WHAT IT MEANS TO FAIL: EXPLORING HOW THE MODEL MINORITY MAKES SENSE OF ACADEMIC STRUGGLES IN COLLEGE

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Sarah Michelle Olia

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Abstract
This study examined how eight Asian American undergraduate students made sense of academic difficulties while pursuing a degree in the health professions at a highly selective, private, research university. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the research methodology used to qualitatively explore the problem. A psychosocial student development model geared towards Asian American college students was applied as the theoretical lens for designing the study. This study demonstrated that Asian American students are under tremendous pressure to achieve academically and are held to strict criteria for defining success due to family expectations and social stereotypes such as the model minority designation. The study confirmed that parents are highly influential in the academic affairs of their college-aged children, which is largely attributed to their own struggles as immigrants and their pursuit of the American dream. Encountering an academic setback and jeopardizing their chance to fulfill their familial duty was a deeply unsettling and disorienting experience for the participants. The study revealed that failing a course resulted in a phase of debilitating emotional distress, which was followed by a period of coping, reflection, identity development, and the reevaluation of future plans. An important finding from this study is that the participants felt unsupported within their home and college environments during times of academic difficulty, suggesting that universities should rethink their approach to working with Asian American students and making their services more tailored to the needs of this unique population. Encouraging reflection and engaging Asian American students in positive advising relationships with empathetic faculty and staff members are also recommended.
Key words: Asian American college students, academic success, model minority, identity development, racial microaggressions, academic advising, interpretative phenomenological analysis, critical race theory
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silenced or misunderstood at some point. I am optimistic that through my ongoing advocacy, I
will be able to influence other practitioners to examine their own blind spots and bias when it
comes to working with Asian American students and contribute to the expansion of scholarship
on the topic.
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Higher education scholars and practitioners have examined the educational trajectories of various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to better understand how college is experienced and perceived by students from a diversity of backgrounds (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Museus & Ruvello, 2010). Despite growing interest in this research, much remains to be learned about Asian American students. The purpose of this study was to investigate how Asian American college students experience and make sense of academic difficulties while pursuing an undergraduate degree in the health professions at a highly selective, private, research university. An academic difficulty is defined as failing a course required by one’s major, not being allowed to progress normally in one’s major, or being dismissed from one’s major for an academic reason. Data gleaned from this research is intended to inform support for Asian American students with the goal of strengthening and enriching their time on campus, particularly during periods of challenge and distress. This study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis to qualitatively explore the research problem.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to Asian American college students to provide context and background to the study. Then, the rationale and significance of the study is discussed, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are explained next. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced.

Context and Background

According to the Pew Research Center (Pew Social Trends, 2013), Asian Americans represent one of the fastest growing racial groups in the United States. The most recent United States Census showed that 4.8 percent of the population identifies as Asian American and an
additional 0.9 percent identifies as being mixed-race Asian American. In total, the Asian American population increased more than four times faster than the overall population since the previous census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Likewise, the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (2011), also known as the NCAAPI, reported that the number of Asian Americans going to college grew from 235,000 in 1979 to 1.3 million in 2009. The NCAAPI projects that the number of Asian Americans pursuing a college education will continue to grow at high rates compared to other racial groups with a 30% anticipated increase between 2009 and 2019. In an overview of the Asian American college student population, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles found that the top majors for Asian American undergraduates were the health professions, the biological sciences, business, and engineering (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007). Understanding these trends is vital to helping higher education scholars and practitioners learn more about and engage with Asian American students.

Research has begun to reveal the complexities of the Asian American student experience, examining factors such as race, identity development, and campus environment to understand how they relate to performance in college (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Gloria & Ho, 2003; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012). Identity, for example, is particularly salient for Asian American students as it is closely linked with purpose and perception of their roles within their families and society, which drives academic and career decision-making during the college years (Kodama et al., 2002). For Asian Americans, identity development is a distinctive and complex process (Museus, 2014), often influenced by a constellation of cultural and social factors that surface or appear in new ways during college as students gain independence, adapt to new environments, and acquire a deeper future orientation.
The widespread model minority stereotype that typecasts Asian Americans as more academically and professionally successful than other racial groups has resulted in an overly simplistic public perception of the population, underestimating the vast amount of diversity within the population and dismissing the experiences of Asian Americans that struggle to achieve conventionally defined success (Suzuki, 2002; Yeh, 2002). Only recently have researchers addressed the challenges and adversities that Asian Americans confront. This work has largely focused on the prevalence of acculturative stress related to family pressure (Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012), racism (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009), and mental health concerns such as higher levels of suicide ideation among Asian American students when compared to other racial groups and a reluctance to seek counseling (Wong, Brownson, & Schwing, 2011; Wong, Koo, Tran, Chiu, & Mok, 2011). Despite these efforts, most educational discourse reinforces the belief that Asian American students are high achievers and not in need of additional support while in college (Suzuki, 2002; Yeh 2002).

**Rationale and Significance**

Expanding research on Asian American college students has implications for a variety of stakeholders with significance in the domains of policy, practice, and research. Because Asian Americans represent a rapidly growing segment of the population, they will likely have a strong presence in many aspects of daily life in the United States for years to come (Kim, Chang, & Park, 2009). Furthermore, their participation in higher education is specifically linked with their ability to fully participate in their communities and contribute to our nation’s economy (Teranishi, 2012). Higher education, on a systemic level, must respond to the shifting demographics of its student population to keep pace with needs of its clientele. This demands
that administrators and practitioners have the backing of policy and research to develop the resources and competencies required to effectively work with individuals from different racial groups and nurture their growth as students, young professionals, and members of society.

Amidst the current climate of competition and accountability, colleges and universities are being scrutinized for their ability to deliver a quality education for all learners and prepare graduates to enter the workforce (Hillman, Tandberg, & Gross, 2014). Institutionally, persistence and retention are important because they function as metrics to determine if schools are providing the type of education they advertise and preparing students who are willing and able to work in their fields of study (Wimhurst & Allard, 2008). When schools are unable to retain students, it is not only their academic reputations at stake but also their financial stability. As such, identifying strategies for facilitating the academic success of students while they are in college is of utmost importance. With Asian Americans continuing to occupy more seats at institutions of higher education in the United States, they are a population that requires and deserves heightened attention (Kim et al., 2009; Pak, Maramba, & Hernandez, 2014). Not only will research on the experiences of Asian American students who have academic difficulties equip faculty, staff, and administrators with evidence to improve practice, it will also begin to shift societal attention away from the model minority stereotype towards a more comprehensive understanding of individuals who identify as Asian American (Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009; Suzuki, 2002; Tran & Birman, 2010).

The university selected for this study is considered highly competitive and maintains academically rigorous standards for its students. Commitment to student achievement, along with administrative pressure to retain students, means that identifying appropriate support strategies for students who have academic difficulties is a priority for faculty and staff members.
Consequently, understanding the factors that promote and prevent success is an important goal for those who work directly with students and share responsibility for persistence and graduation rates. Knowing that issues related to race, ethnicity, culture, and family involvement represent important dimensions of the student experience (Benner & Kim, 2009), pinpointing patterns and trends among students who identify as Asian American on a particular campus may lead to the creation of academic resources that are culturally appropriate and suitable to the context of the research site, as well as adaptable to other types of institutions.

Finally, this study has implications for individual students. Asian American students deserve and will benefit from a more accurate portrayal of what it means to be Asian American. The term Asian American encompasses a diverse group of people spanning numerous ethnic backgrounds, language traditions, immigration statuses, and lengths of time spent in the United States (Suzuki, 2002). These characteristics, along with several others, make Asian Americans a complex population with compelling academic and emotional needs, as well as wide-ranging socioeconomic profiles. However, the model minority stereotype has meant that Asian Americans are presumed to be enjoying levels of academic and professional success beyond that of other races (Yeh, 2002). Museus and Kiang (2009) described Asian Americans as an “invisible” (p. 5) minority, referencing the fact that they are addressed minimally in education research and even excluded from some definitions of underrepresented minorities. As a result, most faculty and staff lack access to useful information about the Asian American students in their classrooms and on their campuses. Having a more robust body of literature to draw upon would provide the empirical evidence necessary to better serve, support, and nurture Asian American students in times of success and failure, improving their overall experiences and engagement on campus.
Research Problem and Research Question

The quickly growing numbers of Asian American students pursuing a college degree makes them an important population within higher education. The ability to work effectively with Asian American students and encourage their academic success and social adjustment in college demands a comprehensive understanding of their educational experiences.

Unfortunately, the current body of research on Asian American students is limited in comparison to other minority groups due in part to the belief that Asian Americans are universally high achieving, commonly referenced as the model minority stereotype (Museus & Chang, 2009). Asian Americans have also been allocated less research funding and attention than other populations deemed more at risk.

The perception that Asian American students are doing well means that those that struggle are not only unacknowledged and misunderstood, but also “systematically neglected” (Yeh, 2002, p. 6) at many institutions, leaving this population vulnerable and in need of targeted support. Exploratory research on underachieving Asian Americans demonstrates the damaging effects of the model minority stereotype, not only as a demoralizing force for weak students, but also as a mask for the issues that underlie academic difficulties (Kim & Lee, 2013; Li, 2005). Other studies argue that discrimination and racism towards Asian Americans is treated dismissively, ignoring a critical aspect of the student experience and an important factor to consider when students encounter academic challenges (Suzuki, 2002; Tran & Birman, 2010; Yu, 2006). Yet another obstacle is the tendency for Asian American parents to force their children to pursue prestigious and academically rigorous majors such as the health professions, law, or engineering with little regard for the student’s interests or abilities (Kodama et al., 2002). Despite being pressing issues, the public’s perception that Asian Americans are a problem-free
model minority prevails, perpetuating the belief that they are less deserving of educational support than other racial groups.

The model minority stereotype has also led to a general lack of information about Asian American college students (Museus & Chang, 2009), resulting in little being known about how they make sense of their academic experiences and deal with setbacks in college. College is commonly regarded as a time of exploration with opportunities to make decisions that lead toward particular career paths (Okubo, Yeh, Lin, Fujita, & Shea, 2007). It is common for students to face challenges while in college that cause them to question their professional goals with academic performance being just one of many potential roadblocks. Given the cultural, familial, and societal pressures that Asian American students face, issues related to academic achievement are especially meaningful for this population and are often extremely complicated for students to negotiate (Kodama et al., 2002). Tension between Western and Asian value systems force students to balance ideals such as individualism, a Western value, and collectivism, as Asian value, when they make choices and decisions related to their academic and career trajectories. Decision-making processes are brought to the fore when students encounter an academic setback and are confronted with determining how to move forward. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how Asian American undergraduate students in the health professions make sense of their academic difficulties at a highly competitive private research university in the Northeast. Academic difficulties, also referred to as academic setbacks, include failing a required course, not meeting progression requirements as dictated by one’s major, or being academically dismissed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to capture the voices of students and extract themes related to their experiences.
Embracing the stories of Asian American students is a first step towards generating a set of best practices and interventions for supporting their academic success and cultivating a more inclusive and nurturing campus climate. Findings from this work may be useful for faculty and staff members that work with Asian American students and administrators responsible for retention and graduation rates. This study is also intended to shape and promote a research agenda that values Asian American perspectives in higher education.

This qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with Asian American undergraduate students, was guided by the following overarching question:

What does encountering academic difficulty mean to certain Asian American students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a highly selective, private, research university?

In reality, the experience of an academic difficulty may impact more than a student’s educational trajectory. This study sought to explore the internal and external forces that unleash when a student experiences a setback, such as disruptions to sense of self-identity, personal value orientation, and pressures exerted by one’s family and society to live up to expectations by fulfilling certain academic and career goals. The intervening role of race and Asian American racial stereotypes, particularly those that presume Asian Americans to be academically successful, add a layer of complexity to the problem. These areas of inquiry provide a starting point for making sense of the Asian American student experience from the perspectives of individual students.

**Defining the Asian American Population**

According to Accapadi (2012), the Asian American label is “widely used to describe a diverse group of communities that have differing political histories, immigrant histories, religious practices, linguistic roots, physical features, and cultural norms” (p. 60). To distinguish
among Asian Americans, four categories based on national origins were created to allow for
more directed dialogue about this population: East Asian (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and
Taiwanese), Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian), South Asian
(Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, and Indian), and Pacific Islander (Native
Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Guamanian, and Fijian). These categories are not exhaustive, but
they are useful in refining and focusing discussions about Asian Americans in a way that honors
the geographic, linguistic, and cultural diversity among them.

In addition to national origin, several other factors are relevant to understanding the
individual experiences of Asian Americans. For instance, whether a person was born in the
United States or is an immigrant from another country makes one’s identification as an Asian
American distinctive (Castillo et al., 2012). For those that were born in the United States, the
number of generations that their families have lived in this country is an important determinant
of their overall experience and acculturation. Finally, the circumstances under which individuals
and families decided to come to the United States are noteworthy (Museus, 2014). Asians have
immigrated for reasons as varied as political asylum, forced labor, cross-national adoption,
marrige, or education.

Although using the term Asian American as a general category is common among
scholars and practitioners, one must be cognizant and respectful of the diversity within this group
for the reasons addressed above. In fact, many individuals shift between affiliating with a pan-
Asian identity and being more closely aligned with a specific ethnic subgroup (Museus, 2014).
In this thesis, the term Asian American is utilized broadly with a focus on commonalities and
trends. Racial, ethnic, and other types of variability are explained when they add to the
interpretation of the literature and in order to highlight the complexity of the population. The
sample selected for this study’s data collection is limited to students with East Asian heritage to allow for a more nuanced analysis of the findings.

**Other Key Terms**

In addition to Asian American, there are several other key terms referenced in this study. This section provides definitions, drawing from other works when appropriate, as a reference to the reader.

**Academic difficulty** – This study defines an academic difficulty, also referred to as an academic setback, as failing a course required by one’s major, not being allowed to progress in one’s major, or being dismissed from one’s major for an academic reason.

**Acculturation** – Acculturation refers to the process of adopting the dominant cultural group’s norms and attitudes (Castillo et al., 2012). It also implies a change in the degree, usually a decrease, to which an individual retains the cultural values and practices of his or her heritage group.

**Ethnic identity** – According to Alvarez and Helms (2001), ethnic identity involves how a person’s sense of identification is shaped by cultural elements, such as traditions, language, and other social norms.

