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Asian American Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution

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Action Research Project

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Abstract

In the fall of 2019, institutionalized data reported that Asian American undergraduate students had a lower sense of belonging at the University of San Diego (USD) in comparison to white peers. This action research paper explores the needs and experiences of the Asian American undergraduate student population at USD— a predominantly white, private, religious-based institution. This research is centered around the question, "How can Student Affairs professionals better understand and support Asian American undergraduate students and their sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution?" Through ten semi-structured interviews and one community focus group, participating students associated their sense of belonging on campus with community, authenticity, and feelings of safety— socially, emotionally, and physically. Additionally, their stories included personal experiences of culture shock, code-switching, the crucial role that faculty and multicultural-based student organizations play in fostering Asian American students' sense of belonging, and addressing the politics of belonging.

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Introduction

Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing racial demographics entering the higher education pathway in the United States. That said, this demographic faces various tropes and stereotypes, such as the Model Minority Myth, which often paint a monolithic narrative that alludes all Asian Americans come from a higher socioeconomic status, have access to stable employment, and excel in academics– ultimately creating unique experiences and challenges for them as students. Although the stereotype can be seen as a positive characteristic at first glance, the pernicious trope of being the "model minority" erases the lived experiences outside of the stereotype, which can be highly detrimental to the way that Asian American students navigate the education system, ask for help, and how they are perceived consciously and unconsciously by higher education professionals (Suzuki, 2002) . Subsequently this research project was intended to provide space for Asian American undergraduate students to reflect on their own lived experiences as Asian Americans, build community, and provide safer and braver spaces to share their counterstories that debunked stereotypical narratives and tropes of these students.

Throughout this research paper, the terminology Asian American is used to refer to members of the Asian community within the American diaspora. This predominantly includes individuals within the East and Southeast Asian ethnicities. As a researcher, I wanted to acknowledge the umbrella terms that are often used to refer to this community such as Asian Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA), and Asian Pacific Islander Middle Eastern Desi American (APIMEDA). As the umbrella terms mentioned previously promote an inclusive

pan-ethnic community, the unique narratives and stories of Pacific Islander, Desi American, and Middle Eastern voices can also be overlooked by the use of these terms. While the umbrella terms have the intention of bringing visibility of the Pacific Islander, Desi American, and Middle Eastern identities, they can also create further divisions and diminish different efforts. And as solidarity and coalition work is absolutely necessary and important to further the work of social and racial justice, I did not want to further perpetuate a monolithic narrative of an extremely diverse community. For the purpose of this research, I intentionally chose to use the terminology of Asian American to reflect the current literature and research participants of this research project and want to acknowledge that even the use of Asian American can be too broad.

This research project was centered around the following questions of (a) How can I, as a Student Affairs professional, better understand the Asian American undergraduate student experience and their sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution?; (b) Who and what spaces on campus make these students feel included?; and (c) Which spaces need improvement in creating an inclusive environment for these students? The purpose of this study was to validate the lived experiences of Asian American students, share their stories and counternarratives to combat detrimental stereotypes, allow student participants to feel empowered, and create space for community building within the university's Asian American population. The research questions and purpose of this study were evaluated through the interviews of ten Asian American research participants and by one community focus group.

For personal context, I transitioned into my graduate program directly after graduating from an undergraduate institution recognized as an Asian American and Native American Pacific

Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). According to the U.S. Department of Education, an AANAPISI is an application-based federally funded program that "provides grants and related assistance to enable such institutions to improve and expand their capacity to serve Asian Americans and Native American Pacific Islanders and low-income individuals." When I first started my journey as a graduate student learning about higher education, I noticed the difference in various resources and student support services offered at my previous institution compared to my graduate institution at the University of San Diego (USD), which is a predominantly White institution (PWI). With those observations in mind, I began to think about how Asian Americans were navigating their undergraduate student experience and how I could better support them with the knowledge and experience that I bring from my previous institution. After my initial moments of personal reflection, I heard direct comments from Asian American undergraduates about their desire for an Asian American space and their experiences of microaggressions on campus, which led me to further explore and investigate this particular concern.

After the completion of this research project, I anticipate this research will bring systematic awareness of the support, resources, and spaces that are needed for Asian American students to allow them to fully integrate and feel a sense of belonging at PWIs and the crucial role that institutional agents play during this process. I plan to share my findings with various stakeholders of this institution to raise awareness of the Asian American undergraduate student experience and allow faculty, staff, and administration to better understand their experiences, implement intentional programming, and allocate specific resources to Asian American students to advance their success and allow them to thrive in a higher education institution.

Literature Review

One's sense of belonging can stem from personal feelings, physical environments, or the connections one makes with others in a collective group. Belonging in the context of higher education can be seen as, "the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (Hurtado and Carter, 1997, p. 327). When conceptualizing a group of students' sense of belonging, Samura (2016) states to pay attention to the fluidity and mutability of how someone may experience belonging and to be mindful of the role students themselves play in their processes of belonging (p. 136).

When analyzing the Asian American student experience in higher education, we need to be mindful of how the model minority myth stereotype is detrimentally impacting the way they navigate spaces. The Model Minority Myth is a stereotype that is placed on Asian Americans that perpetuates Asians as the idealized "model" of a minority. Asian Americans being seen as the "model minority" first appeared in the 1960s due to sociocultural and historical changes in America, and they were stereotyped and commonly depicted to be high achieving, academically inclined, crime-free and more economically stable (Wong et al., 1998). They are often in comparison to other racial groups, when it comes to education, class, economic status, and social mobility. As this social construction of racial division is placed on the diverse group of Asian Americans, their campus needs can often get looked over. Suzuki (2002) argues that "because Asian American students are stereotyped as "problem-free" high achievers, institutions of higher education have tended to neglect and ignore the many serious problems and needs they have" (p. 29). As these stereotypes are placed on this community, many fail to recognize the unique and different challenges that they face in regards to being supported and feeling like they are truly

included on campus. Additionally, Yong Zhao and Wei Qiu (2009) refute this stereotype and argue that the Model Minority Myth fails to consider students on an individual level, mental health, and the lack of knowledge and skills in other fields. Therefore, this stereotype often erases other lived experiences that do not fit the socially created image.

Alongside the invisibility of experiences caused by the socially constructed stereotypes placed on Asian American students, the racial diversity of institutions also have an impact on how they navigate their college experience. Wells and Horn (2015) emphasized the importance of having a diverse student population and the positive influences it has on enhancing learning environments, students' perceptions, college experiences, and overall academic success. Campus climates then shape how various racial groups experience their sense of belonging on campus, and their academic sense is attached to it as well. However, they argue Asian American students "are often overlooked when it comes to campus programs, services, and academic research… due to the various stereotypes and myths surrounding AAs [Asian Americans]" (Wells and Horn, 2015, p. 150). To support this, research on Southeast Asian American college students demonstrates the navigation at a PWI results in feelings of social isolation, marginalization, and exclusion. (Museus and Mueller, 2018). Subsequently, diverse universities tend to have a better environment for cultivating a higher sense of belonging to their students of color. That being said, there are various factors that can support Asian American students feeling more connected and supported at PWIs.

One big factor that increases students' sense of belonging on college campuses is the support of institutional agents. Institutional agents can consist of staff, faculty, and administrators at the institutional level. Even though college student success is highly influenced by these

institutional agents, "institutional agents who promote SEAA students' success are virtually nonexistent" (Museus and Mueller, 2018, p. 194). Alvarez (2003) shares how Asian American students are often seen as a homogenic community, and emphasizes the importance of understanding racial identity theory for higher education practitioners to better support these students. Once practitioners can recognize the unique experiences of Asian American students, practitioners can help these students make meaning of their experiences as well.

