have experienced.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study, and the largest one that I feel compelled to name is that we did not have any South Asian representation. South Asians are constantly left out when it comes to conversations around the Asian American identity, and this further perpetuated that. Representation was also a limitation in that since there was only one mixed-race participant, there were challenges in holding enough space for their experiences to be shared. If this study were to be replicated, I would recommend that it encapsulate more of the diversity of the Asian American graduate student population.

Also, while we were definitely able to create a sense of community in the focus groups, I lumped us under the umbrella of "Asian American" just by the nature of holding this study. Some participants expressed a closer connection to others from their ethnic-specific group and in one case, an aversion to the term "Asian American." While I wanted to speak to our shared experiences and forms of cultural capitals, I have to acknowledge how problematic it can be to lump Asian Americans, as it can mask the diversity and specific needs ethnic subgroups.

Another limitation is how close I am, as an Asian American graduate student, to this community. Since I am intentional about connecting with other Asian American graduate students, I was already familiar with the participants. Their relationship to me could have affected the ways in which they participated in this study. Also, while I resonated with almost everything that was shared in my focus groups, it also became a blind spot for me. I recognize

that I did not take up as many opportunities to inquire more, because I felt as though I already understood what they were sharing.

Recommendations

Even though the School of Leadership and Education Sciences is the most diverse school at the University of San Diego, it is still predominantly white and could offer more support to our marginalized students. A common theme throughout my focus groups was this need for a stronger connection to others and for mentorship, in particular. My participants expressed this desire to create a mentorship program and willingness to continue to support its development even as alumni. They identified Asian-identified faculty members, alumni, and undergraduate student organizations that could eventually be a part of this initiative. This would be a means to capitalize on the network that SOLES already has.

If this mentorship manifests through the SOLES Ambassadors program, there would need to be an effort to ensure that there is diversity within the ambassadors and that they are trained specifically be to be culturally aware mentors. This would allow them to more effectively mentor across difference. Also, since the ambassadors are typically one of the first interactions that incoming graduate students have with SOLES, leaving a positive impression and planting the seed for a potential mentoring relationship may improve sense of belonging for all students before they even step foot on campus.

My participants also expressed the need for space to have authentic dialogues similar to the focus groups. During my third focus group, an administrator suggested having yearly meetings or focus groups between the administrators and Asian American graduate students of SOLES (as well as other affinity groups). This would be a more intentional and proactive way for the administration to hear about and address the concerns of this particular graduate student

community. It would also show that the administration are upholding its mission of diversity and inclusion and that they are genuinely willing to spend time making changes to improve the Asian American graduate student experience at SOLES.

While there is a student organization for SOLES' Asian/Asian American Pacific Islander graduate students, A.S.I.A., or Asian Students in Alliance, I would also recommend there be a more intentional relationship between A.S.I.A. and SOLES. A.S.I.A. holds monthly programming for this graduate student community, but there is little interaction between the organization and SOLES's faculty, staff, and administration. In fact, the majority of my focus group, who do attend A.S.I.A. events, could not name staff and administrators in SOLES aside from the Dean. This is the first year that SOLES is hosting a graduation celebration for Asian Pacific Islander-identified students, which was requested by students from A.S.I.A. This shows that SOLES is willing to support when asked. However, if faculty, staff, and administration were more proactive with this support by offering their insight in the planning process of events or even participating in programs, it may be an opportunity for Asian American graduate students to connect with them more deeply, which can strengthen sense of social belonging.

As graduate students, professional development is key and provides opportunities for connecting with others, who may understand both the practice and experience of identifying a specific way, ethnically and racially. Graduate students should be encouraged to attend conferences and join professional organizations where marginalized people in these fields can also find a sense of belonging and community. However, conferences are costly when registration, transportation, and lodging are all considered. Since marginalized students, including specific Asian American ethnic subgroups, often come from lower-income backgrounds, needs-based funding of some sort could be beneficial for this community. Asian

American graduate students would specifically benefit from attending conferences related to their marginalized Asian American identities. This could even provide an opportunity for these graduate students to connect to one another and to bring the community and knowledge that they gain to the rest of the SOLES' Asian American graduate student community, perhaps through a workshop following the conference experience. The benefit of being located in California is that there are many Asian American conferences in the state. For example, Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education hosts their annual conference in Oakland, and Queer and Asian Conference is hosted in Berkeley.

Final Reflections

After completing my action research, I feel that I now better understand how I can support Asian American graduate students in strengthening their sense of social belonging through my practice. These focus groups emphasized to me the importance of creating space for storytelling and counter-storytelling as a means to share real experiences and to demystify the Asian American experience for those who believe that we are already successful and that we do not need support. They also showed me the importance of connecting with my Asian American peers, because the assumption of the model minority myth and the weight of cultural expectations may affect all of us, and yet, we are not always offered the space to unpack these experiences. As I continue to create these spaces at other institutions, I hope that they will also allow for the community building, support, and joint action that I saw in my focus groups.