**Model minority** – The model minority label is used to describe Asian Americans as hardworking and intelligent, as well as academically and professionally successful. Asian Americans are presumed to possess these traits innately because of their race. This stereotype is often perceived as harmless, though it is damaging in that it masks the discrimination experienced by Asian Americans and racializes success in a way that pits Asian Americans against other minority groups (Chang, 1993).
Racial identity – Racial identity involves how a person’s sense of identification is shaped by socially constructed definitions of race, including how a person deals with the psychosocial and sociopolitical effects of racial oppression (Accapadi, 2012; Alvarez & Helms, 2001).

Racial microaggressions – Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2009) define racial microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (p. 88). Microaggressions take different forms, ranging from direct physical and verbal assaults to indirect insults or invalidations (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Equilin, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the Asian American psychosocial student development model (Kodama et al., 2002) as a theoretical framework. The framework emphasizes the individual constructs of identity and purpose, while acknowledging the impact of family and society on decision-making for Asian American students (see Appendix A, Figure 1). Through this model, Kodama and colleagues extended the reach of previous student development theories, offering a lens for making sense of the Asian American college student experience.

Historical and Contemporary Foundations of the Framework

Chickering’s seminal work (1969), later expanded by Chickering and Reisser (1993), is frequently referenced in student development research and practice. Chickering’s theory of student development delineates seven vectors of the college experience: developing competency, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing interpersonal relationships, developing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Chickering also identifies tasks that correspond to the vectors that signify the ways in which students achieve the goals of each domain. Chickering’s theory has been used to design and
justify student affairs programming and advising strategies in higher education for several decades and is recognized for its utility in making sense of how students approach the opportunities and challenges they confront in college.

In recent years, the generalizability of Chickering’s theory to various sub-populations of college students has been questioned (Kodama et al., 2002). Given that Chickering constructed his theory with a traditional White student population in mind, several scholars have claimed that his ideas are outdated and do not accurately reflect the diversity of college students today. As a result, a number of more contemporary theories have emerged that explore race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and other meaningful identity markers in the context of student development.

**Critical Race Theory**

Student development models that permit a race-sensitive way of understanding the college experience resonate with the tenets of critical race theory (CRT), a research approach that encourages the dismantling of dominant racial paradigms and stereotypes (Parker, 2015). Adapted from the field of legal studies, CRT offers educational researchers theoretical and methodological direction for exposing the influence of racism on the lives of students through its attention to sociohistorical contexts, experiential knowledge, and interdisciplinary viewpoints. CRT is particularly useful for research that focuses on the Asian American population, given the pervasiveness of the race-based model minority stereotype and the corresponding tendency to treat Asian Americans as a non-disadvantaged group despite evidence to the contrary (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009). As a methodology, CRT provides a forum through which the voices of Asian American students can be showcased to advance a more realistic picture of their experiences. This thesis took inspiration from CRT in its utilization of
Kodama et al.’s (2002) Asian American psychosocial student development model as a theoretical framework and in its overarching goal of increasing awareness, augmenting support, and refining practices related to Asian American college students.

**Components of the Theory**

Kodama et al.’s (2002) Asian American psychosocial student development model builds on Chickering’s earlier ideas and applies them to the Asian American student population. A psychosocial perspective takes into account the things that are of significance to students, as well as students’ methods of prioritizing tasks and decisions. These authors emphasize the critical and nuanced role of race and culture in understanding student development for the Asian American population. Above all, Kodama et al. underscore the interaction between Asian culture and dominant culture in influencing how Asian American students cultivate a sense of self and approach their college experiences. Asian American students often feel tension as they negotiate the competing pressures of biculturalism, given the contradictory values and beliefs that each culture espouses. Moreover, dominant culture also exerts a degree of racism through the perpetuation of racial stereotypes on Asian American psychosocial development. Again, the model minority stereotype is a poignant example of how a seemingly harmless label can create unfair assumptions about a student’s ability or intentions. Kodama et al.’s model of Asian American psychosocial development places *identity* and *purpose* at its center. Influencing this core is *society* via racial stereotypes and *family/culture* via behaviors and expectations. In addition, Chickering’s vectors of *emotions*, *competency*, *interdependence*, *relationships*, and *integrity* form branches that emanate from the core. The significance of identity and purpose, and the ways in which society and culture impact their realization, distinguish Kodama et al.’s student development theory from Chickering’s (1969) version. Maramba and Velasquez (2012)
found that many Asian American students explore their racial identity for the first time as college students, especially when they are distanced from their families. Identity development is also molded by the experience of microaggressions, or everyday acts of racism that often take the form of insults or dismissals (Sue et al., 2009). Microaggressions can cause emotional and psychological pain for targeted individuals, which in turn may impact academic success and social adjustment. Purpose is a second area of development that may be distinctive for Asian American students. That is, Asian American students tend to be more likely to define purpose in pragmatic terms based on academic achievement, future job security, and prestige than their White counterparts. Kodama et al. suggest that Asian American students associate identity with purpose and may be more resistant to changing their major than the general population. The manifestation of emotions, competency, interdependence, relationships, and integrity are closely linked to identity and purpose, reflecting how a student negotiates the balance between Asian and dominant cultures.

**Critics of the Theory**

Although Kodama et al.’s (2002) framework is an improvement upon Chickering’s (1969) original student development theory for the Asian American population, there are some limitations to its application. For example, a one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to embody the range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds represented within the population of Asian American students. It also does not explicitly address the influence of the campus environment on student development, despite the fact that scholars have noted that environment is significant to the minority student experience (Carter, 2006; Cress & Ikeda, 2003). Finally, it has been argued that the Asian American student experience is unique enough to warrant a model that is
designed specifically for the population, rather than simply modifying an existing theory like Kodama et al. did to create their framework (Museus, 2014).

**Rationale**

Kodama et al.’s (2002) theory of Asian American psychosocial student development provides a complex model for examining the ways in which society and culture influence purpose and identity for participants in this study. It functions as an insightful interpretive lens for examining the central phenomenon of experiencing an academic difficulty by taking into account the competing pressures of racial stereotypes, family, and cultural norms. Since an academic setback often disrupts a student’s sense of self and requires rethinking future plans, a framework such as this that centralizes the concepts of identity and purpose is needed to adequately analyze the problem.

**Application to the Study**

Kodama et al.’s (2002) theory of Asian American psychosocial development served as a guide for selecting and refining several aspects of this study and its design. The core elements of the framework, identity and purpose, were reflected in the overarching research question’s focus on the individual experience of encountering an academic difficulty and how one moves forward from such an event. Moreover, the framework’s emphasis on psychosocial development made qualitative methods a suitable choice for the study. In-depth interviewing as a data collection strategy allowed the researcher to gain insight on the phenomenon through direct interaction with participants (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis and the presentation of findings relied on showcasing the voices of participants to highlight their experiences and provide authentic examples to illustrate features of the framework. This study aimed not only to deepen understanding of the framework and its components, but also to identify points of departure or
additional influences on the Asian American college student experience to advance knowledge of the population.

Summary

As Asian American students continue to represent an expanding segment of the college-going population, the need to understand their trajectories is an urgent matter of importance for higher education professionals (Pak et al., 2014). This study focused on the experiences of Asian American college students that have encountered academic difficulties to challenge the assumption that Asian Americans are universally high achieving. This study was not intended to downplay the experiences of Asian Americans that have attained conventionally defined success, but instead was meant to call attention to the diversity of circumstances that exists within the population.

The next chapter provides a review of the existing literature relevant to the topics and themes addressed in this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

With growing numbers of Asian American students entering institutions of higher education in the United States, the need for a clearer understanding of the population is mounting (Pak, Maramba, & Hernandez, 2014). To date, the scholarly literature and popular media have produced conflicting and largely misleading images of Asian Americans that do not accurately reflect the lived experiences or diversity of the group (Suzuki, 2002; Zhang 2010). As a result, colleges and universities often lack the information necessary to create effective structures of support and to enact institutional policy that serves the best interests of Asian American students and improves their college experiences (Museus & Kiang, 2009).
Exploring the educational trajectories of ethnic minorities has been the focus of numerous investigations (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011). These studies represent the outgrowth of concerns over low rates of degree attainment and expressions of dissatisfaction with campus environments among racial and ethnic minority students (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2012; Museus & Neville, 2012). Identifying factors that contribute to the positive and negative college experiences of ethnic minority students has become a priority for administrators and practitioners in the field. However, most of the work on this topic has focused on African American and Latino populations, largely excluding Asian Americans due to the assumption that they are achieving at levels on par with White students and do not require as much attention as other minority groups (Museus & Chang, 2009).

The following literature review addresses the need for improved knowledge about Asian American college students through a critical examination of the existing research. The review seeks to illuminate the unique educational experiences of Asian Americans by considering various dimensions of their individual and group identities. Special acknowledgement is given to the ways in which Asian American students confront and negotiate hardships to contrast with the presumption that all Asian American students are successful. This literature review concentrates on undergraduate students, but studies with mixed samples of undergraduate and graduate students were incorporated when appropriate. Terms such as Asian American students, model minority, racial identity, ethnic identity, Asian American culture, racial microaggressions, acculturative stress, academic support, and academic achievement were used to search for literature using the Academic Search Premier article database. Literature was also identified by reviewing the sources cited in relevant articles and doctoral dissertations, searching through
specific journals that publish articles closely linked to the topic, and based on recommendations from colleagues and professors.

This review focuses on three distinct, yet overlapping, strands of literature related to Asian American college students. First, literature that explores the role of race and racism for Asian American college students is presented (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Espenshade and Radford, 2009; Fischer & Massey, 2007; Hune, 2002; Kang, 1996; Li, 2005; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Museus, 2014; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Pak, et al., 2014; Pyke & Dang, 2003; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Equilin, 2007; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Suzuki, 2002; Tran & Birman, 2010; Trytten, Lowe, & Walden, 2012; Yeh, 2002; Ying, Lee, Tsai, Hung, Lin, & Wan, 2001; Yoo & Castro, 2011; Zhang, 2010). Perspectives involving race that are relevant to Asian American college students include immigration patterns and legal treatment on a sociohistorical group level, and racial microaggressions and stereotypes on an individual level. The second section considers literature dealing with identity development for Asian American college students (Alvarez, 2002; Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012; Castro & Rice, 2003; Dundes, Cho, & Kwak, 2009; Kawaguchi, 2003; Kim, 2001; Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hang, 2001; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002; Lee & Zhou, 2014; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Museus, 2008; Museus, 2013; Museus, 2014; Okubo, Yeh, Lin, Fujita, & Shea, 2007; Saw, Berenbaum, & Okazaki, 2013; Shen, 2015; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Wong, Brownson, & Schwing, 2011; Wong, Koo, Tran, Chiu, & Mok, 2011; Wong, Kim, Nguyen, Cheng, & Saw, 2014; Xie & Goyette, 2003). Central to this strand is the notion that Asian American culture is intimately linked with identity for Asian American college students and is exerted through parenting practices and
evidenced in value adherence. The final strand of literature examines the environmental, relational, and emotional aspects of the college experience for Asian American students, along with an overview of what faculty and staff members can do to shape an inviting and nurturing campus climate (Ancis et al., 2000; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 2003; Johnston & Yeung, 2014; Kim, Chang, & Park, 2009; Kuh, 2005; Liang & Sedlacek, 2003; Liu, 2009; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Museus & Truong, 2009; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009; Suzuki, 2002; Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009; Wei et al., 2011). The review concludes with a summary of the literature and proposes opportunities for further inquiry.

The Role of Race and Racism for Asian American College Students

This section examines research that considers how race and racism impact Asian American college students. The sociohistorical circumstances that have shaped policies and attitudes towards Asian Americans over time are presented, along with specific examples of discrimination and marginalization.

Immigration Patterns

Tracing the history of how the Asian American population has expanded in the United States and within higher education is a necessary starting point for the discussion of race and racism. To begin, immigration patterns reveal a great deal about why Asians Americans have such disparate experiences and trajectories (Hune, 2002; Pak et al., 2014). There were two major waves of immigration from Asia to the United States (Hune, 2002). The first wave began in the second half of the nineteenth century with immigrants coming predominantly from China, Japan, and the Philippines to help settle and build the Western territory. They were routinely
victimized by discrimination and exploitative policies that took advantage of their labor without
granting them basic civil and political rights. The 1965 Immigration Act allowed both trained
professionals and unskilled workers to come to the United States in order to fill vocational voids,
initiating the second wave of immigration. In addition, large numbers of refugees from Vietnam,
Laos, and Cambodia came to the United States seeking relief from their war-torn homelands.
Many of these families came from impoverished backgrounds and had endured unthinkable
trauma, unlike the immigrants from East Asian countries who predominantly moved at will in
pursuit of educational or professional opportunities. The combination of these two waves of
immigration has resulted in a substantial and growing Asian American population today,
including a large college-aged sector of children born to immigrants across generations.

**Asian Critical Theory**

As the Asian American population grew in the United States, the legal rights and
treatment of the group were disputed, leading to ongoing debate about the status of Asian
Americans within education and other shared spaces (Museus, 2014; Pak et al., 2012). Chang
(1993), a second generation Korean American law professor, wrote prolifically about the
distinctiveness of racism against Asian Americans and contributed to the establishment of an
Asian American critical legal scholarship framework. He argued that Asian Americans have
been victimized by racism in a manner that is unique from that experienced by other race groups.
For example, Asian Americans are frequent targets of nativistic violence, referring to racism
provoked by patriotism and “America first” sentiments that cast Asian Americans as foreigners.
The legacy of legislation that prevented Asian Americans from gaining citizenship and owning
property in the early 1900s exacerbated the alienation of the group and characterized Asian
Americans as outsiders or perfidious foreigners (Suzuki, 2002). Nativistic violence is frequently
triggered by the impression that Asian Americans are stealing opportunities from more deserving Whites. This type of racism is heightened during times of economic hardship and increased competition and in many cases, the courts have not recognized the brutality of nativistic violence towards Asian Americans. Chang cited several examples of racially motivated murders in which egregiously light sentences were given to the perpetrators, including the 1982 killing of Chinese American Vincent Chen in Detroit that resulted in an initial sentence of no jail time for the two Detroit autoworkers that committed the crime. While the situation has improved for Asian Americans over time from a legal justice standpoint, Chang asserted that racism towards Asian Americans has simply evolved in nature. He stated that contemporary racism “murders the spirit” (Chang, 1993, p. 1314) through non-violent forms of discrimination and is no less damaging to the psyche of Asian Americans. Thus, there remains a need for critical scholarship that focuses on the particularities of the Asian American population from a wide range of perspectives.