There are several challenges and limitations in existing literature, which include how there has not much research conducted and published that solely focuses on this particular student demographic on a large scale. Due to this, the data might not be able to accurately depict all of the lived experiences and counternarratives of this community. Museus (2009) asserts, "this population has been relatively excluded from higher education research and discourse." (p. 95). In addition, some key challenges when conducting research on Asian Americans include, "the chronic burden of demystifying myths, justifying the research, lack of financial resources and scholarship, and the absence of a knowledge base on Asian Americans in higher education" (Museus and Chang, 2009, p. 96-99). Therefore, the data itself, or the lack thereof, is a major limitation with literature for this research topic.

All in all, pre-existing literature asserts the premises of belonging in higher education, detrimental impacts of varying stereotypes on Asian American students, importance of support from institutional agents, and limitations within the literature as well. This reveals the need for more research to be conducted on this particular demographic in a higher education context. Conclusively, current literature supports the conduction of this particular research and its place in future literature.

Context

The institutional context in which this research project was conducted consisted of the

Asian American undergraduate students at the University of San Diego (USD), which is a private

Roman Catholic university in the state of California. As of the 2019-2020 academic school year,

the student body of 5,919 undergraduate students consisted of 38% students of color and 62%

White students, which designates the campus as a PWI. Within the overall undergraduate student

population at the institution, 403 undergraduate students identified as Asian, which was 6.8% of

the undergraduate population. Alongside the data of the racial makeup of the university, the

institution's mission statement is as follows: "The University of San Diego is a Roman Catholic

institution committed to advancing academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional

knowledge, creating a diverse and inclusive community, and preparing leaders dedicated to

ethical conduct and compassionate service."

In addition to the institutional context for this research, I as the researcher worked as a

Graduate Assistant (GA) at the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC), which allowed

me to interact and engage with various students of color, including Asian American students.

Within my role as a GA, I worked closely with members of various Asian American student

organizations through being their liaison with the department, collaborating with multicultural

student organizations on programming events, and by attending the United Front Leadership

Council (UFLC). The UFLC is an initiative hosted by the UFMC department that facilitates,

fosters, and promotes gatherings for student leadership development with affiliated multicultural

student organizations. Due to these direct involvements, I built authentic connections with

students who utilized the UFMC space, who used the resources that the department offers, and who participated or attended our events and programs. However, due to my role as a GA for the UFMC, I knew that I had to be cognizant about my positionality concerning the students since there was an already established power dynamic present due to the hierarchy of institutional status and employment.

I also wanted to acknowledge the sociopolitical and global context that this research project process was conducted under the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of increased racial justice uprisings, and the 2020 United States presidential election. During this unprecedented time, there has been a large shift in academics and campus culture as students were asked to move off campus and back home. Therefore, the measurement of the student's sense of belonging during this research project will be different since their experience was in a virtual capacity. Alongside the physical displacement of students, the pandemic has and is continuing to exacerbate the ongoing inequalities and inequities of various communities experiencing marginalization. Specifically in regards to this project, the pandemic impacted Asian American students as the world exemplified, and continues to heightened instances of racism and xenophobia towards people of Asian descent. This caused an exponential spike of Asian hate crimes across the country that led to the increase of anxiety, fear, and emotional distress during this time. In addition to the racial impacts of the pandemic on the Asian American experience, the United States went through an intense presidential election that also caused heightened emotions and additional stress during the time period in which the research project was conducted. With this reality, I definitely saw how the various events made impacts on the way students engaged in the research process and the way they navigated their daily lives as students.

Methodology I

The methodology used to inform the cycles of this Action Research (AR) project was Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle Model. Kolb's model emphasizes that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Accordingly, this model highly emphasizes the process of learning through the various lived experiences that one navigates, and the importance of having transformative experiences through new knowledge. As for the approach, this model has four main cyclical steps which include: having or doing a concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, then finally active experimentation. The concrete experience consists of the learner encountering or re-encountering an experience. This then leads to the reflective observation stage which allows the learner to review, analyze, and better understand the experience– this leads to the next step, abstract conceptualization. This step in the model allows the learner to make conclusions and generalizations of the experience and subsequent reflective observation. After abstract conceptualization, there is active experimentation, which consists of the implementation of testing out their generalization through an action piece. Then, the model restarts in a continuous pattern of the learning cycle. Although this was the order of experiential learning, learners can start and end at any point of the cycle. The epistemological assumptions that inform my AR method choice include the validation of lived experiences, and various opportunities for reflection and learning to occur. As such, this model allows concrete steps of processing information in each step of the cycle and allows for flexibility in the research process for both the research and research participant.

Action Research was relevant for this topic because the current data already revealed that Asian American undergraduate students were feeling a certain way on campus. Therefore, there were pre-existing lived experiences that led the students to make those conceptualizations and observations. My role was to facilitate an affirming space for students to share their experiences, and provide a collective transformational experience through community building. Kolb's theory also related to the way I approached my research project as well. I had a certain experience that allowed me to make various abstract conceptualizations after having time to reflect and think about the experience. Then, my next step of active experimentation would be the process of conducting this Action Research project. Therefore, the action piece in the next step was ensuring that there was an effort to make the steps better reflect those experiences and create the necessary change to make this demographic of students feel fully included, comfortable, and integrated on their college campus.

Some of the reasons why this was a strong model for this research was because it allows researchers to put theory into practice, encourages collaboration and engagement with participants, and allows for continuous learning to happen. The extensive time to process in three different stages truly allowed time for deeper learning to occur in every cycle conducted. In addition, it also allowed me to be a part of the learning experience alongside the participants, which granted a deeply immersive research experience. On the other hand, literature states that some of the challenges of this methodology can include not having enough time for reflection after the action piece to fully comprehend that stage. Since self-reflection is a crucial component of this methodology, some of the limitations and challenges of this chosen methodology included

not allowing structured time or space for participants to reflect before, during, and after each of the experimental stages.

In addition to Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a framework for this study. The tenets of CRT include the intersectionality of social identities, challenging dominant ideologies, having a commitment to social justice through a critical lens, validating experiential knowledge, and offering counter-storytelling and utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective (Teranishi et al., 2009). In addition, Buenavista et al. (2009) state that, "these tenets of CRT provide a framework for scholars to examine the historical and contemporary marginalization of Asian Americans in higher education, and the ways in which these issues may be addressed" (p. 72). Therefore, I used a CRT lens throughout the whole research process because, "critical race theory can be an important tool for developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of specific Asian American ethnic groups and individuals" (Buenavista et al. 2009, p. 69). It was important for me to include CRT in the framework of this research because it acknowledges and affirms the unique experiences of non-White research participants and allowed myself as the researcher to challenge and think critically of the institutional practices that are engrained in whiteness– especially since higher education institutions can perpetuate systems of oppression.

Alongside the framework of this research project, certain practices were included to ensure the confidentiality and effectiveness of this process. First, none of the research participant's names were included or used in this research paper in order to protect their identities. Second, after cycle one and cycle two, all Zoom recordings of interviews and the

community focus group went through a transcription process. The Zoom interview recordings were transcribed manually, and the community focus group recording was transcribed through an automated transcription software system called Otter.ai. For final results, minor edits were made to omit filler words like "um" or "like" for easier reading accessibility. Ellipses were included to clean up quotations from the research participants for flow, and consistency of topic. Even with the slight adjustments, the meaning and intentions behind the participant's sentiments were not altered or changed in any way. Third, after the completion of the research project, all recordings and document files regarding research participants were destroyed and deleted. These additional steps were made to ensure the success of this research project, but to also honor the stories that were shared throughout the process.