This research also reminded me that as I continue to advocate for Asian American students in my work of social justice, I should ask them about their experiences, instead of relying solely on literature and my personal perspectives. I want to be intentional in honoring the different experiences of Asian Americans in higher education, as we are a very diverse group. I

did not always understand the experiences that my participants shared, whether it was around being mixed or male, but I could listen and learn. This is integral in developing support efforts that are both co-imagined and co-created. Instead of only using my voice to share the experiences of Asian American students who have been excluded from the work of diversity and inclusion, I want to provide access and empowerment for them to share their experiences and to advocate for themselves.

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Appendix A: Research Participant Consent Form

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board

Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
Fostering a Sense of Belonging: The Asian American Student Experience

I. Purpose of the research study
Linh Nguyen is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences department at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore the ways that Asian American graduate students understand and experience a sense of social belonging at the university.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:
Complete an introductory questionnaire that asks nine questions about gender, age, ethnicity, major, number of academic years on campus, activities on campus, and your understanding of what it means to belong at USD
Participate in three focus group discussions about your sense of social belonging and available support on campus; potential programming, services, and other forms of support at USD; and tangible actions to enhance sense of social belonging for Asian American students at USD
Complete journal entries after each focus group
Complete a closing survey that asks three about your experience in the focus groups

You will be audiotaped during the focus groups.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 215 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:
San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

You can also contact Student Wellness at (619) 260-4655 or visit them at Serra Hall 300.

IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the role of sense of social belonging for Asian American students.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Linh Nguyen
Email: linhnguyen@sandiego.edu
Phone: (530) 848-7592

2) Dr. Annie Ngo
Email: maianhngo@sandiego.edu
Phone: (858) 232-6217

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix B: Pre-Assessment

This questionnaire includes questions regarding demographics, your involvement on campus, and your understanding of what it means to belong on campus. Please answer each question to the best of your ability and let me know if you have any questions.

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Program:

How many semesters have you spent at USD?

What generation Asian American Pacific Islander do you identify as?
    1st (born in another country)
    1.5 (born in another country, but arrived in the U.S. during or before early teens)
    2nd (parents were born in another country, and you were part of the first generation born in the U.S.)
    3rd (you and your parents were born in the U.S., but your grandparents were not)
    Other (explain)

At USD, first-generation college students are those whose parents have not earned any post-secondary degree. Do you identify as a first-generation college student?

What are you involved in on campus (i.e. jobs, student organizations, etc.)?

What does it mean to you to belong at USD?

Appendix C: Focus Groups – Script and Questions

Hello everyone, thank you for volunteering your time to participate in this research project. My name is Linh Nguyen, and I am both a graduate assistant at the United Front Multicultural Center and the researcher of this project. The intent of these focus groups is to have you all share your experiences of feeling a sense of social belonging and having support at SOLES and USD, while also exploring how these experiences connect to your identities as Asian American graduate students. As a collective, we will also brainstorm tangible ways to enhance our sense of belonging on campus.

Since we may be sharing personal thoughts and experiences, I ask that we create a space where we can be open and vulnerable with one another. I also respectfully ask that each member of the group keep what is shared in this space private. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you can choose not to. You can also discontinue your participation at any point in this project.

Focus Group #1
1. Why did you choose to attend USD?
2. Is there a difference between SOLES and the rest of USD? Please explain.
3. What communities do you consider yourself to be part of on campus?
4. Do you feel supported by your peers?
    a. Faculty? Staff? Administration?
5. Do you feel like you belong on campus?
    a. Please explain.
    b. How does being Asian American affect your sense of social belonging on campus?
    c. What other identities affect your sense of social belonging on campus?

Focus Group #2
1. When you hear "USD," what words or ideas do you think of? SOLES?
    a. How do these words or ideas relate to the Asian American identity?
2. What social support do you feel that you need to succeed at USD?
3. If you woke up tomorrow, what new program or service would exist that would make you feel supported on campus?
4. What would a campus community that socially supports Asian American students look like? What might programming and/or services that support Asian American students look like?

Appendix D: Post-Assessment

Please answer each question to the best of your ability and let me know if you have any questions.

Have your thoughts on your sense of social belonging at SOLES and USD changed since participating in the focus groups? If so, how?

Were there benefits and challenges to participating in these focus groups? Please explain.

Do you plan on taking any actions to enhance your sense of social belonging on campus? If so, what action(s) will you take?