**Race and College Admissions**

The role of race in education has been debated in law and policy for decades in the United States. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) a landmark decision declared the racial segregation of schools unconstitutional and was followed by a number of cases targeting educational practices such as race-conscious college admissions decisions and the application of affirmative action. Racial quotas, or “set-aside programs” that reserve seats for minority applicants, were banned in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), though the court upheld the use of race as one factor, among many, that could be considered for admission. The question of whether or not Asian American students should be treated as underrepresented minorities was also debated in this case (Lee, 2008). In 2003, two cases revisited the
consideration of race in the admissions process. The court decided in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) that the point system used at the University of Michigan, giving underrepresented minorities an advantage, was unconstitutional. However, a “plus” system that favored underrepresented minorities along with other factors was deemed constitutional in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003). The dissenting opinion in this case stated that a plus system was simply a quota system in disguise. That said, it is not surprising that the constitutionality of race-conscious admissions has remained a deeply contested legal issue. In 2014, the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2012) that race may continue to be used as a factor in admissions decisions, but it is expected that colleges will be held to a higher standard for proving that such measures are required for achieving campus diversity. This ruling was upheld in 2016, reinforcing the idea that universities are able to pursue diversity goals through the admissions process, but that race should not play a greater role than necessary to achieve that end (*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2016).

According to the literature, Asian American students have mixed views about race-conscious admissions practices (Inkelas, 2003; Park & Liu, 2014). Periodicals like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* have reported extensively on this topic in the past few years, spreading the message that Asian Americans are victims of reverse discrimination as a consequence of policies that consider race, similar to complaints made by White students in the past (Fischer & Massey, 2007). Some authors suggest that Asian American students are held to an even higher standard than White students in the college admissions process resulting in a phenomenon that Kang (1996) called negative action, whereby White students with less competitive academic records are admitted over Asian American students. Espenshade and Radford (2009) published a study indicating that Asian American
students had to score at least 140 points higher on the SAT than their White peers to be admitted to an elite college or university. In other words, this study reported that a White student with a 1290 would be just as competitive as an Asian American student with a 1430 when being evaluated based on SAT scores. Recently, several Asian American organizations filed federal complaints contending that Harvard University and other Ivy Leagues schools discriminate against Asian American applicants (Schmidt, 2015). Collectively, these claims insinuate that Asian American students are embarking on their college searches with the belief that it may be biased against them (Supiano, 2012). For students who perceive themselves as disadvantaged because of their race, the college admissions process is often laden with stress and anxiety, compelling some to file formal complaints of discrimination (Kennedy, 2013). Thus, the legal ramifications of race-conscious practices and affirmative action in higher education are salient for Asian Americans, and are understood and internalized on a personal level for many students.

**Asian American Students and Racial Microaggressions**

Although race-conscious admissions policies have generated a great deal of media attention, the racial oppression that Asian American students encounter on campuses post-matriculation is also troubling. Studies indicate a tendency for racism against Asian Americans to be ambiguous, concealed, and indirect (Ong et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2009). Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2009) use the term microaggressions to classify this type of racism, defined as everyday insults, whether intentional or unintentional, based upon a person’s race or marginalized group membership. Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Equilin (2007) outlined three categories of microaggressions: microassaults (blatant racial denigration), microinvalidations (acts that discredit the experiences of a minority group), and microinsults (acts or comments that belittle or minimize racial heritage). Microaggressions often target
individuals, but they can also stigmatize entire groups and erect damaging hierarchies of power within society.

Ong et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative investigation to gauge the prevalence of microaggressions among a sample of 152 Asian American college freshmen. They analyzed self-reported data collected in a series of diary entries logged by participants each evening during a two-week period. Results indicated that 78% of students in the sample experienced at least one microaggression during the course of the study. Examples of microaggressions reported by participants included hearing comments that all Asians look alike or are good at math and science, being assumed to not speak English competently, or being teased for using chopsticks. Another significant finding of this investigation was that the impact of microaggressions appeared to be cumulative, suggesting that the experience of several small incidents over time compounded and wore away at the well-being of Asian American students. This finding is troubling, given the inclination of Asian American students to continually dismiss microaggressions without taking the time to process them mentally, discuss them with others, or report them to the authorities (Alvarez et al., 2006). A qualitative study by Sue and colleagues (2009) discovered that it is often close contacts, like teachers or friends, that initiate microaggressions toward Asian Americans. As a result, participants in this study reported feeling “trapped, invisible, and unrecognized” (p. 97) by individuals that supposedly knew them well. The participants recognized that microaggressions were often committed unintentionally, yet that did not decrease the emotional pain that students felt as they dealt with their own reactions to the acts or comments.

The psychological impact of racism is well documented (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Ong et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2009), but what are the ramifications of racism on the academic performance of
Asian American students? There is some evidence that perceived racism is associated with higher dropout rates, lower grades, and decreased academic engagement for Latino and African American students (Martinez et al., 2004; Smalls et al., 2007). Building on this research, Yoo and Castro (2011) explored the linkage between racism and academic performance for a sample of 155 Asian American college students using quantitative data from a questionnaire and self-reported grade point averages. Yoo and Castro failed to find a significant relationship between racism and academic performance within their aggregate sample, though they did uncover some notable trends when examining the students born in the United States and the students born abroad separately. In this study, perceived racism seemed to decrease academic performance for foreign-born participants and increase academic performance for US-born participants. While this was an exploratory analysis, Yoo and Castro’s findings point to the possibility that US-born students become more invested in their academic success when they sense racism as prohibiting advancement in other aspects of their lives. Sue and Okazaki (1990) coined the term relative functionalism to explain the emphasis that Asian Americans put on education as a reaction to discrimination in non-educational areas. Yoo and Castro surmised that stereotype confirmation among US-born participants might also account for their findings that racism predicted higher academic performance and that language proficiency might add to the academic challenges experienced by foreign-born participants.

**Asian American Students and Racial Stereotypes**

One of the ways that microaggressions are conveyed is through racialized stereotypes (Ong et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2009). There are several racialized stereotypes that are applied to Asian American students, the most prominent being the notion that Asian Americans are a model minority. William Petersen (1966) introduced the term model minority in the 1960s when *The
New York Times Magazine published his article touting the success of Japanese Americans. In this piece, Petersen described Japanese Americans as follows: “this is a minority that has risen above the end of the wartime camps, this is a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism…the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native born whites” (p. 21). Other news sources followed suit and began recognizing Chinese Americans (“Success Story of One Minority Group,” 1966) and Korean Americans (“Korean Americans,” 1971) for similar accomplishments. The popular media has continued to perpetuate the model minority stereotype over time, with articles in widely read magazines such as Time calling Asian Americans “whiz kids” (Brand, Hull, Park, & Willwert, 1987) and books like Amy Chua’s (2011) controversial Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother chronicling how the author raised her daughters with an intense focus on academic success.

The model minority stereotype has resulted in the neglect of Asian American students within the research agenda, with many scholars and practitioners assuming that Asian Americans are doing exceptionally well, academically and professionally (Museus & Kiang, 2009). That said, some studies have scrutinized the role of the model minority stereotype in the lives of Asian American students and sought to undo its grip on society (Li, 2005; Tran & Birman, 2010; Trytten et al., 2012; Suzuki, 2002). Suzuki, along with Museus and Kiang, referenced the vast diversity within the population as a rationale for rejecting the model minority stereotype. They claimed that misleading data and reporting strategies distort the socioeconomic status and academic performance of Asian American subgroups, giving the illusion that Asian Americans are doing significantly better than other racial groups. In a mixed methods study on a sample of engineering students, Trytten, Lowe, and Walden (2012) did not find any differences between the academic records of Asian American students and students of other races. During the
interview phase of the study, however, Asian American participants shared that the model minority stereotype was a commonly held belief on their campus with many students offering examples of how it had been applied to them, oftentimes unfairly, in academic settings.

The model minority stereotype is especially harmful to underachieving Asian American students (Li, 2005; Yeh, 2002). Using a case study approach, Li (2005) explored the damaging effects of the model minority stereotype for Asian American students that are struggling academically. Li’s research demonstrated how the model minority stereotype leads to a “blaming the victims” (Li 2005, p. 69) perspective on Asian American students who do not meet expectations to achieve, shifting responsibility from schools to the students themselves. Under the assumption that all Asian Americans possess the qualities and conditions necessary for success, those that lag behind are presumed to be at fault for their underachievement. Equally concerning is Yeh’s (2002) research that found academically at-risk Asian American students are ignored or unidentified because of the model minority stereotype. This leaves students without access to the resources and support they need to develop and succeed as learners.

Other studies related to the model minority stereotype have examined non-academic aspects of the Asian American student experience (Ying et al., 2001; Zhang, 2010). Ying, Lee, Tsai, Hung, Lin, and Wan (2001) surveyed 642 undergraduate students and determined that Asian Americans have lower levels of cross-cultural engagement and overall physical and psychological well-being than students from other racial groups in the sample. In a similar vein, Zhang (2010) found that Asian Americans are often left out in social settings and non-Asian Americans are unlikely to initiate relationships with them. Zhang attributed these negative outcomes to the public’s perception that Asian Americans are “nerdy” (p. 20) and only care about academics, making them less desirable as friendship partners. Considering psychological
and social adjustment patterns alongside academic performance is important to making sense of the time Asian Americans spend in college.

Eliminating racial stereotypes is essential to establishing supportive college and university campuses for Asian American students. In addition to the model minority stereotype, Asian Americans also find themselves as fighting the perfidious foreigner label (Suzuki, 2002) that classifies all Asians as outsiders with no regard for their actual immigration status or length of time spent in the United States. The effect of this stereotype creates rifts among Asian Americans, with more assimilated Asian Americans attempting to distance themselves from their less assimilated counterparts to gain social status and avoid negative stereotyping (Pyke & Dang, 2003). Other stereotypes are gender-based, such as the emasculation of Asian American males and the exoticization of Asian American females (Museus, 2014). These stereotypes can be detrimental to the psyche of Asian American students and have spillover effects on other aspects of the college experience.

**Summary**

In review, this body of research underscores the persistent and damaging impact of racism for Asian Americans, including the college student population. Tracing back to immigration patterns and legislation that limited the rights of the first Asian settlers in the United States, the tendency to view Asian Americans as foreigners or outsiders has persisted. Racism towards Asian Americans has taken various forms, ranging from violent murder to subtle stereotyping. In addition, race is an important factor in the college admissions process and trends suggest that Asian Americans may be disadvantaged due to the perceived saturation of elite schools. This mistreatment offers support for the development of a critical race discourse
that acknowledges and includes Asian Americans, calling attention to the instances in which
Asian American students experience adversity related to race in higher education.

**The Role of Identity Development for Asian American College Students**

This section discusses identity development for Asian American students, beginning with
a general discussion of how college students explore identity and continuing with a synthesis of
what identity development entails for Asian American students in particular.

**Exploring Identity in College**

College is a time when many students explore and develop their identities (Chickering,
1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012). Race, ethnicity, culture,
gender, sexual orientation, professional goals, linguistic preferences, religion, and physical
appearance are some of the elements comprising identity development for college students.

Many colleges and universities offer opportunities for students to participate in affinity groups
generated towards the development and celebration of ethnic and racial identity (Museus, 2008).

According to Accapadi (2012), “the exploration of ethnic and racial identity plays a significant
role in the holistic identity formation process for people of color” (p. 64). Maramba and
Velasquez (2012) found that nurturing identity development had both cognitive and non-
cognitive benefits for students of color. Their qualitative study demonstrated that many students
considered their ethnic and racial identities for the first time as college students when they
became more independent from their families. When students in this sample spent time
cultivating their ethnic and racial identities, they reported a greater sense of belonging, improved
critical thinking and problem solving skills, and motivation to achieve. These findings suggest
that facilitating ethnic and racial development may improve the college experiences for minority
students and yield benefits on the individual and campus levels by promoting growth, satisfaction, and inclusivity.

Theories of Asian American Identity Development

Several scholars have formulated theories on identity development, some specific to Asian American college students (Kodama et al., 2002; Kim, 2001). These models attempt to integrate traditional college student development theory (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) with what is believed to be unique for Asian Americans. For example, special consideration is given to the cultural tensions Asian American students feel as they reconcile the demands of their family and home culture with those of mainstream society. The ways in which Asian Americans define purpose may also be culturally specific, as are attitudes towards familial obligations and developing independence (Kodama et al., 2002). Kim (2001) proposed another way to think about Asian American identity, which is as a series of stages through which individuals develop feelings and political awareness for their ethnic background in contrast to dominant society with the final outcome being comfort and reconciliation with both. Finally, the racial oppression that Asian Americans have experienced throughout history has psychological and sociological consequences on the development of identity (Museus, 2014). Its impact varies significantly depending on individual circumstances and contexts, but is undeniably a defining characteristic of the Asian American collective consciousness.

Despite growing interest in understanding its particularities, Asian American identity development remains a puzzling subject (Alvarez, 2002). Research on Asian American college students yields diverging results when identity is concerned. Some students exhibit immense pride in their heritage, while others deliberately reject and distance themselves from their Asian roots (Pyke & Dang, 2003), and still more report having mixed or evolving feelings about

**Asian American Cultural Values and Family**

As fundamental aspects of identity development, the role of cultural values and the significance of family are particularly salient to the educational experiences of Asian American students (Kodama et al., 2002). Cultural values, which Smith and Bond (as cited in Kim & Omizo, 2005) define as generalizations about what a group finds desirable, must be considered with caution given the diversity of the Asian American population (Kim, 2009). Some scholars have attempted to learn more about values common to Asian Americans and how value adherence relates to the college experience (Kim & Omizo, 2005; Kim et al., 2001; Wong et al., 2010). This research suggests that there are certain values associated with Asian culture and that levels of adherence to these values may have consequences for students’ college experiences. A quantitative study by Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, and Hong (2001) surveyed 570 Asian American college students from a variety of Asian ethnic subgroups to identify common cultural beliefs among respondents. Students in their sample differed somewhat in their adherence to and understanding of certain values. However, they found collectivism or an emphasis on group harmony over personal satisfaction, conformity to norms, control of emotions, filial piety, and family focus on achievement to be commonly held values across the subgroups. These values may be indicative of other trends, such as the tendency for students with a strong Asian value orientation to disengage and avoid seeking help when they encounter mental health problems (Wong et al., 2010). Conversely, Kim and Omizo (2005) determined that Asian American students that adhered more closely to European values were more likely to demonstrate higher
levels of cognitive flexibility and self-efficacy, signifying that more acculturated students may possess greater intrinsic motivation and a stronger ability to cope with academic challenges.