Methodology II

For this Action Research project, there were a total of one pre-cycle and two cycles that followed Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. Each conducted cycle included time for personal reflections to allow researchers, such as myself, to process the collected data and the overall research experience. The intentional and additional time to reflect during each cycle encourages researchers to make better-informed decisions for the next cycle of their research, as well as for future research implications. Depending on the data that I collected from the pre-cycle, those findings informed the way I framed the questions and conversation that I planned to incorporate in the interviews during cycle one. Similarly to the previous cycle, the qualitative data and themes depicted from the interviews in cycle one informed how I approached the community focus group in cycle three.

Pre-Cycle

For the pre-cycle, I allowed my observations from leading the 2019 Asian, Pacific Islander, Desi American (APIDA) Mixer at the UFMC and my attendance in the 2019 Student Success Summit to inform my initial research questions and inquiry. I noticed that my initial interactions and personal observations during the APIDA Mixer were supported by institutionalized quantitative data presented during the summit. Experiencing both of these events during my first semester at the university solidified my desire to explore the undergraduate student experience of the Asian American community and get a better understanding of how they felt connected to campus.

Through my graduate assistantship at the UFMC, I led the first-ever APIDA Mixer during the Fall of 2019. The APIDA Mixer was a social event hosted by the UFMC during the first week of the fall semester to bring APIDA-identifying students, staff, faculty, administration, and allies into a space of community. To plan for this new event, I assembled a planning committee that consisted of myself as the department representative, one graduate representative from an Asian graduate student organization, and five undergraduate students from various APIDA-identifying undergraduate student organizations. During the planning committee meeting, we went over the terminology of APIDA, brainstormed snack options, event structure, marketing strategies, and feedback on finalizing the flyer. Leading up to the event, I included committee members to ensure that the student voices dictated how the event ran. There was intentional outreach through the Admissions office to inform new incoming first-year students about this event and the various resources that the UFMC department had to offer.

During the event, there was a snack bar with a diverse range of Asian and Hawaiian snacks alongside a boba station that served milk tea and mango fruit tea. While students were grabbing snacks and drinks, they were encouraged to play a game of human bingo that provided structured time for participants to get to know each other and mingle with one another. After the completion of a bingo line, winners were awarded raffle tickets for a chance to win goodie bags, which included a UFMC t-shirt, notebook, drawstring backpack, and a reusable water bottle. Staff, administration, and faculty present were offered time after the raffle to formally introduce themselves and their role on campus. After their introduction, student leaders from various multicultural student organizations had time to share more about their organization during the event. There were over 100 participants and I noticed that there were many conversations throughout the entire event between an array of attendees.

After the APIDA Mixer, the planning committee gathered for a last meeting to debrief the strengths of, and areas of improvement for the event. During the meeting, I received feedback from an undergraduate student committee member that the event was a much-needed space for the Asian American community to come together and get connected at the beginning of the school year, and they would like to see the event continue in the future. From this feedback, I knew there was a need I wanted to explore more with this particular demographic of students.

In addition to my personal observations during the 2019 APIDA Mixer, I attended the university's 2019 Student Success Summit that addressed student enrollment, retention of students, and graduation updates. In addition, the meeting shared the institutionalized data on students' sense of belonging at USD by asking students to answer the statements, "USD feels like a place where I can be my real self." and "USD feels like a place where I'll be able to feel

comfortable." During this institutional staff gathering, they shared data regarding students' sense of belonging and desegregated the data based on racial identity and that was when I focused on the percentage of Asian students that indicated "strongly disagree, agree, or neither agree or disagree with those previously mentioned statements. After reflecting on both my experience leading the APIDA Mixer and digesting the data shared during the Fall 2019 Student Success Summit, I wanted to better understand the Asian American student experience at the university and learn more about their perceptions on belonging at a private higher education institution. This pre-cycle process solidified the research topic, target demographic for research participants, purpose, and research questions.

Cycle One

For cycle one, 30-minute semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted within a timespan of two weeks. I strategically made sure to conduct interviews during the beginning of the spring semester after students came back from their winter break so that it did not interfere with studying for midterms or other busy commitments during the middle and end of the semester. After email outreach to various student networks, marketing the research flyer on the UFMC's social media platforms, and asking staff for referrals, I had ten undergraduate students who reached out to me about their interest in participating in this study. The ten participants interviewed shared both their ethnicity and nationality, so I have included the information in order to honor their identities (see figure 1). This detail illustrates the diversity of the community and how the Asian American identity is influenced by both one's ethnicity and nationality. Therefore, the terminology of Asian American is important to recognize in framing this research.

Furthermore, I specifically chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because it allows the researcher to be flexible with the questions that they can ask of their research participants, especially when it comes to asking them to further expand on a previous response. This approach also allows the researcher to create an environment and atmosphere where conversations can organically occur versus feelings of a one-directional conversation. This can build comfortability and rapport between the researcher and the research participants. The questions that guided the conversation were informed and influenced by the research questions of getting to know their experience as Asian American undergraduate students, where they find their sense of belonging, how the pandemic affected them, and knowing the role that institutional agents play in their educational journey. Additionally, the guiding interview questions were also informed by the observations and data from the pre-cycle.

Before conducting the interviews, I was slightly nervous leading a research project on a demographic of students that I align work so closely with. Even with the observations during the pre-cycle, I was not entirely confident with myself and had some doubts going into this research project. I thought I was overthinking my observations or that I was projecting my own experiences on an entire demographic of undergraduate students. However, after completing the ten interviews, I felt really proud of myself for continuing with this research project and was validated through the research process. One participant shared during the end of their interview that they "really appreciate this study. I just like it because I feel like our struggles are being recognized." Equivalently, I received a follow-up email from another research participant after the completion of their interview that shared sentiments of appreciation for my efforts in creating change on campus for Asian Americans, their support in this research project, and encouraged

me to keep going. The interviews and words of affirmation from participants empowered me. As I doubted myself as a scholar and the work I was doing in this research, I found the interviews incredibly validating– not just for myself but the community I was supporting and advocating for through this research.

 After conducting interviews with ten research participants, I noticed common themes and experiences that I wanted to explore further in the second cycle of my research project. Some of the themes that I coded included the experiences of culture shock, pressure to code switch around different people on campus, and holistic support from faculty members. With these three main themes, I made sure to note this and incorporate them into the second cycle of the study. I changed some of the original discussion questions during the group activity, to offer space for the participants to further share their thoughts about the themes and find moments of relatability with one another.

Figure 1

Participants of Cycle One

Participant	Ethnicity/Nationality	Year	Campus Involvement*
Student 1	Filipino-American	3	Filipino Student Organization Psychology Club Tutoring Internship
Student 2	Chinese-American	4	Student employee Panhellenic Sorority
Student 3	Chinese-American	1	Esports Club
Student 4	Chinese-American	3	Resident Assistant Chinese Culture Club Humanities Center Mortar Board

Participant	Ethnicity/Nationality	Year	Campus Involvement*
Student 5	Japanese/Filipino/Hawaiian-American	3	Filipino Student Organization Pacific Islander Student Club
Student 6	Chinese/Filipino/ Taiwanese-American	3	Asian Students Organization Filipino Student Organization Chinese Culture Club
Student 7	Filipino-American	2	Filipino Student Organization University Choir
Student 8	Japanese/Hawaiian-American	2	Filipino Student Organization
Student 9	Filipino-American	2	Multicultural Sorority Filipino Student Organization, Behavioral Neuroscience Club Asian Students Organization Cheerleading
Student 10	Vietnamese/Chinese-American	3	Commuter Commons Filipino Student Organization, Medical Brigades Volunteering Clubs

*Note: The asterisks denote that many of the student organization's original names have been changed in order to protect student identities.