**Parental pressure to succeed.** Parenting practices are closely linked with academics for Asian American students, with excessive parental pressure to succeed being a common theme in the literature (Castro & Rice, 2003; Museus, 2013; Saw et al., 2013). Museus (2013) described how parental involvement creates both positive and negative pressure to succeed in a sample of Southeast Asian American college students. The expectation that they would go to college, instilled at a young age by their parents, was motivating and empowering for many of these students. That said, excessive parental pressure was found to be harmful, leaving “students feeling that they cannot please their parents and are doomed to fail, ultimately resulting in a diminution of motivation to succeed” (Museus, 2013, p. 730). Saw, Berenbaum, and Okazaki (2013) conducted a quantitative study that compared Asian American and White American college students on measures of personal standards and perceived parental expectations. The two groups were similar in their overall tendency to worry, but Asian American students were more likely to worry about academic and family matters. Specifically, Asian American students were concerned that they were not living up to their parents’ expectations to a greater extent than White students. This finding is corroborated by Castro and Rice’s (2003) research that linked high parental expectations with Asian American students’ focus on perfectionism, exhibited through fear of making mistakes and self-doubt.

**Parental influence over career choice.** Parental pressure is also exacted during the process of choosing a college major and career path for Asian Americans (Dundes et al., 2009; Lee & Zhou, 2014; Okubo et al., 2007; Shen, 2015; Xie & Goyette, 2003). In research conducted by Dundes, Cho, and Kwak (2009), Asian American students placed greater priority
on prestige than happiness when compared to White students when choosing a college and academic major. Additionally, the Asian American participants in this study expressed feeling as though their parents were highly influential in their college decision-making process. Shen (2015) described the preponderance of culturally valued majors among Asian American families, further underscoring the tendency for Asian Americans to elect high-paying, prestigious jobs in the fields of math, science, and business at greater rates than their non-Asian peers. Several authors have attempted to explain these patterns. Sue and Okazaki (1990) claimed that a strong emphasis on academic and career success is a reaction to the idea that education is the only mechanism for upward mobility for Asian Americans. This belief leads to the espousal of a narrow success frame for Asian Americans, whereby achievement is strictly defined in terms of educational and professional advancement (Lee & Zhou, 2014). Lee and Zhou argued that the Asian American success frame has the potential to empower students to achieve, but that it disempowers those that lack the interest or academic skillset to succeed in culturally valued majors. In the worst cases, Asian Americans that fell outside of the success frame in Lee and Zhou’s study, despite being quite accomplished in their fields of choice, reported feeling like failures and as a result, distanced themselves from their families and co-ethnic peers.

**Acculturation**

The aforementioned examples of cultural values and parenting practices are mediated by what Castillo, Zahn, and Cano (2012) call the acculturation gap, which occurs in families when parents and children adapt at different rates to their host culture. Acculturation gaps are more pronounced between parents that were born and raised abroad and their children that have only experienced life in the United States. Immigrant status may also exacerbate the divide between parents and children when it comes to navigating choices like selecting a college or choosing a
major. Communication can be an issue for immigrant families, with linguistic preferences shifting from a native language to English more quickly for children when compared to parents. It is not unheard of for children and parents to lack a common language that both parties are proficient in, leading to language-based misunderstandings in conjunction with cultural dissonance.

**Mental Health**

Other studies have examined the potential influence of cultural values and parenting practices on extreme cases of mental health distress among Asian American students (Wong, Brownson, & Schwing, 2011; Wong, Koo, et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2014). Wong, Koo, Tran, Chiu, and Mok (2011) revealed that Asian American students reported higher levels of suicide ideation, or thoughts about suicide, than other racial groups. Asian American students in their sample, mostly from East Asian subgroups, associated suicide ideation with unfulfilled expectations related to family, peers, and society. In addition to family pressure, Wong, Brownson, and Schwing (2011) suggested that academic difficulties and financial strains contributed to suicide ideation for Asian American students. Intense feelings of shame that accompany failure or disappointment of family may also lead thoughts of self-harm. According to Wong, Kim, Nguyen, Cheng, and Saw (2014), shame can “trigger a desire for suicide as an expression of self-punishment for the perceived harm caused to their families” (p. 11). The findings of these studies are unsettling for higher education administrators and personnel working directly with Asian American students. Previous research has shown that Asian Americans are often reluctant to seek help or utilize counseling services (Kim, 2009; Kim & Lee, 2013), meaning that students may be grappling with these issues alone and without adequate support from their institutions. The consequences of not addressing problems of this nature may
have severe implications for students’ psychological health, as well as their ability to persist through their academic programs.

Summary

Identity development is multifaceted for Asian American college students, with the influence of cultural values and parental pressure as key components to this process. While there is substantial variation from person to person, many Asian American students experience anxiety about developing individual identities and making decisions that are at odds with family expectations. This has substantial impact in areas such as choice of academic major or career path, where it is common for Asian American parents to have a narrow view of what is acceptable. Depending on the situation, navigating these challenging conditions may become overwhelming and in the worst cases may contribute to mental health problems. It is vital that individuals working with Asian American college students be aware of these issues and offer support that is sensitive to their circumstances.

The College Experience for Asian American Students

This section reviews literature on what the college experience is like for Asian American students. The significance of campus racial climate is established with examples specific to Asian Americans and strategies for improving their relationships with peers, faculty, and staff.

Campus Racial Climate and Diversity

The campus environment is an important aspect of the college experience, especially for racial minority students (Museus & Truong, 2009). While many measures of the college experience focus on academics, studying the role of the campus environment as a whole captures a broader set of social, emotional, and relational factors. Campus racial climate focuses on those aspects of an institutional environment that reflect the presence of diversity and community
members’ attitudes and behaviors towards demographic differences (Hurtado et al., 1998). Several studies have demonstrated that dissatisfaction with campus racial climate can negatively influence a range of outcomes such as persistence, sense of belonging, and overall satisfaction (Ancis et al., 2000; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Gloria & Ho, 2003; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Wells & Horn, 2015). Other research that includes Asian Americans has been inconclusive, with some studies indicating relative satisfaction (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and others reporting lower levels of adjustment and well-being (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Johnston & Yeung, 2014; Kuh, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Despite the mixed findings, these studies point to stress associated with being a racial minority and incidents of racism or discrimination as causes of dissatisfaction.

Asian Americans frequently report experiencing racial hostility on their campuses (Johnston & Yeung, 2014; Liu, 2009; Museus & Truong, 2009; Wei et al., 2011). In a personal narrative, Liu (2009) wrote about seeing a fellow UCLA student wearing a jacket that refashioned UCLA to read “University of Caucasians Lost among Asians” (p. 1) walking around campus. Like many others, Liu initially found the jacket amusing, but later interpreted it as an expression of racial hostility. Similarly, Duke University made headlines when a fraternity hosted an anti-Asian party at which guests dressed up in stereotypical Asian costumes (Parke, 2013), enflaming Asian American student organizations and resulting in the fraternity’s suspension. In addition to public displays of racial hostility, students describe feeling marginalized and misunderstood on their campuses not only by their peers, but also by faculty and staff (Lagdameo, Lee, Nguyen, Liang, Lee, Kodama, & McEwen, 2002). In a survey of White student services practitioners, Liang and Sedlacek (2003) found that most participants exhibited perceptions of Asian American students based on racialized stereotypes, such as the
presumption that Asian American students excel at technical subjects. Therefore, improving campus racial climate for Asian Americans requires commitment from all members of the community: students, administrators, faculty, and staff.

**Recommendations for Personnel that Work with Asian American College Students**

Faculty and staff who work with Asian American students within institutions of higher education often lack credible sources of information for improving their approach to serving this growing population (Museus & Kiang, 2009). As a result, misconceptions and bias abound. To address this void, some researchers have identified strategies for working effectively with Asian American college students (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Kim et al., 2009; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Museus and Neville (2012) advocated for giving racial minority students, including Asian Americans, access to social capital as a means to foster conditions for success. They found that faculty and staff who shared common ground with students, took a holistic approach to working with students, humanized the college experience by showing genuine care and concern for students, and offered proactive support were most influential for racial minority students. In a separate study, Museus and Ravello (2010) highlighted the importance of academic advisors. According to Museus and Ravello, advising can positively affect persistence and graduation, making it a worthwhile focus for higher education administrators who allocate funding for student support projects. This study echoed the need for intrusive and multifaceted strategies for working with racial minority students, which may be additionally important for those students who are reluctant to ask for help or seek out advice from faculty and staff members.

Kim, Chang, and Park (2009) argued that “there are few efforts that target greater academic and nonacademic engagement for Asian American students, and subsequently, those
students are considered by some to be ‘underserved’ in the student affairs arena” (p. 215). These authors utilized data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program to show that Asian American students tended to have fewer and lower quality interactions with faculty than students from other racial groups. This insinuates that Asian Americans may be missing out on an important aspect of their college experiences. A study by Gloria and Ho (2003) demonstrated that peer mentoring programs may be one way to engage Asian American students. Their study explored the environmental, social, and psychological experiences of Asian American students and found that social support variables were most significantly linked with academic persistence. Having peers that students identify with and trust can have a powerful impact on self-confidence and motivation to succeed.

Suzuki (2002) recommended that colleges and universities conduct professional development for faculty and staff on issues related to diversity, multiculturalism, and working with racial minority students. He asserted that these efforts should be continuous and ongoing to encourage changes in attitudes and behaviors to take hold among participants. For instance, Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, and Day (2009) explained that cultural barriers may prevent faculty and staff from adequately addressing students’ concerns, in turn discouraging Asian American students from taking full advantage of resources and support. Faculty and staff may unintentionally misinterpret Asian American students’ reliance on their parents when making decisions related to their academic plans or draw false conclusions about Asian American students’ language abilities. Professional development that increases awareness for these issues and gives faculty and staff strategies for assisting students is needed. In addition, Suzuki encouraged institutions to create taskforces that monitor racial harassment and find ways to deal with unreported incidents involving Asian American students on campus. Such committees have
the potential to positively influence campus racial climate, making a more constructive educational and social environment for Asian American students. Many scholars agree that learning from Asian American students directly is a necessary step in improving existing support strategies and inventing new ones (Lagdameo et al., 2002; Teranishi et al., 2009).

Summary

The college experience for Asian Americans is an amalgamation of several interrelated factors, academic and otherwise. For instance, campus racial climate often sets the tone for students’ psychological adjustment, which in turn can impact persistence and levels of satisfaction. The literature indicates that there are many things colleges and universities can do to support Asian American students and assuage the impact of racial hostility, starting with increased awareness and sensitivity towards the challenges Asian Americans encounter in college. Furthermore, campuses should cultivate ways for Asian American students to build positive and productive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers. These actions require institutions to acknowledge the challenges that Asian American students encounter during college and to commit to serving their unique needs in the classroom and beyond.

Conclusion

Given the substantial evidence that Asian American students have a unique perspective on the college experience and knowing that they are well represented on many campuses across the United States, it is important for scholars and practitioners to continue identifying ways to support Asian American students to ensure that they persist, graduate, and move on to productive careers. This literature review examined research related to Asian American college students and their experiences with race and racism, identity and identity development, and campus environments. The review highlighted the hardships that Asian Americans face despite the
incorrect, yet widespread, belief that they are a uniformly high achieving group. This misconception masks the diversity of backgrounds represented within the collection of ethnic subgroups that identify as Asian American. The literature reveals that Asian American college students are likely to confront challenges associated with race that make their college experience distinctive, particularly when they are forced to navigate tensions between familial and societal expectations. The need for a better understanding of Asian Americans in higher education is a theme that emerged from each strand of literature, offering support for studies that investigate the nuances of the Asian American college student experience.

The next chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of this study’s research design and procedures.

Chapter Three: Research Design

This study explored the individual experiences of Asian American undergraduate students that encounter significant academic setbacks while in college. The following chapter describes the study’s research design and provides support for the researcher’s methodological choices. In the first part of the chapter, the research approach is explained. The second part of the chapter focuses on the procedural elements of the project, offering a detailed account of how this study was conducted including a discussion of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, the researcher’s positionality, and possible limitations.

Research Question

The central research question driving this study was: What does encountering academic difficulty mean to certain Asian American students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a highly selective, private, research university? A sub-goal of this study was to collect data that illuminates the importance of internal and external pressures for participants as they make sense
of their academic challenges. This investigation utilized Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee’s (2002) Asian American psychosocial student development model as a framework, which takes into account the interaction of an individual’s Asian family culture and Western societal norms on identity and sense of purpose as they relate to navigating college.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to understanding the research problem. According to Elliot, Fisher, and Rennie (1999), “the aim of qualitative research is to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage, and live through situations” (p. 216). Qualitative methodology focuses on exploring, rather than explaining, a problem (Creswell, 2012). As such, it is best suited for responding to *how* or *what* questions. Other features of qualitative research include the importance of learning from participants, collecting data over a period of time, and emphasizing details about the contexts within which participants exist. In doing these things, qualitative research seeks to find and reveal meaning within people’s lived experiences from which connections can be made to the social world and practice (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). By paying close attention to the natural settings in which events and processes occur, it is possible to uncover the subtleties and nuances of phenomena through qualitative inquiry. Therefore, qualitative studies hold tremendous explanatory power and possess an authenticity that often has a unique and meaningful impact on readers.

Qualitative methods were determined to be the most compatible with the research goals of this study. First and foremost, the purpose of this study was to understand the essence of an experience and meaning making process, rather than trying to measure variables or test a theory (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002). With that in mind, participants were recruited that could speak
specifically to the phenomenon under investigation. It was not assumed or expected that the accounts of these participants are generalizable to the population at large, but what was learned may indeed be insightful and applicable to others that share in their experience of the phenomenon or that come from similar contexts. Qualitative methods also allowed the researcher to play an active role in research process. This required the researcher to be mindful and vigilant of how personal biases influence interpretation, but allowed for the co-construction of meaning through interaction with participants (Pascal, Johnson, Dore, & Trainor, 2010).

Given the flexibility and variability of qualitative inquiry, maintaining quality controls throughout the research process was essential. Unlike quantitative research that often adheres to numbers-based measures of quality, qualitative research is less amenable to straightforward objective criteria. In response, several scholars have proposed ways of evaluating quality for qualitative researchers (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Gergen, 2014; Roulston, 2010; Seale, 1999; Tracy, 2010). The importance of identifying a topic that furthers understanding about a relevant issue, upholding standards of rigor in research design and execution, and providing credible data are common themes that have emerged from these discussions. In Tracy’s (2010) view, quality in qualitative research rests on achieving meaningful coherence. Meaningful coherence is the proper alignment of a study’s purpose with the methodological choices and theoretical frameworks, as well as the effective integration of appropriate and compelling literature. This echoes Roulston’s (2010) claim that quality is demonstrated differently depending on a researcher’s theoretical orientations. Again, the alignment of a study’s multiple components is key to producing quality work and the researcher is held responsible for being explicit and transparent about explaining his or her choices throughout the research process.
This study demonstrated quality by meeting its purpose of investigating how Asian American college students make sense of academic difficulties through the lens of an appropriate theoretical framework and methodological decisions that allowed for a thorough exploration of the problem. The study’s philosophical underpinnings and research design are described in the sub-sections that follow, along with a statement about the researcher’s potential biases and the measures adopted to enhance credibility.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

From a philosophical perspective, this study aligns most strongly the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). First and foremost, constructivists acknowledge the existence of multiple realities. They argue that reality is self-defined, rather than relying on universal truths to explain how individuals make sense of their lived experiences.

Constructivism also places value on the interactive process that occurs between the researcher and the participant as they co-construct insights and meaning through dialogue and reflection. The role of the researcher is critical in this type of qualitative research, namely in the interpretation of a participant’s account and the conclusions drawn from the data (Creswell, 2013). A secondary philosophical influence on this work is critical theory, which pairs the empowerment of the oppressed and the disruption of the status quo with the aim of transforming institutions, interactions, and broader social contexts (Parker, 2015). Consonant with critical theory, this study’s purpose exudes a tone of advocacy and encouragement, as it desires to call attention to student voices that are often silenced or ignored.

**Methodology**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the methodological approach selected for this study. The purpose of IPA is to explore how individuals make sense of their
lived experiences through a close examination and interpretation of personal accounts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Given its focus on the meaning that individuals attribute to experiences and real world contexts (Larkin & Thompson, 2011), IPA was a suitable choice for the investigation of the research question at hand.

IPA was introduced in the mid-1990s with a paper written by Jonathon Smith that was published in a psychology journal (Smith et al., 2009). Smith’s manuscript advocated for the expansion of traditional psychological research to include qualitative and experiential dimensions, marking a shift away from the nearly exclusive use of quantitative inquiry within the field. After gaining momentum in the realms of psychology and the health sciences, IPA has become well regarded within the disciplines of counseling and clinical psychology, as well as the social sciences. IPA is characterized by its focus on applied work and its grounding in three theoretical sources: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Each source will be discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is the study of being and experience with philosophical origins tracing back to Socrates and Aristotle (Shosha, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) describe phenomenology as “thinking about what the experience of being human is like, in all of its various aspects, but especially in terms of the things which matter to us, and which constitute our lived world” (p. 11). As a research approach, phenomenology requires the identification of a phenomenon – such as being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or facing a life transition – and recruiting participants that have first-hand knowledge of the experience to share their accounts (Creswell, 2013). The researcher utilizes the participants’ accounts to explore the essence of the phenomenon, including what was experienced and how each individual
experienced it. The experiential reports gleaned from participants serve as evidence in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology can be sub-divided into two distinct, yet overlapping, approaches: descriptive and interpretative (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Shosha, 2012). Descriptive phenomenology is commonly associated with Husserl, a German philosopher. Husserl argued for the detailed examination of experiences in the natural ways in which they occur (Smith et al., 2007). Referred to as transcendental phenomenology, Husserl also placed importance on finding the essential and universal elements of an experience that would ultimately transcend our assumptions about the world. For Husserl, this required bracketing (also known as epoché), or the setting aside of one’s biases and preconceptions in order to appreciate the true substance of a phenomenon. Although several aspects of IPA flow from Husserl’s descriptive approach, his most enduring contribution was the value he placed on reflection as a critical process for the researcher and participant alike.

Heidegger, a student of Husserl’s, proposed an approach to phenomenology that was less theoretical and more interpretative and existential (Smith et al., 2009). In contrast to Husserl, Heidegger was interested in understanding over pure description and as a result, his approach explored consciousness and worldliness (Dowling, 2007). Intersubjectivity, or “the shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 17), is an important concept to Heidegger’s phenomenology. He also used the phrase “being-in-the-world” to express the idea that experiences do not occur in isolation, but are always in the context of something that is intertwined with the meaning-making process. The importance of perspective and the complexity of these relationships are closely related to Heidegger’s interpretative stance, also known as hermeneutics, which is the second theoretical basis for IPA.
Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, is essential to IPA.

Hermeneutical theorists explain the methods and purpose of interpretation, and grapple with the question of whether it is possible to discover the original meaning of a text (Smith et al., 2009). As mentioned, Heidegger’s work is closely linked with hermeneutics. His emphasis on engaging with the world entails a careful examination of appearances and the uncovering of aspects of a phenomenon that may be hidden at first glance. Allowing what is hidden to emerge and being a facilitator of that process is a critical function of the researcher.

Although applied widely to texts of various genres ranging from Biblical passages to historical documents, hermeneutics has a specific role within IPA. Smith et al. (2009) describe the act of interpretation as “detective work” (p. 35) in which the IPA researcher is seeking to bring forth the phenomenon, much as Heidegger encouraged, and then make sense of it during the analysis phase. This requires moving beyond the text and conducting multiples layers of interpretation to address the complexity of lived experiences and their contexts (Smith, 2004). Even more involved and circuitous is the concept of a double hermeneutic. Given the active role of the IPA researcher, the interpretation process becomes a two-stage endeavor in which the participant is making sense of their experiences and the researcher is making sense of the participant’s sense-making efforts (Smith & Eatough, 2007). This can be accomplished through a blend of empathetic and critical hermeneutics. Empathetic hermeneutics involves placing oneself fully in the role of the participant and attempting to see the world through their eyes. To the contrary, critical hermeneutics requires separating oneself from the participant and interrogating their experience from an outsider’s perspective. In combination, the “totality of the person” (Smith & Eatough, 2007, p. 36) is likely to surface, contributing to a rich and multidimensional interpretation of the phenomenon.
**Idiography.** Finally, IPA is idiographic in its focus on the particular. This is demonstrated by IPA researchers through attention to detail in terms of analysis and commitment to understanding particular phenomena, along with the specificities of their accompanying perspectives and contexts (Smith et al., 2009). For example, IPA research is based upon the detailed analysis of cases, individually and in a cross-case format. This case-by-case approach allows for the pulling apart of details such that they can be examined in the context of the individual case and then in comparison to other cases. Ultimately, the IPA researcher is called upon to produce a balanced narrative that preserves the intricacies of an individual case while highlighting superordinate themes that run across the multiple accounts collected for a study. IPA research, through its case study format, illuminates the ways in which experience is both individualized and communal. Smith (2004) eloquently captured this duality and the essence of IPA’s idiographic lens when he wrote: “the very detail of the individual brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity” (p. 43).

**Rationale for IPA**

IPA research is dedicated to understanding how individuals attribute meaning to their lived experiences by conducting a detailed analysis of their personal accounts (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the outcome of an IPA study is two-fold: to give voice to participants by capturing the essence of their stories and to make sense of their experiences by thoughtfully and systematically sharing an interpretation of the content (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Moreover, the flexibility of IPA research allows for themes and ideas to emerge during analysis, adding to the authenticity and utility of the findings (Smith, 2004).

This study, an exploration of Asian American college students that encounter academic difficulties, aligned well with IPA research. First of all, Larkin and Thompson (2011) state that
IPA research must revolve around a topic that matters to the participants. In this case, the experience of an academic setback was selected as the focal topic. Given the pressures placed on Asian American students to be academically successful by their families and society (Kodama et al., 2002; Lee & Zhou, 2014, Li, 2005; Shen, 2015), it is likely that for many students an academic setback would be a significant matter. It follows that participants should have valuable insights to share about their experiences, yielding a robust body of evidence to be analyzed.

Next, IPA provides a platform for uplifting the voices and perspectives of participants. This is important to the researcher’s goal of calling attention to the experiences of Asian American college students that struggle academically and is also consistent with the critical race theory agenda that is a motivating force for this study. Finally, a great deal stands to be learned from looking at several individual cases of students that have encountered an academic setback and searching for the themes that arise from their collective experiences. At its core, the experience is individualized and nested with a particular context that encompasses multiple factors, including but not limited to the student’s family circumstances, immigration status, sources of support, and future aspirations. Yet, at the same time, the commonalities that are shared by all participants can be used to inform practice and contribute to a shift in the way Asian American college students as a whole are perceived and treated.

**Participants**

IPA research is generally conducted using a sample of individuals that can speak profoundly about the research topic (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007). This means that IPA samples tend to be small and homogeneous. This study included face-to-face interviews with eight individuals that have experienced an academic setback while enrolled full-time in an undergraduate program of study. For the purposes of this study, an academic setback
is defined as failing a course required for one’s major or not being allowed to progress in one’s major for an academic reason. Progression requirements are determined by the policies prescribed for each participant’s academic program.

**Sample characteristics.** Several other criteria were established to achieve a relatively homogeneous sample. Smith et al. (2009) state that a uniform sample is desirable for IPA research in that it allows for a discussion of within group similarities and differences in the context of the problem. In that vein, this study recruited undergraduate college student participants that identify as Asian American and have East Asian ancestry. East Asian countries include China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Accapadi, 2012). Previous research on value adherence by Kim et al. (2001) suggests that individuals from an East Asian background may share some cultural similarities that are less common to other subgroups of Asian Americans, such as South Asians or Southeast Asians. Participants were either first or second generation Asian Americans, meaning that their parents or grandparents must have immigrated to the United States and have East Asian ancestry. Knowing that acculturation tends to be associated with the number of generations a person or their family have lived in a particular country (Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012), the researcher decided to limit the sample to students that are not more than one generation apart in terms of immigration status. Participants that were born in an East Asian country and immigrated to the United States are intentionally not included due to their more limited exposure to the United States and the potential for lower levels of English language proficiency. Lastly, this study recruited participants that were pursuing careers in the health sciences at the time they experienced their academic difficulty. Several studies have discussed the tendency for Asian American parents to encourage their children to enter college majors that will lead to high paying, stable, and socially prestigious careers (Dundes, Cho, & Kwak, 2009;
Lee & Zhou, 2014; Poon, 2014; Shen, 2015). Consequently, Asian American families often endorse careers in the health sciences whether or not their children display intrinsic talent or interest in the field. Circumstances that may cause a student to question their major, like failing a course, are often exceptionally challenging when his or her parents are not willing to consider a different career path. The researcher decided to narrow the sample to students in health science majors to further explore this dynamic and to reduce program-based variability. Participants were of a traditional undergraduate college age, approximately 20 to 23 years old, and had completed at least two years of study in their major by the time they experienced their academic difficulty. This ensured that the participants had invested a substantial amount of time and energy into their fields of study by the time they experienced the setback.

**Sampling procedures and participant recruitment.** Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, which is the practice of selecting participants that are able to speak to and inform the research question (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling is used to produce a group of participants that have all experienced a particular phenomenon and is therefore a common practice within IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). Participant recruitment involved an academic advising office from the research site that is responsible for monitoring student progression and compliance with academic standards. The academic advising office identified Asian American students that were enrolled in a health professions major and had completed at least two years of study in their major. A student was included if they were listed as Asian according to data provided by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and also claimed United States citizenship. All non-United States citizens and green card holders were excluded. The academic advising office emailed the individuals in the pool of possible participants with a brief description of the study and requested that anyone interested in learning more about the
study email the researcher directly. A follow up message was sent to remind the students of the study one week later. In accordance with the academic advising office’s commitment to maintaining student privacy, the list of potential participants did not include course grade information. Potential participants that expressed interest in the study were asked to self-disclose if they met the research criteria of having experienced an academic setback per the definition set forth for this study, if they were of East Asian heritage, and if they considered themselves first or second generation immigrants. After the researcher verified eligibility, individuals were invited to participate and were given additional information about involvement in the study. During the recruitment period of three weeks, 23 students emailed the researcher to inquire about participating. Fifteen were excluded for not meeting the criteria, yielding eight eligible and willing participants. The recruitment messages are available in Appendices B, C, and D.

**Research site.** The research site selected for this study is a private research institution in the Northeast region of the United States. According to *US News & World Report* (2014), the research site is considered a “most selective” school and was ranked in the top fifty among national universities. With an acceptance rate of about 32%, the school upholds rigorous standards for admission and attracts a highly talented pool of applicants each year. This type of institution was sought out for this study in order find participants who were accustomed to being academically successful, as demonstrated by their ability to be admitted to the school. It is presumed that experiencing an academic setback is likely to be of significance to participants that fit this profile, aligning with the goals of IPA research.

**Participant profiles.** Purposeful sampling procedures at the research site yielded eight participants that met the study’s criteria and were interested in participating. A brief description
of each participant is provided below. All participants were enrolled in the university described in the research site section of this chapter at the time the data were collected.

**Participant 1 – Marvel.** Marvel was in his fifth year of the pharmacy program at the time of the interviews. He is of Chinese and Korean ancestry and grew up in a predominantly Asian neighborhood of New York City. Marvel had failed three required courses for his major and was mandated to fall back one year as a result.

**Participant 2 – Tony.** Tony was in his fifth year of the pharmacy program at the time of the interviews. He is of Chinese ancestry and was raised in the suburbs of Boston. Tony failed one required course for his major and was able to repeat it the following summer, avoiding a need to fall back in the program.

**Participant 3 – Amy.** Amy was in the fifth year of the pharmacy program at the time of the interviews. She is of Chinese ancestry and was raised in the city of Boston. She attended a high school that had a large Asian American population. Amy failed one required course for her major and was allowed to progress in the program and repeat the course the following year without incurring a delay to her graduation.

**Participant 4 – Molly.** Molly was in the fourth year of the pharmacy program at the time of the interviews. Molly had previously been a health science major, but applied and switched to pharmacy in her third year. She is of Korean heritage and grew up in northern California. Molly failed two courses in the same semester and was required to drop back one year as a result.

**Participant 5 – Steve.** Steve was in his fifth year of study at the time of the interview. He spent three years as a pharmacy major before switching to the health science program, which was his major at the time of the interviews. He is of Chinese American heritage. He failed one required course, which he did not have to repeat because he opted to change majors.
Participant 6 – Kim.  Kim was in her fifth year of the pharmacy program at the time of interviews. She is of Chinese ancestry and was born in the United States, but also spent time living in a Southeast Asian country during her childhood. She attended high school in the United States. She failed one course, but was not required to fall back in the program.

Participant 7 – Joy.  Joy was in her sixth year of the pharmacy program at the time of the interviews. She was raised in a suburb of Boston and did not interact with many other Asian Americans during her childhood. Joy is of Chinese and Vietnamese ancestry. She failed two required courses for her major and was required to fall back one year in the program.