Cycle Two

For the second cycle of this research project, all Asian American undergraduate students who participated in the first cycle of interviews were invited to join an hour-long community focus group to have conversations with other participants about their experiences. For this portion of the research process, I recruited three returning research participants. During the community focus group, I started with reintroducing the purpose of the research project, shared community guidelines for participants to follow throughout the time together, facilitated a group discussion activity based on themes I coded from cycle one, structured time for individual reflection of the space, and ended the community focus group with a closing activity. When

preparing to conduct the community focus group, I hoped for students to be able to create new connections and see the representation of Asian Americans on campus across the board, which would hopefully increase their feelings of belonging on campus. After facilitating the community focus group, I felt confident that the community space I created was successful in meeting its goals, for two reasons. First, we went over our allocated time boundary without even realizing it. Student participants even decided to stay a bit longer to finish the agenda. And most importantly, when participants were asked to share a one-word reflection based on how they were feeling after participating in the community focus group, the responses shared during the closing activity were "heard, relatable, relieved, and solidarity."

After ending the Zoom meeting for the community focus group, I felt incredibly empowered by the students who shared their stories with the other participants and me. As a facilitator and researcher of the community space, I felt more connected with my Asian American community at the university, especially during an isolating time due to the pandemic. A rush of happiness and excitement overwhelmed me because I began to reflect on the beginning of my research process where I had moments of hesitation, doubt, and feelings of imposter syndrome. The community focus group acted as a reminder for me that I am a scholar and that my research is extremely important and valuable– for the Asian American community to share their stories, but also for everyone else to listen and learn from their stories.

Just like my experience after the interviews during cycle one, I was able to create intentional spaces that allowed Asian American students to process and reflect on their experiences, but this time it was validated by their fellow peers who were also able to share their stories and counterstories. After the conversations with peers, the community focus group was

designed to incorporate individual reflection for participants to process their experience. This

aligned perfectly with the original intentions and purpose of this research project. Throughout the

community focus group, many of the student participants expressed moments of agreement,

empathy, and sympathy as they all expressed their stories. As I initially worried about the smaller

attendance for the community focus group than anticipated, the turnout ended up being a perfect

size for participants to share freely without interruptions and make connections with everyone in

the group within the allotted one-hour time frame.

Figure 2

Participants of Cycle Two

Participant	Ethnicity/Nationality	Year
Student A	Filipino-American	3
Student B	Filipino-American	2
Student C	Filipino-American	2

Results

After the completion of this research project's cycles, there were four main findings of

the Asian American student experience at USD as a PWI. The four factors included the students'

experiences of culture shock, code-switching, who and where they found a sense of belonging

and the areas on campus that did not foster a sense of belonging for Asian American

undergraduate students. This section will further explore the various impacts that the 2020 global

pandemic has had on this particular demographic of students in regards to their academics,

campus involvement, mental health, and feelings of belonging connected to the university.

Culture Shock

When asked about their experiences at USD, multiple student participants shared that they initially felt a culture shock when they first stepped foot on campus. Cupsa (2018) describes culture shock as a "powerful, transformative process that takes place at both the individual and societal levels as important cultural forces are clashing" (p. 181). The clashing of cultural forces depicted in this research included one's Asian American identity and white American culture. During the community focus group, a participant said that "It was definitely a big culture shock, because I knew USD was predominantly white, but I didn't, I guess grasp that until I actually stepped on campus." Whether they came from a diverse neighborhood, a predominantly Asian neighborhood, or predominantly White neighborhood before attending USD, several student participants shared that they immediately noticed that the campus was predominantly white. They were shocked about the culture shift from what they were used to from their high school or the area they grew up in. When student participants were asked the question if USD is a place that makes you feel the belonging that you described, student participant one shared their experience of culture shock and voiced the following:

> I definitely experienced culture shock and a bit of anxiety and discomfort when I was first on campus. It was a mix of being a college freshman but also being a person of color in a predominantly white institution was something that definitely made me super uncomfortable. I've never been in a space where I was the ethnic minority since I came from a town that was extremely diverse.

This student immediately noticed the racial makeup of the school and how they experienced

being part of a smaller demographic at the institution. This ultimately impacted the way they felt

when they first arrived at the university and the awareness it brought to their own racial identity.

Student participant three from their interview shared that they had to change their lifestyle,

"From traditions that I have stopped such as weekly KBBQ [Korean Barbeque] or anime watch

parties, these small things make me feel less belonging." This student noted how they had to stop

participating in particular cultural activities while transitioning to the university, negatively

impacting the way they experienced their belonging at the university as well. Stopping the

participation of cultural foods and activities can be a sign of assimilation as well.

Code-Switching

Alongside experiencing culture shock, some student participants experienced pressure to

code-switch in different spaces depending on who they were with and the environment they were

in. Code-switching is described to be, "adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and

expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality

service, and… opportunities" (McCluney et al, 2019). The experience of code-switching is

highlighted through the experience of student participant nine where they shared in their

interview that, "I feel like I'm living in a dual world." This dual world that student participant

nine was referring to was how they navigate the university as an Asian American. Additionally,

student participant eight felt the need to code-switch by hiding or concealing their "accent" and

change some of their word choice because they received comments on how it was different and

was noticed by non-Asian peers. This experience of being perceived as "different" due to the

way they spoke led to the pressure of assimilating to the dominant culture of the university and

the larger context of San Diego. Another way that a student experienced code-switching was

when they identified that they acted differently at the university which is a predominantly white

space and back at their hometown where it was predominantly people of color. For example,

when asked about their USD experience, student participant four shared that they have "sort of

formed a different identity. On campus, I'm someone who is okay with being by myself and at

home, I'm more community-based. It's sort of become an instinct for me where I'll keep a

certain distance." Through this narrative, this student participant could have felt pressured to

minimize their engagement and disassociate with people or campus culture. They felt this

automatic response to play a different persona while being a student at the university. One reason

that they felt the need to code-switch could be that they wanted to protect themselves from

criticism or trying to make sense of the dissonance that they were experiencing on campus.

Sense of Belonging

As this research project explores the experience that Asian American undergraduate

students have pertaining to their sense of belonging at the university, student participants were

asked to define what belonging means to them. When students were asked questions regarding

their sense of belonging at the university, many of them described a feeling of comfortability,

safety, and a place they can be their authentic selves. Student participant one during their

interview in cycle one shared that, "sense of belonging, especially on a campus college, means

not feeling anxious or uncomfortable on campus… it's being able to see familiar faces and

having spaces where you can be yourself and find people you share identities with, seeing people

who are like you on campus." For this student participant, their sense of belonging stemmed

from a feeling of comfortability and a place that allows them to have psychological and

emotional safety. Additionally, they associated that feeling with people and physical spaces on

campus that cultivate those feelings of comfortability and safety. Similarly, student participant

four shared that to them, "sense of belonging is pretty important... most people would say it's

pretty important– to have a place you can always be at." To this participant, their sense of

belonging was defined as a physical space that they can be themselves and an important value

that they see when it comes to a college experience.

      In addition to how the participants defined and understood their sense of belonging for

themselves, many of the student participants referred to multicultural student organizations as

spaces with peers that provided and nurtured the feeling of belonging that they described.

Student organizations are where they found their "home away from home", community, fun,

academic support, and most importantly, belonging. Student participant nine during their

interview shared that, "It was kind of hard for me to make friends that I felt like I really

connected... But after joining some multicultural organizations, I found those types of people."

Through joining multicultural student organizations, this student participant felt connected to

campus and found friendships that fostered the belonging that was hard to find at first. Similar to

the experience of student participant nine, student participant five mentioned on two occasions

during their interview that, "The [Filipino Student Organization] and [Pacific Islander Student

Club] helped me feel that sense of belonging… I found a lot of my belonging through all of the

organizations that they provide on campus." This participant shared how two specific

identity-based multicultural organizations played a crucial role in fostering their sense of belonging at school.