Participant 8 – Laura.  Laura was in her fifth year of the pharmacy program at the time of the interviews. She spent the majority of her childhood in two different suburbs of Boston and attended a predominantly White high school. Laura failed one required course for her major but was able to remediate without falling back. However, she elected to take a one semester medical leave for mental health reasons.

Procedures

The decision to use IPA as a methodology influenced each aspect of the research design, beginning with crafting a research question that honed in on the sense-making process of a major life event or phenomenon. The data collection and analysis procedures followed standard IPA research recommendations and are described in detail in the following sub-sections.

Data Collection

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in accordance with the local requirements, data were collected for this study in four phases. Three of the four phases were modeled after Seidman’s (2012) three-interview structure for qualitative researchers. All interviews were recorded with the permission of each participant using two digital recording
devices with one serving as a backup in case the primary device malfunctions. In phase one, the researcher established an interview protocol and conducted a pilot test. The protocol was structured enough to glean data relevant to the research question, yet flexible enough to allow insights and reflections to emerge organically during the course of the interview (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007). After the pilot test, the protocol was adjusted slightly to improve the specificity and flow of the questions. At the same time, participants were recruited and identified. In phase two, the researcher met with each participant for an initial interview. The purpose of this meeting was to describe the study in greater detail, answer questions, obtain informed consent (see Appendix E), gather biographical and other background information, and build rapport with the participants. Participants were asked to self-report details relating to their academic setback, such as the specific course they failed and their grade point average (see Appendix F). In phase three, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with each participant, lasting approximately one hour. The questions were open-ended, eliciting information about the participants’ encounter with the phenomenon (see Appendix G). Following recommendations by Smith et al. (2009), the researcher took on the role of an active listener and encouraged the participants to provide as many details as possible about their experiences and sense-making processes related to encountering and dealing with an academic setback. To prompt participants to elaborate on important points, the researcher asked relevant follow-up questions. The data were transcribed after each interview using an internet-based transcription service called Rev. In phase four, the researcher contacted each participant by email to provide the interview transcript and a vignette that summarized the essence of each interview as a form of member-checking (Creswell, 2013). The participants were invited to respond to the transcript and vignette to clarify, confirm, or disagree with the content. The researcher responded to any concerns
proposed by the participants related to the data. The participants had the choice of responding in writing, or arranging an additional meeting to review the material. Seven of the participants opted to respond in writing and one of the participants requested an in-person conversation.

All participants selected a pseudonym during the initial interview or gave the researcher permission to select a pseudonym on their behalf, which was used to protect identity during the research process (Creswell, 2013). The researcher maintained a password-protected file that documented participants’ actual names and their pseudonyms. All audio files and written documents containing data were stored electronically on the researcher’s personal computer. Files were backed up using an external storage device and in a secure data storage program online. Passwords and other security features were maximized. Any physical documents (field notes, consent forms, etc.) related to the research project were stored in a locked cabinet and the key was kept in the possession of the researcher. A master list of data sources was developed so that information could be retrieved easily, per Creswell’s (2013) recommendation.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed a five-step process based upon the strategy laid out by Smith et al. (2009). The steps were designed to allow the researcher to pay close attention to each case individually before considering cross-case themes and connections. That is, steps one through four of the data analysis process were completed for each individual case in isolation, allowing for a full analysis of a participant’s account before moving on to the next account. Step five, which deals with identifying superordinate, or overarching, themes did not begin until each individual case had been analyzed. The process as a whole was iterative and inductive (Larkin & Thompson, 2011), relying on the researcher to be reflective and in constant dialogue with the data. After the data were analyzed, the researcher deductively examined the emergent themes
and considered them in relationship to the Asian American psychosocial student development model (Kodama et al., 2002) to determine how the findings of this study are consistent with and divergent from existing theory.

**Step One.** Step one of the data analysis process involved the reading and re-reading of the interview transcript from the first participant interview (Smith et al., 2009). The goal of this step was to become immersed in the data and to focus on the participant while attempting to bracket, or set aside, any preconceived ideas or biases. During step one, the researcher listened to the recording of the interview to become reacquainted with the participant. Next, the researcher read and re-read the transcript, paying closer attention to the details each time, making an effort to “enter the participant’s world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82) and becoming familiar with the structure of the content. In addition, the researcher kept a reflective journal to record her thoughts and procedural decisions. Larkin and Thompson (2011), Shaw (2010), and Smith et al., (2009) suggest that keeping a reflective journal is a helpful strategy for authenticating the data analysis process. It is important to document thoughts related to the data in order to trace analytic and interpretative decisions, maintaining as much transparency throughout the process as possible.

**Step Two.** Step two involved the line-by-line analysis and initial coding of the data (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher made exploratory comments, dissecting the content and narrative flow of the interview and beginning to contemplate the implicit meaning behind the participant’s words. Specifically, the researcher wrote descriptive summaries and documented initial codes to capture of essence of what the participant said (Shaw, 2010). Following Shaw’s recommendation, descriptive summaries and initial codes were placed in the left-hand margin of the transcript. During this step, the researcher listened to and read each account with the goal of
discovering what matters to the participant and searching for a conceptual understanding of what the participant said during the interview (Smith et al., 2009). This involved paying close attention to how the participant used language as an expressive tool, considering elements of speech such as pauses, hesitation, volume, inflection, and others.

**Step Three.** The third step focused on making initial interpretations and identifying emergent themes within the interview by clustering the introductory codes from step two into bundles of information and insights that contain significance for the participant (Smith et al., 2009). This required searching for patterns, overlap, and connections amongst the notes taken during steps one and two, rather than relying exclusively on the transcript. The purpose of this step was to consider what is significant about what the participant is saying during each segment of the interview. Taking reflective notes was especially important during this phase, because it was essential for the researcher to be able to substantiate all interpretative claims with evidence in the data (Shaw, 2010).

**Step Four.** In the fourth step, the researcher looked for connections across the emergent themes in order to produce a structure that pointed to the most compelling parts of the interview. Shaw (2010) describes this step as “taking large amounts of raw data and then going through various stages of activity in order to reduce them into meaningful chunks” (p. 196). Since the analysis becomes increasingly more interpretative at this stage, thinking about the contextual and functional aspects of the data was particularly useful, as was considering how much weight the participant placed on certain comments (i.e. mentioning a topic multiple times or adjusting one’s speech to add emphasis). The researcher established final, or superordinate, themes based on an audit trail of descriptions and interpretations that emerged from the interview transcript, capturing the essence of the participant’s experiential account (see Appendix I). Steps one
through four were repeated for each participant until all interview transcripts had been fully analyzed. The researcher took care to begin each analysis with a fresh perspective, bracketing any assumptions derived from previous analysis.

**Step Five.** Once all interviews were analyzed individually, the fifth and final step of the data analysis process commenced. This step entailed looking for superordinate themes and patterns of meaning that ran across all of the cases in the study (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher searched for the shared experiences articulated by the participants and created a graphical representation of the overarching themes represented in the interviews (see Appendix H). In this phase, the researcher revisited Kodama et al.’s (2002) Asian American psychosocial student development theory to see how the themes that emerged in this study related to an existing framework. The theoretical framework was not used to explain the data collected in this study, but rather provided an entry point for the subsequent discussion of key findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

While it unlikely that a study of this nature would cause harm to participants, Creswell (2013) describes a variety of ethical issues that researchers should be mindful of during the research process to ensure the protection of human subjects, all of which were considered throughout this project. First, the researcher obtained approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board and complied with all guidelines related to human subjects. Measures were taken to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants, such as using pseudonyms, securing all electronic and physical data, and allowing the participants to select meeting times and locations that were convenient and comfortable for them. In addition, the researcher remained cognizant of issues like power imbalances and participant vulnerability that might surface during the interviews, given the sensitive subject matter of the conversations. The researcher gave
special attention to building trust and rapport with each participant to mediate these potential challenges and to establish a comfortable dynamic throughout the interviews.

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher took several measures to ensure trustworthiness throughout the data collection and analysis procedures. While the majority of the data for this study was gathered during in-depth interviews, additional data were collected during the initial interview and during the follow-up email phase. Thus, participants had the opportunity to share their experiences during three separate interactions and using at least two different mediums (face-to-face conversation and email). Using multiple sources of data helped to develop a comprehensive understanding of each participant’s perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Member-checking also occurred during the data collection phase when the researcher presented the interview transcript and a summarizing vignette to each participant. Feedback provided by participants was incorporated into subsequent drafts in order to achieve the most authentic representation of the participant’s views. The researcher included substantial detail about the participants, setting, and other relevant information so readers can make appropriate and informed decisions about transferability.

**Potential Research Bias**

The researcher’s interest in this topic is grounded in her identification as an Asian American and her role as a higher education administrator and former academic advisor. Being Asian American and living most of her life in predominantly White communities, the researcher has experienced racial microaggressions and has been stereotyped as a member of the model minority. In addition, the researcher spent several years working with a population of students that was heavily Asian American and thus developed an interest in this topic. As such, the
researcher is personally familiar with and professionally invested in supporting Asian American students and understanding the distinctiveness of their college experiences and identity development, particularly in light of expectations for academic success.

Machi and McEvoy (2012) point out that writers often hold preconceived ideas about their research based on their experiences, opinions, and attachments. Here, it is important to recognize that the researcher is sympathetic towards students who have difficulties in college and frustrated with their families, peers, and society at large for placing excessive pressure on them to live up to high expectations. Prior to conducting this study, the researcher worked at the research site. As such, she was familiar to the participants and in some cases, had background knowledge of their situations. To overcome potential bias, the researcher included extensive participant excerpts and carefully prepared an audit trail to focus on what the participants said and the meaning behind their accounts. In general, the researcher hoped to expand her knowledge of the topic and was committed to maintaining an open outlook towards perspectives that she had not yet considered through this project.

Limitations

There are three key limitations to this study. First of all, the generalizability of the findings may be constrained. Since participants were recruited that fit a specific profile, their experiences should not be understood as representing reality for all Asian Americans. Secondly, this study focused on participants admitted to a highly regarded university in order to explore the experience of an academic difficulty from the perspective of students that were accustomed to being academically successful, as indicated by their ability to be admitted to an institution with competitive admissions standards. The experiences of these participants may not be transferable to students at other types of schools, nor to students that have different academic backgrounds.
Finally, the participants differed in their level of comfort discussing their academic difficulties, as well as the extent to which they had personally reflected on their circumstances and future plans. The depth and richness of the interview data collected varied across participants, so the researcher had to interpret the weight and significance of the issues, examples, and emotions presented in certain cases when identifying superordinate and subordinate themes.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of Asian American college students that experience academic setbacks. IPA methodology was utilized to make sense of the participants’ accounts, as shared during in-depth interviews. The strength of IPA research resides in its ability to capture the meaning that individuals attribute to major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009) such that others can understand, appreciate, and support them and those in similar situations in more impactful ways. Standard IPA procedures were followed to collect and analyze data in a predominantly inductive manner. Deductive references to the Asian American psychosocial student development model (Kodama et al., 2002) were made only after the data have been analyzed. Given the active role of the researcher in qualitative research, and IPA in particular, precautions were taken to control for bias.

The next chapter describes the study’s findings, based on the careful analysis of the data collected from the participants.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Asian American college students make sense of academic difficulties while pursuing an undergraduate degree in the health professions at a highly selective, private, research university. Eight participants were interviewed for the study. The researcher explored the participants’ immediate reactions to an academic setback, as
well as their coping mechanisms and reflections. Participants were prompted to explain their reasons for pursuing a health professions major, providing valuable context for their accounts. The participants also addressed other topics related to how they perceived and responded to academic difficulties, such as the role of family pressure and the existence of racial stereotypes.

After analyzing the data, the researcher identified six superordinate themes and twelve subordinate themes. All eight participants made statements relating to each of the superordinate themes: Choosing a career path, Tolerating parental involvement in educational decision-making, Responding emotionally to failing a course, Coping with failing a course, Developing an identity as an Asian American college student, and Moving forward with purpose. The twelve subordinate themes represent clusters of supporting evidence for each superordinate theme for which at least half, and in most cases more than half, of the participants expressed comparable thoughts (see Appendix H). The superordinate and subordinate themes are introduced in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes and Sub-themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Choosing a career path</td>
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<td>Tolerating parental involvement in educational decision-making</td>
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<td>Responding emotionally to failing a course</td>
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<td>Coping with failing a course</td>
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<td>Developing an identity as an Asian American college student</td>
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<td>Moving forward with purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influence of family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental prioritization of academics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling disorientated and out of control</td>
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<td>Anxiety about telling parents</td>
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<td>Internalizing racial stereotypes</td>
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<td>Taking time to reflect</td>
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<td>Interest in field</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition of parental sacrifice and hardship</td>
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<td>Erosion of self-esteem</td>
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<td>Reevaluating future goals</td>
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<td>Negotiating Asian and mainstream culture</td>
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<td>Finding closure</td>
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Choosing a Career Path

The first superordinate theme, *Choosing a career path*, examined the reasons why each participant selected a college major in the health professions. This background information establishes a foundation for interpreting the meaning that participants associated with their career paths and highlights important commonalities across their accounts. Understanding the rationale behind this decision is critical to deciphering the feelings and attitudes that participants linked with their academic performance. None of the participants made the decision to pursue a major in the health professions entirely on their own, which may have contributed to their level of commitment to their programs and ways of responding to academic challenges. When choosing a college major, the participants tended to place more weight on practical and strategic considerations, rather than their individual strengths and aspirations. In the first subordinate theme, *Influence of family*, the participants articulated the role that immediate and extended family members played in their decisions to pursue health professions careers. In some instances, the participants reported that their family members were directly involved in the decision, while for others the involvement was more indirect. That said, several participants also expressed personal motivation and enthusiasm for the health professions as discussed in the second subordinate theme, *Interest in field*.

Seven of the participants were majoring in pharmacy at the time of the interview; the eighth participant started as a pharmacy major but switched to the health science major after completing three years of pharmacy. One of the pharmacy majors started as a health science major and later switched to pharmacy. The pharmacy program that the participants were enrolled in is a six-year clinical doctorate that students are admitted to directly from high school. After successful completion of the first five years of the program, students are awarded a pass-
through Bachelor of Science degree in Pharmacy Studies and then continue for an additional year of clinical rotations before receiving the Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) degree. The health science degree is an undergraduate program that prepares students to enter various fields in the health professions and is often used as a pathway towards licensure-based careers or working in public health.