Furthermore, students mentioned the UFMC, Commuter Commons, and The Commons as a physical space on campus that fostered a sense of belonging. The Commons is the collective identity-specific centers on the fourth floor of the Student Life Pavilion (SLP) that includes the Black Student Resource Commons (BSRC), LGBTQIA+ & Allies Commons, United Front Multicultural Commons, and the Women's Commons where the collective space aims to provide a safer and braver space for students of all identities to foster coalition, amplify marginalized voices, and make change. These were one of the very few physical spaces on campus spoken about where Asian American students in this research felt they belonged. When asked during the interview portion of cycle one, student participant one said that "the UFMC definitely provided the biggest space of belonging. If I ever needed a place to go, I can always go up to the UF to eat my lunch and there's always a familiar face in there." As aligned with the department's mission, this student found the physical space of the UFMC a place where they can feel welcomed and be part of a community where they can be their authentic selves. Likewise, student participant ten found very similar sentiments but for the Commuter Commons. When asked about where they found a sense of belonging at USD, they explained with the following:

> For me, it's the Commuter Commons. That place has been my hub. It's been my home between class, before school and after school. That's where I'm at and where we all share this communal space and just be with each other.

Just like how student participant ten spent a lot of their time in the Commuter Commons, student

participant eight spent a lot of their time outside of classes on the fourth floor of the SLP. They

remembered that The Commons was the last place they hung out with their friends before

everyone transitioned and moved off campus due to the COVID pandemic. Therefore,

identity-specific spaces like the UFMC, The Commons, and the Commuter Commons provided a

physical space where Asian American students can gather to find community, friendships, and

form a strong sense of belonging at the university.

Lastly, the data revealed that faculty members play a critical role in fostering an inclusive

environment both in person and virtually for students. Since a majority of students spend most of

their time on campus in the classroom setting, their engagement with faculty allows them to feel

connected to the university. Many student participants shared positive remarks and sentiments

about their encounters with faculty members. Student participant nine during their interview

noted that "All the faculty that I've met have been very supportive and wanted to hear about my

experiences and what I had to say." They felt supported by the faculty's openness to understand

and listen to their perspectives and experiences. Similarly to their sentiments on support from

faculty members, student participant one shared in their interview that, "My faculty advisor is

definitely someone I can go to for any kind of support like academic and mental health

resources." This student received academic and non-academic support from faculty and is

comfortable asking for support from their faculty advisor. Therefore, holistic support from

faculty members was a big factor that promoted a sense of belonging at USD. And in student

participant four's response, when asked about their relationship with faculty members at USD,

they replied, "I talk to a lot of my professors and they're super-duper nice... I have a lot of

faculty where I can just go to office hours to chat." Interacting with faculty in both academic and

non-academic ways has promoted a welcoming environment where these students feel supported,

comfortable, and safe– all of which were characteristics that were mentioned when defining what

sense of belonging meant to them. Faculty members were able to create those feelings of

comfortability and safety through their willingness to support students in various capacities.

Impacts of the Global Pandemic

As noted in previous sections, the global pandemic caused by the rapid spread of the

coronavirus created drastic changes around the world. One of the main changes the global

pandemic had on university students was the abrupt transition to online learning. Particularly in

the context of this research, Asian American students' sense of belonging at a university campus

environment and culture were also impacted in multiple ways. This physical shift in their

learning environment, and the emotional shift of having to adjust to a brand new lifestyle

impacted students' academia, campus involvement, mental health, and their sense of belonging

in a university setting as well.

The classroom– which was an in-person space of curiosity, learning, and interacting with

peers– became online Zoom links and seeing others in a two-by-four virtual box. Connecting

with faculty, staff, administration, and other peers also became less easily accessible and the

inadvertent nature of bumping into others for a quick chat became inexistent. And in terms of

students' new learning environment, many found the transition to cause a new level of stress.

Student participant five shared in their interview a challenge they experienced because of Zoom

classes and stated, "I feel uncomfortable asking questions because most of my lectures are

recorded and recordings are forever. I guess there's a little bit of anxiety around that, like asking

questions, participating, and class discussions." This experience demonstrates how recorded

lectures on Zoom caused them to feel uncomfortable and anxious, which impacts how they can

authentically and safely participate in class. As many professors require class participation as a

graded portion, this can negatively affect their overall performance in the course as well.

Additionally, student participant six explained some technical challenges, such as wifi

connections and inconsistent audio on their device, which made it harder for them to focus in

class. They concluded their experience of learning on Zoom by stating, "Keeping ourselves stuck

in this virtual space… makes learning less meaningful." The learning environment cultivated in a

physical classroom setting made the learning process and experience more meaningful for this

student, while virtual learning had more challenges that impacted learning for them.

As the classroom experience was reimagined during COVID, so did the conceptualization

of what "campus involvement" entailed as there was no physical campus that students gathered

on. As many participants shared that student organizations were the main source of cultivating a

healthy sense of belonging for them on campus, the virtual university experience was no

exception. One of the participants from the community focus group recalled the efforts of the

multicultural organizations made during the time of virtual learning and shared, "even before

COVID, it was pretty much the multicultural organizations. And then during COVID, it's kind of

the same thing... I think bonding and like going to events is prioritized in these organizations

now more than ever." This reveals how multicultural student organizations were working even

harder to make sure that their organization members were able to connect, foster meaningful

friendships, and stay active in their social life. However, as multicultural student organizations

were putting in intentional efforts to cultivate those social spaces for connections online, some

students did not have the energy to attend the events. For example, student participant ten described themselves as someone who was fairly active in student organizations at the beginning of their interview and later mentioned that "with clubs and social interactions, I haven't been super active due to Zoom fatigue and my social battery is not that high anymore." Being on Zoom for both academic and social capacities put a toll on this student participant which they referred to as "Zoom fatigue". Zoom fatigue is depicted as a common experience of exhaustion caused by the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for an extended amount of time, which "due to spatial dynamics in CMC alters how people engage interactions in virtual contexts" (Nadler, 2020, p. 2). Due to Zoom fatigue, student participant ten had to limit their online engagement with others which ultimately impacted their feelings of belonging and connectedness.

As an outcome of the additional layers of stress from overall experiences of the global pandemic, several students noticed a detrimental impact on their mental health. When asked about their transition to virtual engagement and remote learning environments, student participant six recognized that "I think also for mental health, it's been a problem." Navigating mental health was identified as an impact due to all of the transitions, changes, and adjustments that occurred during this time period. This similar sentiment on the negative impact of the global pandemic on the mental health of students was further described by student participant ten who vulnerably conveyed that, "I have been having a really hard time with it. I definitely feel like I'm more isolated with everyone... The feelings of disappointment and hopelessness are weighing heavy right now on me." A wide array of emotions were named to describe the feelings and experiences of this change, even one year into the circumstances of the global pandemic.

As the global pandemic impacted students' academic performance, involvement on campus, and mental health, this ultimately contributed to the way that students navigated their sense of belonging as a member of the university community as well. Student participant one shared their experience regarding the remote learning environment and vocalized, "I'm relying more on my interpersonal relationships with people to feel connected to campus, to school and still have that sense of belonging. I'm lucky that I'm a third-year where I had two years on campus before transitioning online." Current third-year and fourth-year students who were able to go through at least an entire academic school year on campus had the time to connect with peers on campus before the pandemic, which was evident in this student participant's experience. They were able to utilize the network and community that they already built to lean on, which could be harder for first-year and second-year students to develop. Student participant four spoke about their transition to the remote learning environment and stated, "I haven't adapted too well. Being online is not the same as being in person. To me, especially because I don't have a lot of super close friends, it's even harder because I haven't closely connected or clicked with people." This indicated how some students who might not have built a steady community yet had a harder time making connections to other students and building friendships.

Politics of Belonging

When examining the experiences of belonging, the politics of belonging is also something to consider because "the politics of belonging provides conceptual tools for exploring belonging and exclusion as intertwined aspects of human life" (Juutinen, 2018, p. 19). Juutinen (2018) further argues that belonging and exclusion show up on three levels (which include

individual, community, and societal) and the politics of belonging from an educational

environment is a relational concept that determines who is an insider versus an outsider (p.

41-42). As student participants in this research project shared the people and places that fostered

a sense of belonging at the university, some narratives and experiences that depicted an

environment of exclusion as well. For example, places and environments that did not foster a

healthy sense of belonging for some included the university Residence Halls and Fraternity and

Sorority Life (FSL).

When asked to elaborate about their experience of culture shock and code-switching

during the community focus group, several examples were shared. One of the student

participants shared a personal story of a conversation with their white roommate in their dorm

room regarding familial expectations and communicating with parents. After sharing a synopsis

of the conversation, they noticed a difference in culture and values and shared that, "There was a

lot of cultural differences there. And so it made it hard for like me to feel super comfortable in

my living space freshman year." This student's experience with a culturally insensitive roommate

created an uncomfortable living arrangement, in a place where students spend a lot of time. Over

the timeframe of an academic school year, this can cause additional stress and emotional taxation

of being cognizant of the differences. Furthermore, another student participant from the

community focus group responded to their storytelling by sharing a similar experience during

their first year living on campus. The next student participant replied, "Yeah my example's pretty

similar in regards to when it comes to the culture shock. Mine also had to do with my roommate

freshman year… it did make me realize how different everyone is, in terms of how we were

raised." Some cultural differences that they noted were the tones and inappropriate language that

White students used to speak to their parents on the phone and wearing shoes on their bed. Likewise, one student participant experienced this shock with a White roommate during their first year of college in regards to living norms and habits that were very different from their own upbringings. Student participant three from their interview shared that they were, "honestly pretty culture-shocked when people did things like wear shoes in the dorm." Cultural norms like taking off the shoes before entering a home or living space are common practices in many Asian and Asian American households, and the cultural differences caused moments of personal reflections of feeling different.

During an interview, a student participant shared that they went through the Panhellenic sorority recruitment process and immediately noticed the lack of racial diversity in the various organizations. They became hyper-aware of their identity as an Asian woman and felt the pressure to join the sorority with more diversity compared to the other sorority chapters and they claimed that "if you look at the panhellenic councils, or greek life, the diversity is just lacking. There's maybe one or two Asian Americans or a few people of color who are showcased as the token diversity." Alongside the experience during recruitment, one of the research participants during the community focus shared an anecdote where they were invited to collaborate with FSL on a First-Generation College Student Panel as part of a multicultural sorority. However, they automatically felt labeled as first-generation college students, even though they did not identify as first-generation, nor were the majority of the members of the organization. This reveals that certain members or organizations of the FSL community made assumptions regarding a family's education level solely based on a multicultural identity. In addition to the assumption made, the FSL organizations that extended the collaboration forgot that the student participant's

multicultural sorority had been invited. After telling their story of this experience, this participant

shared that, "it makes me feel less than because I felt like targeted, kind of, as a person of color

just because of the way that my skin looks or how my last name sounds. And it's disgusting."

This experience caused emotional harm and upset the student, causing them to feel unwelcome

and othered in FSL spaces. Therefore, the two main areas at the university that need

improvement in fostering belonging to Asian American students include Residence Halls and

environments with FSL members.

Summary of Results

Although student participants defined and experienced their sense of belonging

differently in their own unique ways, there were many overlaps in their experiences. Some

associated their sense of belonging with emotions and feelings, while others were able to locate a

physical space on campus that fostered an environment that allowed them to feel connected and

be part of a supportive community. Alongside feelings and physical spaces, some named groups

of people and student organizations that shared similar social identities as them as a collective

community that fostered belonging for them. Conclusively, the three main factors that foster

belonging for Asian American undergraduate students through this study included student-led

multicultural student organizations, identity-specific spaces like the UFMC, Commuter

Commons, and The Commons, and faculty members from the university. On the contrary, some

areas that caused experiences of otherness and exclusion were the university's Residence Halls

and FSL-affiliated events and spaces.

Limitations

Although this research was conducted with ten total participants, some factors caused some limitations and challenges to this research. Since the data collected was from ten participants at the same university, there is decidedly not enough data for a claim on behalf of the larger demographic, or all institutions across the nation. Also, only the topic of sense of belonging was explored when there are also other educational navigations that the Asian American community might experience that were not accounted for.

During the span of time in which this research was conducted, the global pandemic had a tremendous impact on the research process, student experience, and institutional changes. Due to the pandemic, all students transitioned to virtual engagement, online learning, and remote working. Since students had to transition all of their engagement online, there was a significant amount of fatigue on virtual platforms experienced by the target demographic. Due to the fact that this research was done entirely on a virtual platform, this could have impacted the number of participants that could have been included in this research.

In addition to the limitations of the virtual transition and online fatigue, the global pandemic led to the exponential increase of anti-Asian violence, hate crimes, racism, and xenophobia. With the reality that racially charged violence towards the Asian American community was highly prevalent during this time, many members of the community experienced emotional trauma, grief, and fear. These emotions and experiences not only showed up in the student participant's responses during the community focus group but were present to the researcher as this research was conducted during that time as well.

As the research was conducted at an institution in the state of California within the United States of America, another important contextual piece that impacted student participants included the 2020 presidential election between Joseph Biden representing the Democratic Party and Donald Trump representing the Republicans. This election caused heightened experiences of various emotions ranging from stress, nervousness, anxiety, fear, and living with uncertainty. Therefore, the presidential election added another level of emotional distress that could have impacted not only the research participants, but also students who did not have the mental capacity to participate in the research as well.

Finally, there were institutional structural changes to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process that delayed me to start my research project. As mentioned previously, the university's employees and most departments quickly transitioned to a remote environment due to the pandemic, so the IRB process took additional time for paperwork and research to get approved. Due to the structural change to the IRB approval process and physical transition of reviewers, this ultimately added another layer of intensive time that was added to get approval to start the cycles of the research project. This led to a shorter amount of time to initiate participant outreach, searching for participants, and the execution of each cycle.

Recommendations

As an Asian American graduate student, Student Affairs practitioner, educator, advocator, leader, and researcher of this study, I would like to present four tangible recommendations to address the adaptive challenge of creating and sustaining a diverse and inclusive institution that promotes the well-being and belonging of Asian American undergraduate students. The four

recommendations are (a) conscious implementation of intentional hiring practices of staff,

faculty, and administrators; (b) increasing exposure and awareness of the various

identity-specific spaces like the UFMC, The Commons, and Commuter Commons; (c) providing

more funding and institutional support to multicultural student organizations; and (d) creating a

multicultural Living Learning Community (LLC) in one of the Residence Halls at the university.

With the implementation of these four recommendations, I truly believe that Asian American

undergraduate students will be able to establish a healthy sense of belonging at a PWI and thrive

in the university environment as a learner, leader, and member of their growing community.

First, I recommend the conscious implementation of intentional hiring practices of

institutional agents at USD. Several student participants shared that faculty play an important

role in feeling supported, so it would be strategic for the institution to hire more professionals of

color while being mindful of the representation of Asian American faculty, staff, and

administration who work directly with Asian American students. Student participant one in their

interview shared the following as a suggestion to increasing Asian American students' belonging:

> I would love to see more Asian faculty… I would love to see them outside of Ethnic
>
> Studies as well because it's not our responsibility to teach people. I would like to see
>
> more faculty and staff in other places on campus. I know they're there, but they are
>
> limited. It would allow me to feel more comfortable as a student.