**Influence of Family**

In their accounts, all eight participants stated that their immediate and extended family members played a part in their decision to pursue a career in the health professions. The influence of their families ranged from being direct and overt with some parents dictating the majors that their children were permitted to select, to being more indirect and subtle in the form of encouragement or guidance towards certain majors over others. Regardless, most participants did not see the decision as being entirely within their control. Marvel explained his choice to study pharmacy as a “joint decision” between him and his parents:

It was kind of a joint decision between my parents and I…When it came to deciding my college education my parents, I don’t want to say made an ultimatum but they kind of came to an agreement with me where they said if I went into a field that they agreed with they would cover all of my college costs.

Marvel’s parents endorsed a limited set of careers that required licensure, such as lawyer, doctor, or pharmacist. Pharmacy seemed like a logical fit, since Marvel enjoyed working with people and had taken the prerequisite science courses having attended a specialized science high school. He admitted that his personal interests and strengths aligned better with public relations or business, but felt constrained by his parents’ financial stipulation and ultimately decided to obey their wishes. Although he maintained that the decision to study pharmacy was made jointly, it
was clear through his account that he would not have been able to go against their wishes and was essentially powerless to exert his own opinion in this matter. In fact, at later points in the interview, he referred to being “forced” by his parents to study pharmacy.

Similarly, Laura repeatedly used the plural pronoun “we” when discussing her decision to study pharmacy, indicating that she was acting together with her parents as a decision-maker in the process of selecting a college major. Laura’s parents directed her to pharmacy and researched programs with her so she was prepared to apply during her senior year of high school. Her father pushed the notion that choosing a college major and future career should be based upon practical considerations and therefore pharmacy, a well-paying and stable profession, was her best option:

I wouldn’t say that our conversations were forceful in the sense that he was forcing me into the field, but the way that the conversations were conducted were that education and university is not just about having the four most fun years of your life like…how college is presented in the media or popular culture. College is an opportunity for you to secure your life and go into a career, and you have to see beyond the experience ahead of you.

Laura confessed that because she was indecisive and valued her parents’ opinion, she did not have a good reason for going against their recommendation that she study pharmacy. In contrast to Marvel, whose parents imposed a financial incentive that led him to pursue pharmacy, Laura seemed to genuinely adopt her parents’ perspective, believing that pharmacy was a good fit for her at the time.

Likewise, Tony stated that he lacked direction as a high school student so he “just went with the punches” when he decided to major in pharmacy after his parents and cousin intervened to assist him with his college plans. Tony looked to his parents and other influential adults for
guidance since he did not see himself as equipped to make the decision on his own, echoing the
hesitancy that surfaced in Marvel and Laura’s stories.

Several participants referenced having family members or close friends that were in the
health professions as a main reason that they considered the field to be suitable for them as well.
Joy, Amy, and Molly had siblings, cousins, or uncles that are pharmacists. Marvel recalled the
day that his mother’s friend showed up at their house with a new car, purchased for her by her
son using his signing bonus from his new job as a retail pharmacist. He believed this was the
moment that his mother became fixated on him also becoming a pharmacist, so she too could
“show off” to her friends. Not only were these personal contacts esteemed as reliable sources of
information and encouragement for the participants as they considered college majors, they also
served as role models and evidence that success was attainable in their particular fields. The
participants mentioned that the sense of security and positive reinforcement that stemmed from
these interactions were important to them, underscoring the need for familial support and
consensus when it came to choosing a college major.

According to the participants, their parents endorsed college majors in the health
professions for the financial stability and social status they were likely to deliver upon
graduation. In their interviews, the participants recited the risks pertaining to careers in other
fields that their parents raised them to fear. For example, Molly’s parents were resistant when
she expressed a desire to major in business:

[My parents] thought business was for students that didn’t know what they wanted, first
of all. Second of all, it had a lot of risks associated with it so they thought business was a
major anybody could do versus pharmacy in which you have a degree…and people look
up to that role. You have a good status in society. It just sounds better than a business
major. It’s less competitive in the sense that once you become a pharmacist, then you’re always and forever a pharmacist versus if you’re a business major you don’t really know where to go…they just didn’t like that instability…

Joy received similar guidance from her parents when it came to avoiding “risky” career choices, a viewpoint that she seemed to espouse as her own when recounting her process of selecting a major:

I was also taught that it would be a very risky career choice to deviate from the health professions, because you don’t necessarily have stability and guaranteed income. I think that I did come to understand that was important. I didn’t want to take that risk with loans and then not being in a health profession, because I knew that if I did something in health professions I would have a job and job security.

The participants’ families placed enormous value on stability, which some of the participants attributed to their parents’ lack of secure jobs and reliable income as a result of their status as immigrants. Furthermore, several participants referenced a desire for upward mobility and the achievement of the “American dream” as key factors in their families’ attraction to well-paying jobs in the health professions. Therefore, the participants seemed to harbor feelings of immense responsibility and pressure to be successful on their parents’ terms.

For most of the participants, considering careers outside of the health professions was simply not an option. All participants had a clear idea of what their parents would not consider acceptable, citing examples such as music, teaching, and writing as undesirable professions. Tony’s parents were adamant that he major in pharmacy, despite the fact that science was not his strength as a high school student. When asked why he did not consider majoring in one of his favorite subjects like geography or the humanities, he laughed, indicating that his parents did not
take those fields seriously. To further his point, he added that his parents would have “thrown
him] out of the house or just not funded [his] college” had he pursued a career that they deemed
unacceptable. Steve also felt unable to pursue his interests:

I actually did want to apply to an art school, but [my parents] refused to help me with the
application in terms of more financial means. At that time, I didn’t…I wasn’t really
working, so I didn’t have any…I didn’t have the means to support myself in going
forward with that kind of decision.

Deferring to their parents’ definition of success and selecting a major that they permitted meant
that the participants found themselves suppressing their own interests and talents in order to
appease their parents, a topic of tension that resurfaced when the participants faced academic
challenges and began to question or resent their majors.

**Interest in the Field**

Five participants expressed that not only were their parents and families supportive of
careers in the health professions, but they were personally interested in the field as well. Two
participants shared stories of being treated by healthcare professionals as infants or children as
one reason they chose to pursue pharmacy. For example, Amy explained that as a child she had
persistent problems with her skin and was eventually diagnosed with eczema. Her pediatrician
prescribed a steroid cream to treat the condition and Amy was fascinated with its effectiveness.
She recalled thinking that “it was really cool how medications…can have such a huge impact”
and was enthusiastic about being admitted to a pharmacy program. Joy had a similar story
suffering from a brain tumor when she was just two months old. Growing up, her parents
reinforced the idea that she was fortunate to be alive and that she owed her survival to the
“miracle of medicine and healthcare providers.” This message was ingrained in her mind to the
point that she desired to impact the lives of others as a healthcare professional, leading her to
select pharmacy as a major. The remaining three participants that expressed personal motivation
for the health professions explained that they were interested in healthcare, but did not have a
specific experience or persuasive example guiding their decision.

Conclusions

The first superordinate theme, *Choosing a career path*, revealed important background
information about the participants and their reasons for selecting their respective college majors.
Notably, only a few participants were able to articulate a clear personal motivation and passion
for studying the health professions that did not involve the input of their families. In contrast,
most participants spoke of selecting their college majors for pragmatic reasons and seemed
detached from the decision-making process. Steve, for instance, ended up majoring in pharmacy
because he felt it was a more “solid route” than business, his alternative option. Although he
changed majors during his junior year, he remained in the health professions, largely out of
convenience. Like Steve, several other participants communicated a lack of enthusiasm for their
majors from the onset.

The influence of family played a much greater role than personal motivation for all
participants when it came to selecting a college major, even for those that expressed some
interest in the health professions. The participants felt that choosing a career path was not an
individual decision, but one that required endorsement from their family members. Many felt
significant pressure to pursue particular majors, such as the health professions, at their parents’
urging and in some cases, outright insistence. Therefore, the participants began college with the
mindset that they had to be successful in their majors in order to maintain the financial support
and approval of their parents. A deviation from the plan would not only disrupt the participants’
academic trajectories, but it would severely compromise the relationship they had with their families. For the participants, deciding to study the health professions was not only about selecting a career path, but it was a means of exercising filial piety and earning the respect of their family and community members. Understanding these dynamics and what is at stake is important for faculty and staff to recognize as they work with students in similar situations and determine how to advise them in matters related to academic and career planning.

**Tolerating Parental Involvement in Educational Decision-making**

Parental involvement was a topic that all participants placed a great deal of significance upon in speaking about their academic experiences leading up to and during college. As discussed in the previous section, parents played a central role in selecting a college major. For the participants in this study, parental involvement started from a very young age and intensified over time. The participants reflected upon how their parents impacted their activities and attitudes related to education, elaborating on how their upbringing contributed to their psychosocial development as young adults and ability to endure academic challenges. During college, the participants found themselves in a tenuous balancing act whereby they were constantly weighing their parents’ expectations and deeply ingrained educational values against the reality of their experiences and academic setbacks.

The first subordinate theme, *Parental prioritization of academics*, deals with the particularities of what parents did to emphasize the importance of academics as the participants were growing up and how the participants internalized the messages that their parents transmitted to them about education as they formulated their own outlooks and goals. The second subordinate theme, *Recognition of parental sacrifice and hardships*, seeks to explain the linkage between the lofty expectations parents placed upon the participants and the experiences
of the parents themselves. The participants’ accounts highlight the social, cultural, and emotional implications of being the children of immigrants, especially when it comes to educational success and career aspirations.

**Parental Prioritization of Academics**

When asked to speak about their childhoods, all eight participants stressed the ways in which their lives and their relationships with their parents revolved around education. Several of the participants discussed the extreme measures their parents took to provide them with educational opportunities, as well as the immense pressure they felt to be high achieving because of their parents’ insistence that education was paramount to success in life. From a young age, the participants began to internalize the message that their level of educational attainment determined their self-worth and position within their families and society.

One of the strategies that parents used to prioritize education was to ensure that their children attended high quality schools. For example, Steve’s parents intentionally purchased a home in an area with a strong school system so that he could attend a competitive high school. Thinking back, Steve traced each decision and relocation that his parents made as a “direct and deliberate move towards securing the best possible level of education” for his sister and him. This marked the importance of education and placed a heavy burden on Steve to optimize the opportunities he was given. Marvel’s parents were equally devoted to enrolling him in the best schools. His mother, in particular, became “obsessed” with identifying the most prestigious college preparatory schools in New York City. She utilized her social network to seek information about schools, relying on other Asian American parents to share information and advice. This underscores the important role that the Asian American community played for Marvel as he grew up in Flushing, a predominantly Asian immigrant neighborhood. Marvel
poignantly captured his experience by saying that he was like an “investment” for his parents, who were willing to put vast effort and financial resources towards his education so that they could reap the rewards when he achieved their vision of professional success. Marvel’s account indicated that he felt objectified and that his well-being was less important to his parents than his achievements.

In addition to sending their children to top schools, the participants’ parents conveyed the importance of education by mandating that out-of-school time be dedicated exclusively to academic pursuits. All participants had examples of how their parents required them to use their free time to “get ahead” academically. Amy recalled that her mother, despite not being well educated, quizzed her every day on her homework until the point Amy’s level surpassed her own. The effort that her mother put towards Amy’s education, despite her own academic limitations, left a lasting impression on Amy and showed her that she “really cared a lot” about her schooling. Both Amy and Laura described going to after school programs and Saturday academies, geared specifically towards Asian Americans, where they studied math, English, and Chinese. Joy’s parents even created extra homework for her to do after school and on the weekends, starting as early as kindergarten. Moreover, her parents elected to purchase copies of her textbooks each year so that she would have her own set at home, allowing her to do additional assignments and to work ahead of her classmates. Joy recalled her parents saying:

You need to study; you need to get all As. You need a good job and a good career if you want to have the life we’ve been able to provide for you because we only did that with hard work. If you want the nice things that we’ve been able to experience as a family like going on vacation, having three guaranteed meals a day, then the only way to do that is through having a good career and being successful.
The demands that Joy’s parents made of her to get perfect grades and the connections they drew between academic achievement and success in life were typical of other participants as well. Also significant is Joy’s parents’ belief that hard work produces success, rather than aptitude or passion for a particular scholastic subject. This subtlety is meaningful, because all of the participants believed that they had worked hard, at least at times, and were discouraged when they did not see results or fell short of their parents’ expectations. Since they were working hard, which their parents believed was the key to success, they began to feel that there was something wrong or deficient with themselves. The blow to their self-esteem gradually eroded their confidence and motivation for academics.

Because of the emphasis their parents placed on academics, the participants saw themselves as different from their non-Asian American peers. Both Joy and Laura, who grew up in Caucasian majority communities, noticed that their classmates were not doing extra homework or spending their Saturdays in school and ascribed these distinctions to race and culture. Many of the participants recognized academic achievement as a source of pride and a significant aspect of their emerging racial identities. It is not surprising, therefore, that academics were integral to how participants defined themselves and assigned meaning to success.

A corollary to the emphasis that parents placed on academic success was a fixation on education as the most important thing in the lives of the young participants in this study and a need for them to not only do well, but to consistently outperform their peers in school, both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities. As mentioned previously, being the best was most often defined by getting top grades. When asked about her parents’ expectations for grades, Kim said that in her household As were required. With a noticeable tinge of sarcasm and
resentment, she shared that it was not just As that her parents wanted, but it was perfection: “It’s like I got a 98... why didn’t I get a 100?” Tony and Marvel stated that grades were of upmost importance to their parents as well. Tony said that grades were “all [he] knew about” starting in middle school and escalating in high school. In a similar vein, Marvel lamented:

...a lot of us grew up where to us the only thing we knew about was education. The only thing we knew about was when is the next test? What grade am I going to get? What grade is going to help appease my parents?

Marvel’s use of the plural pronouns “we” and “us” to talk about his upbringing calls attention to his belief that his experience was shared by others in his peer group from Flushing, an Asian American enclave of New York City.