With intentional hiring practices set throughout the university, students can achieve academic

excellence and feel supported by faculty, staff, and administrators regardless of discipline.

Similarly, another student participant suggested in their interview for the institution, "bringing in

more BIPOC students and also faculty will be very beneficial to understanding our struggle, our history, what's going on with us, and culturally." This student participant identified a need to have more faculty members who can empathize with their experiences as a person of color. This suggestion aligns with the recommendation of increasing racial diversity in both the student demographic and faculty demographic because these intentional hiring and recruitment practices would allow students of color to have a larger community to feel validated in their experiences.

Second, I recommend the institution increase its exposure and bring more awareness of the various identity-specific spaces to prospective students and incoming first-year students. Several student participants shared that some of the few physical spaces that they feel safe and comfortable include the UFMC, Commuter Commons, and The Commons. They discovered the physical spaces and resources they offer through word of mouth from other peers. When asked about resources offered at the institution, student participant ten shared their observation on their peers and shared, "I think if you look at the right places at USD, you can find what you're looking for… there are resources on campus that students just don't know about and don't utilize to their full advantage." The resources are available for students, but some students are not exposed to them or know of the resources that are available to them. Therefore, it would tremendously benefit Asian American students to know about the identity-based spaces that the university provides earlier on in their journey at USD. Some suggestions that the university can consider are making these resources easily accessible on the university website, intentionally sharing the resources during new student onboarding, email outreach of resources, utilization of social media, and much more.

Third, I recommend providing more funding and institutional support to multicultural student organizations. Many of these multicultural student organizations are providing peer engagement that fosters a strong sense of belonging, academic support, and retention of their members in the organization– which constitute the goals of many of the efforts that universities are trying to employ. Therefore, the additional funding would allow student organizations to continue their work, implement new initiatives and socials, and continue their role in creating safer and braver spaces for Asian American students to experience belonging. When asked what support they need to feel more included at the university, student participant six stated that, "I think that we should have a lot more cultural awareness about the main organizations on campus. These [multicultural] organizations are not solely for Asian Americans." Therefore receiving institutional support, especially from non-Asian American allies, will provide the cultural awareness that student participant six desires to receive. Institutional support can entail the initiation and invitation of opportunities for collaboration with various departments on campus that specifically work with retention and student support. Through collaboration they can work together to best support this particular demographic of students.

Last but not least, my fourth recommendation is to create a multicultural Living Learning Community (LLC) in one of the residential halls at the university. Based on the USD website, an LLC is a themed space in Residence Halls where "students who share a common interest live and study together. Not only do LLCs ease your academic and social transition to USD, they expand your intellectual curiosity beyond the classroom, and establish an immediate sense of community with your faculty and fellow residents." The implementation of a designated residence hall or floor that focuses on the celebration and empowerment of multiculturalism can allow Asian

American students and other students of color to build and create community– especially since

joining an LLC is a requirement for all incoming first-year students at USD. In addition, it can

mitigate some of the feelings of isolation, culture shock, and code-switching, while lessening the

pressure to assimilate or be hyper-aware of their identity in predominantly white spaces. When

asked about what fostered their sense of belonging during the interview portion of this research,

student participant ten shared that, "It's a physical space for me." Ultimately, this proposed space

can be that physical place that fosters feelings of safety and comfortability in regard to racial and

cultural identities.

Conclusion

All in all, I am extremely grateful for having the opportunity to execute and conduct

research on a topic that I am incredibly passionate about. I have learned so much about the Asian

American student experience, but also more about myself as a student, educator, and scholar. It

was an honor being someone who created space for Asian American undergraduate students to

share their stories, narratives, and counternarratives. Through the time and energy that they

shared with me, I have gained a better understanding of the multifaceted and unique range of

Asian American student experiences at USD. In an ideal situation, my research would not need

to be conducted, but literature and this research project asserts that it is not the reality. After

hearing and learning from the research participants' personal stories and experiences, I hope that

institutions can implement progress in allocation in resources, advocacy, and representation for

these students. In addition, this research brought forth concerns and desires from students to have

spaces that are needed for the success of Asian American students to allow them to fully

integrate and feel a sense of belonging at PWIs and the crucial role that faculty play during this process. As I continue my professional career in the field of higher education and Student Affairs, this research project allowed me to think critically about how I support students, advocate in meetings, implement inclusive practices, and ways to cultivate a safe and welcoming environment for students to learn, grow, and be leaders.

In addition to the personal and professional growth that this action research project has provided me, I strongly believe that I have provided an affirming and validating experience for all the participants involved in the process. Whether it was through providing thought provoking interview questions which sparked an interesting conversation, intentional spaces for personal reflection, or creating connections of solidarity during the community focus group, I felt like all the participants in this research took away something meaningful. I feel successful in my change efforts because of the positive feedback from the participants in the community focus group space in their survey responses. Knowing that my top priority was and is to support Asian American students, listen to their stories, and create a positive space for community building, the impact I have even on one student felt significant. I know my presence and efforts made a positive impact and allowed students to reflect and make new connections.

My long-term goal and hope for this research project is to spark and create a systemic and institutional shift in mindset when supporting Asian American undergraduate students. Like the research shows, the experiences of Asian American students are extremely diverse, unique, complex, and multifaceted. Like this project, I highly encourage higher education professionals and Student Affairs practitioners to find the time to actively listen to the stories and experiences of this community and create intentional events and spaces on campus that celebrate the beauty

and joys of the Asian American community. For next steps, I would like to see a designated

physical space for Asian American students to continue building their community and for the

continuation and expansion of the APIDA Mixer. I hope that all institutional agents at any

university proactively work to gain cultural competency when interacting and working with this

demographic to best support these students and allow them to authentically thrive at the

university. I acknowledge and understand that these long-term outcomes are adaptive challenges

that take time, resources, energy, and a collective shift. To make sure that my efforts into this

research project and work at the UFMC are sustaining at the institution even after I graduate, I

plan on sharing the paper with the department and other various campus partners that worked

and will continue to work with Asian American undergraduate students. This will ensure that

there is a level of awareness that is in place for the staff and following successor in the space to

critically think about how they can support Asian American students.

　　For possible future research implementations, there are certain aspects of this topic that I

would like to further expand and dig deeper into. If provided the opportunity, I would like to

conduct follow-up interviews with research participants to see if any of their feelings and

perspectives changed once they transitioned back on campus after the pandemic. Additionally, I

would seek more interview and community focus group participants by advertising in more

places on campus that can pique interest from students in different pockets of the university that

might have different opinions. Keeping the research window open a bit longer can also support

finding additional research participants for the advancement of data collection. Furthermore, I

would offer more than one community focus group so that it offers a more structured space for

community building with multiple groups. Lastly, I would like to expand the research range to

other PWI universities across the nation; this could allow for a more diverse range of research participants that could provide different perspectives on their sense of belonging and see how geographical region, institution type, and institutional culture can impact their experiences. For now, I reflect on the words of Yuri Kochiyama, an Asian American Civil Rights activist, and tell myself that this research serves as an important reminder that, "Consciousness is power. Consciousness is education and knowledge. Consciousness is becoming aware... Tomorrow's world is yours to build."

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Appendix A: Interview & Video Recording Consent Form

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
Asian American Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White
Institution

I. Purpose of the research study

Miso Jang is a graduate student in the MA Higher Education Leadership program in the
School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are
invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this study is
to validate the lived experiences of Asian American students, share their stories that
combat detrimental stereotypes, show them what institutional efforts are being done and
empower them to be in community with one another.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to: Participate in a 30 minute
semi-structured virtual interview about your experience as an Asian American
undergraduate student at the University of San Diego. You will be video recorded during
this interview. Then, it will be followed by a 1 hour focus group that will focus on
community building with the Asian American population at USD. Your participation in
this study will take a total of 1 hour and 30 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

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 Asian American undergraduate student sense of belonging at the University of San
Diego.

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. The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and *may* be used in future research.

VI. Compensation
If you participate in the study, the researcher will give you a $5 Amazon gift card in the following way: email. You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire interview or focus group.

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) Miso Jang
Email: mjang@sandiego.edu

2) Nydia Sanchez
Email: nydiasanchez@sandiego.edu

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.

Video Recording: Additional Consent

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in this study. We may wish to present some of the video recordings from this study at professional meetings or as demonstrations in classrooms. We will use computer software to blur/tile your face and alter your voice (like on TV) so you will not be recognizable. In addition to consenting to participate in the research study, you may choose to participate in either of the statements below.

1) I hereby give permission for the video recording made for this research study to be also used for **professional meetings**, such as being shown to professors and researchers at a scientific conference.

2) I hereby give permission for the video recording made for this research study to be also used for **educational purposes**, such as being shown to students in a classroom or available for viewing by students via a password protected file which cannot be copied or downloaded.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

- How would you describe your ethnic identity?

- How are you involved on campus?

    - Are you a part of any student organizations? If yes, do you hold a leadership position in this organization?

    - If not, are there any campus organizations you want to join?

- What interactions do you have with faculty, staff or administration at USD?

    - What are ways they make you feel supported as a USD student?

- How would you describe the sense of belonging for you?

    - Do you feel like USD is a place that makes you feel the belonging that you described?

    - If not, why?

- How do you feel about the transition to virtual engagement?

    - What are some specific challenges you face during this time?

    - Has your sense of belonging changed as we enter our third semester online?

- What type of support do you need to make you feel more included at USD?

- Is there anything else you would like to share during this time?

Appendix C: Focus Group Outline and Script

Asian American Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution
Community Focus Group
Total time: 1 hour

1. Introductions (5 minutes)

    a. Introduce myself: My name is Miso Jang and I am a second year Master's student in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego. I gathered you all today for the third cycle of my Action Research titled, Asian American Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution". Today's focus group will be focused on community building with other Asian American students, faculty, staff, and administrators from USD. This study is voluntary. The focus group will last 1 hour but you may leave the zoom call at any time. And you will receive a $5 Amazon gift card for your participation in this study.

    b. Introduce participants: Ask everyone to share names (or pseudonyms mention they can rename their Zoom names as well), pronouns if comfortable, and their role on campus.

2. Community Guidelines (5 minutes)

    a. Honor and be open to difference

    b. Own your intentions and your impact

    c. Lean into discomfort and observe your resistance

    d. Speak from your own experience (i.e. "I" statements)

    e. Discuss issues as if someone in the room is impacted by them

    f. What's said here stays here; what's learned here leaves here

    g. Does anyone want to add any? (Allow time to add to the community guidelines)

    h. Once done, can everyone give me a thumbs up (physically or using the reaction button on zoom) so it lets everyone in the space know you're in understanding of our agreements.

3. Focus group activity (30 minutes)

    a. As I conducted several interviews the past two weeks, I recognized some themes within our conversations such as defining a sense of belonging with community, authenticity, and feelings of safety (socially, emotionally, physically). In addition, many of the stories shared included narratives of culture shock, code switching, and the strong importance of student organizations.

    b. Where do you find community on campus (pre-covid) or virtually (during COVID)?

    c. How do those communities make you feel like you belong?

    d. What would you like to see get implemented at the university to help you find more community?

4. Reflection (15 minutes)

    a. What are some things that you are taking away from this discussion with this focus group?

    b. What connections did you make from the initial interview and this focus group?

    c. Did anything stand out to you?

        i. If so, what was it?

5. Closing (5 minutes)

    a. 1 word closing: Share one word you are feeling after this community time today.

    b. Thank you all so much for participating.

Appendix D: Reflection Activity

Reflection Question	Answers
What are some things that you are taking away from the discussion with this focus group?	I am not alone. There are other POC just like me who feel the same way and that makes me feel validated and seen. The discussion made me feel safe and heard. it was comforting knowing that I am not alone in my experiences on campus and that my friends care about our Asian American peers and peers of color on campus as well. I learned a lot about the experiences of Asians on campus and how important multicultural orgs are to the safety and belonging of marginalized identities on campus. I am comforted knowing the work I do in FUSO has been successful in making even a few students of color more comfortable. The institution needs to address and implement actual change regarding anti-blackness and white supremacy for all students with marginalized identities to feel safe, supported, welcomed, included, and belonged. The university needs to step up and do what they said they'd do and uphold diversity and inclusion. I feel like the minority communities need to fight their way to the administration in order for their voices to be heard. Not listened to...HEARD. Also

	that racism is too big a problem on campus than what's comfortable.
What connections did you make from the initial interview and with this focus group?	In the initial interview and focus group, I enjoyed our discussions about the shared frustrations we have for the USD administration, mainly President Harris, and how communities of color aren't comfortable with their response (or lack of response) to racial justice on campus. We experience a lot of the same things, especially culture shock and the need to code switch, as well as we all feel the same in terms of the administration and USD's role in upholding white supremacy by not actively speaking out against it. Racial experiences in residential life, need for more transparency from administration, culture shock is huge, student orgs provide so much for students with retention and sense of belonging and community. I learned that my experiences are ones that are shared with other Asian Americans on campus. This makes me feel like sadly, I'm not the only one experiencing these issues but in a way that's good because I know others who want to fight the good fight.

| Did anything stand out to you? If so, what was it? | One thing that stood out to me was the mentioning of the Black Lives Matter course at USD. How come an email or social media post wasn't sent my way when that course came out? Who else doesn't know about it? Or am I just ignorant and accidentally deleted the newsletter about it. It just goes to show how USD isn't completely advocating for their Black community and the resources they have to offer.

Knowing that [someone from the focus group] also felt the same way about feeling pressure to validate our experiences as people of color to other marginalized groups on campus is sad but comforting knowing I am not alone in feeling like I need to codeswitch.

How the conversation led to solidarity work with the Black community. As Am students will not feel supported without Black students feeling supported. There is a lot of work that still needs to be done. The institution needs to advertise The Commons more.

Something that stood out to me was how noticed President Harris' actions and lack there of are. Like people know what he doesn't do and the lies he tells students but he just continues to do so like we can't see it |

Appendix E: Participant Recruitment Flyer

LOOKING FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Asian American Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution

I am looking for Asian American undergraduate students at the University of San Diego to participate in a study that will examine the needs of Asian American students and their sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution during a time of virtual engagement and online learning.

Participants must be 18 years or older and identify as an Asian American undergraduate student.

Participants will be asked to participate in a 30 minute interview via Zoom and another 1 hour focus group via Zoom. Total participation in this study will be 1 hour and 30 minutes. Participants will be video and audio recorded. There will be a compensation with a **$5 Amazon gift card.**

Please contact **Miso Jang mjang@sandiego.edu** if you would like to participant or if you have questions.

Appendix F: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear student,

My name is Miso Jang and I am currently a graduate student in the MA Higher Education Leadership program here at USD. I am reaching out to share an opportunity to participate in my action research project titled "Asian American Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution" that will explore the Asian American undergraduate student experience and their sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution during a time of virtual engagement and online learning.

If you would like to participate in this study, I will be hosting 30 minute interviews with research participants via Zoom. Participants will be audio and video recorded during the Zoom session. Please let me know your availability for the next two weeks so I can schedule a time. This is voluntary and there will be a compensation with a $5 Amazon gift card. The flyer to this study is attached to this email.

Thank you so much for your support and interest in this study. Please feel free to contact me at mjang@sandiego.edu or my faculty advisor at nydiasanchez@sandiego.edu if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,
Miso