Focusing exclusively on grades seemed to have a detrimental effect on participants’ attitudes towards school. Steve described it by saying that he was “desensitized” and started to view success as earning good grades over actually learning material. Molly expressed that although her parents’ expectations were less direct when it came to grades, she grew up with an “intuitive understanding” of what they wanted her to achieve. She knew, for example, that her parents wanted her to be in the top ten percent of her class academically and that she should “be the best” in the various extracurricular activities that she pursued as well. For all participants, high parental expectations were accompanied with a strong sense of disappointment and failure when perfection was not achieved. The participants also indicated through their accounts that their primary motivation to succeed in school was not grounded in a desire to please their parents or attain a personal goal, but rather was based on a compulsion to avoid their parents’ dissatisfaction in the event that they failed to live up to expectations. As a result, academic achievement was viewed as a source of stress and anxiety for many of the participants.
When discussing their upbringings, all participants stressed that education was a fundamental aspect of their relationship with their parents. Often, interactions related to education between the participants and their parents were characterized as tense, combative, condescending, hurtful, and aggressive. Tony recalled his father’s tactic for reinforcing the importance of education:

My father always threatened to throw me and my brother out of the house back when we were kids during summer vacation for not doing his assigned homework and suggested that we look for a White parent who wouldn’t discipline us strictly. I also remember my father would always say ‘I’ll take you to see the beggar right by the fruit market…if you don’t do your homework, you will end up like him…maybe I will leave you with him one day to understand why you need to do well in school.’

This account encapsulates the parental harshness that other participants referenced in their interviews, and ties the emphasis on education to race by implying that non-Asian parents are more lax when it comes to academics than Asian parents. It also stresses the excessive rigidity that several participants described of their parents, whereby anything short of perfect grades and absolute compliance with their parents’ educational plan would inevitably result in a lifetime of failure as depicted in Tony’s example. This account further demonstrates why participants felt an inability to compromise or reason with their parents when it came to questions related to academics or career planning.

Prioritization of academic success also manifested itself in competition with family members and peers in the Asian American community. Notably, none of the participants expressed feeling intrinsically competitive when it came to academics but instead asserted that their parents instigated and drove the necessity to outperform others in their family and social
circles. Nearly all of the participants cited examples of relatives or close friends that were considered models of success, setting the bar for what was expected of them. Laura spoke about how her mother constantly harped on her to be more hardworking and disciplined when it came to doing homework like her Asian American neighbor. For Tony it was his cousins, one that went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and another that went to Cornell University, that fueled his parents’ competitive nature. This strategy of idealizing certain examples of success seemed to backfire, at least for the participants in this study. Rather than being motivating, it resulted in participants feeling resentful, stifled, and incapable of being “good enough” for their parents.

In their accounts, the participants vocalized feelings of exasperation and frustration with their parents’ inflexibility and lack of warmth. At the same time, it was evident that none of the participants believed that their parents were arbitrarily being unreasonable. Many of the participants referenced “Asian parenting” as an approach that was rooted in culture and ultimately stemmed from a desire for their children to be happy and successful. In speaking about their relationships with their parents, the participants displayed a range of emotions. They felt constrained by the narrow view of success that their parents held, yet seemed to understand and accept the ways that their parents expressed their love and care. Joy rationalized her parents’ harsh style and intense focus on academics as a survival strategy, necessary for new immigrant families:

I guess it’s to give us an advantage. I guess it’s to even the playing field, maybe. Like why Asians want their kids to study so much because we aren’t in our native land, and we can downplay it as much as we want, but White people have so much more entitlement
and they have so many more advantages, and we just got here and we’re just essentially first gens. I think if you can be educated, you can make anything of that.

In her explanation for why her parents prioritized academic success, Joy shifted from describing her parents’ perspective to talking about her own views on the topic. This was true of other participants as well; at times it was difficult to distinguish between their opinions and those of their parents.

Parental pressure to succeed was a predominant theme across all participants. In fact, participants shared nearly identical illustrations of how their parents poured enormous resources into their education, required perfect grades, and were intensely competitive with other Asian Americans. The impact of these practices varied somewhat across participants. Laura, for instance, constructed her entire identity around being academically successful. Earning good grades and being known amongst her peers as a strong student was her primary source of pride and motivation as a child and adolescent. However, Marvel stated that he was deprived of a normal childhood because of his parents’ obsession with his education, a sentiment he believes is shared by others in the Asian American community:

We all suffered. We almost had our childhood robbed from us because instead of being able to go to the park after school we had to go to a prep school until dinnertime. Instead of going to birthday parties on the weekends we had to go to an afterschool program to learn next year’s math so then we’re better prepared. Because of that a lot of us didn’t get to experience things that we could’ve. For example, I never went to a sweet sixteen party in my life.

Steve and Kim also suffered emotionally, describing loss of self-esteem and feeling desensitized when it came to their academic performance. Yet, most participants seemed to understand why
their parents prioritized education and did not philosophically disagree with its value. The pressure to be academically superior, coupled with a remarkably narrow definition of success, had a lasting impact on the participants as they transitioned to college. The participants developed a fear of failure and a reluctance to speak openly and honestly with their parents when it came to their education. At the same time, they tolerated and occasionally even agreed with the merits of their parents’ involvement.

**Recognition of Parental Sacrifice and Hardships**

Being part of an immigrant family was a critical aspect of each participant’s background and educational journey. All participants spoke about the hardships that their parents experienced in their personal and professional lives and drew connections to how that influenced the expectations placed upon them, as the children of immigrants, to be successful.

All participants expressed that their families immigrated to the United States searching for a better life and seeking opportunities that were unavailable in their home countries. Several participants described their parents as aiming for the quintessential “American dream” of financial comfort, enviable social status, a beautiful home, and a happy family. In fact, it was these markers that formed the measures for success that the participants felt were militantly enforced and reiterated throughout their childhood. Tony’s family history is representative of what other participants reported about why their parents immigrated and its impact on him:

[My parents’] reason for immigrating was in search of a better life because my mother’s side of the family grew up on a farm in rural China. My father was from the city but also lived an austere lifestyle. Their humble upbringings in China and subsequent working class lifestyle in the US also factored into their desire to push me to go to college for a major that provided a stable profession and job at the end of the day.
The link between their families’ immigration stories and the pressure to be academically and professionally successful was intentional and explicit, placing a colossal amount of pressure upon the participants. For some, like Marvel and Steve, this led to their parents’ insistence on identifying and taking advantage of every opportunity that had the potential to advance the American dream for their families. In other cases, participants like Joy framed the requirement to succeed as a defense mechanism or a way to combat the discrimination that was perceived unavoidable for Asians in the United States. As the participants aged and became college students, the obligation they felt to validate their parents’ decision to immigrate strengthened and continued to serve as a meaningful and persuasive factor in their educational decision-making processes.

Recognizing their parents’ struggles as immigrants was a common thread across all participants. The challenges for their parents ranged from problems getting started, such as an inability to speak English and lack of financial resources, to more persistent difficulties like social isolation and marginalization in the workforce. Laura spoke about how her father came to the United States with only twenty dollars in his pocket, forcing him to start anew in a foreign land with almost nothing. With hard work and perseverance, he was able to attain a college education and launched a career that was lucrative enough to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his family in a middle-class suburb of Boston. However, not all of the participants’ parents were able to realize upward mobility from a socioeconomic perspective. Kim talked introspectively about her parents’ lives as immigrants:

Both my parents’ families were really poor in the beginning…for them like it would be a struggle to get by from day to day and I think for them they don’t want us to feel the same way or they don’t want us to be looked down upon like how they were really
looked down upon growing up because they weren’t educated and didn’t have the money or the means to do the things other people do. 

This account illustrates that being poor and lacking an education can be doubly oppressive, impacting not only the financial standing of a family but also their level of contentment with life. Seeing their parents struggle and face marginalization reinforced the need for the participants to be professionally successful and financially secure. Kim, Marvel, and Amy stated that their parents were not satisfied with their careers for reasons such as low pay, long hours, instability, lack of respect, and constant fear of being replaced. Witnessing these adversities led the participants to understand the value attached to getting a “good job,” while stimulating them to want to take care of their parents in any way possible.

A few of the participants specifically recalled their parents speaking of their arduous pasts in the form of “life lessons,” often employed as a strategy for shaming them when they did not perform up to expectations. Though thinly guised as an opportunity to impart wisdom, the participants seemed attuned to their parents’ true intention, which was to send a message that any problems they (the participants) encountered paled in comparison to the hardships their parents had experienced. All participants conveyed sincere gratitude to their parents throughout their accounts and appeared to agree that their parents had experienced much worse circumstances than they had, forming the basis for a relationship in which the participants felt indebted to their parents and undeserving of the ability to assert their own opinions and aspirations.

One way that participants internalized their parents’ hardships was by assuming feelings of guilt and responsibility, leading them to feel eternally obligated to fulfill their parents’ wishes. Marvel assessed his mother’s life lessons as predominantly punitive, but also recognized them as a display of parental love and caring:
When it came to life lessons, I don’t think there’s anyone better than my mom. She would always use her hardships to the benefit of me growing up. Sometimes she would have serious conversations and if I did something wrong, let’s say I got into a fight with a kid or I did horrible on an exam she would sit me down and be, ‘Look at mom. Look at her hands. I work 16 hours a day. Do you want to do this when you grow up?’ She set me straight really quick.

What Marvel described was common in other participants’ accounts as well: a parental ambition for their children to have better lives than they did, specifically when it came to education and career. Amy found her parents’ struggles as immigrants to be a motivating force:

I think my parents had a huge impact on me. My parents are both immigrants. They came here like barely knowing a word of English. I think when they came to America they struggled a bit, at least in the beginning. I feel like that had a huge impact on me because, when I was growing up, they would always tell me these life lessons. They would talk to me about their struggles. It motivated me to work harder in school.

Amy also explained how her parents’ difficulties caused her stress, in addition to being motivating:

I know that for them they don’t mean to give us extra stress, but then at the same time when they tell me and my brother their life story, it does give us stress. We really don’t want to disappoint our parents, especially when they’ve given up so much for us. We really want to make sure that we make them proud.

The way Marvel and Amy presented their parents’ life lessons as effectively inspiring them to prioritize academics demonstrates how immigrant status is linked with the educational upbringing of the participants. It also reveals the complexity of the participants’ relationships
with their parents. Interactions related to academics were often steeped in conflicting emotions, as was evident in the cautious and reflective way that participants spoke and acted during their interviews. The participants struggled at times to put their feelings into words, especially when trying to explain how they could simultaneously resent and respect their parents’ position. What is certain is that the participants all believed that their parents’ had sacrificed immeasurably in order to give them a better life. In turn, the participants felt responsible for contributing to and enhancing their families’ well-being through the attainment of academic and professional success.

Conclusions

The superordinate theme Tolerating parental involvement in educational decision-making was illustrative of the complicated role that parents played in the lives of the participants when it came to their academic trajectories. The participants described how their parents demanded perfection and prioritized academics above all else, leading many of them to feel as though they were deprived of a normal childhood. Instead of attending social events with friends or exploring their non-academic talents, the participants were forced to utilize their time outside of school doing “extra” homework assignments, attending private enrichment academies, and being quizzed by their parents. Meanwhile, their parents were investigating the best schools and most prestigious college majors, devoting both time and money to paving the way for a successful future.

In some cases, the interviews demonstrated that harsh and authoritarian parenting led to strained parent-child interactions and diminished self-esteem on the part of the participants. Yet, in spite of their frustration and distress surrounding educational decision-making, the participants were generally willing to tolerate their parents’ involvement. For many participants, the only
way they believed they could earn love and maintain their role as a valued family member was by delivering on parental expectations for academic success. Moreover, the participants were acutely attuned to their parents’ status as immigrants and the hardships they had endured to provide them with educational opportunities. The cumulative effect of parental pressure to achieve combined with a narrow definition of success seemed to result in the participants feeling forced to give up their own voice in educational decision-making, even as they entered college, which is typically a juncture when students gain more autonomy and freedom. The complicated, and at times troubling, nature of the participants’ relationships with their families appeared repeatedly during the interviews, suggesting that it is an important consideration for the study of Asian American college students facing academic difficulties.

**Responding Emotionally to Failing a Course**

The participants in this study all vividly recalled their first reactions to discovering that they had failed a course, which is the subject of the third superordinate theme: *Responding emotionally to failing a course*. For all participants, failing meant not earning the minimum passing grade for a course as determined by major-specific academic progression policies and in most instances, was any grade below a C. Since the participants were enrolled in health professions majors with core curriculums, failing a required course usually resulted in having to repeat it in a future semester and often meant that participants were held back for a year. Due to the severity of the consequences, the participants reported feeling a plethora of strong negative emotions upon learning that they had failed a course. The magnitude of the reactions, as retold by the participants, was alarming and in some cases raised concerns related to safety and emotional well-being. Nevertheless, the participants persevered through the initial onslaught of panic, fear, and anger as described in the first subordinate theme: *Feeling disoriented and out of*
control. The second subordinate theme, *Erosion of self-esteem*, deals with a matter that lingered with the participants as they struggled to recover and make sense of their situations, while reframing their expectations for themselves.

**Feeling Disoriented and Out of Control**

All participants communicated having a strong emotional reaction to failing a course. Indeed, the surprising level of detail with which the participants were able to recount their feelings and actions several months after the event is indicative of the significance that the experience held. When asked how she responded to failing a course, Molly described the head-spinning barrage of emotions that she felt:

> It was devastating, disheartening, numb. I felt like a failure, depressed, afraid. I wanted to run away. I lied to myself that I was better than pharmacy and I didn’t need pharmacy because I didn’t have an interest in the first place about drugs anyway…I felt above everything. However, I still felt shackled because I didn’t have a plan. I was lost, helpless, alone. I felt like a child.

Molly also admitted that she was extremely disappointed in herself, saying that she had “let [herself] crumble and fall into pieces.” These vivid emotions depict the astonishment associated with failing a course, an event that left Molly with such a deep sense of devastation that she was unable to grasp the reality of the situation that she was facing. Denial was a feeling that was referenced in other interviews as well. For example, Marvel remembered what it was like for him to see his failing grade:

> When the grade came out and I saw the C minus with that class I initially didn’t believe it. I was refreshing that page for maybe an hour thinking, “No, no, no. That’s not a minus. That’s like a smudge on my screen.” I went to another computer, and I looked at
it again and I was like, “Why is that smudge still there?” I was in denial. I was in a state of panic.

What is worrisome about Molly and Marvel’s accounts is the severity of the mental distress that followed the discovery they had failed a course as indicated by their use of descriptive words such as “depressed,” “helpless,” and “state of panic.” Both of them temporarily lost the ability to think clearly and sensibly, allowing themselves to be consumed with irrational thoughts and powerful, disabling emotions. Joy remembered having a physical reaction involving “difficulty breathing” and “endless sobbing,” in addition to an outpouring of emotions. Moreover, one of the participants referenced being temporarily suicidal, noting that they sought help and overcame the impulse after a few days.

Several of the participants attributed the shock of failing a course to the fact that they had never failed at anything in their lives and therefore did not possess the grit or mental fortitude to withstand the blow, at least in the beginning. Laura labeled herself an “emotional mess” after she failed a course, and stated that she “hit rock bottom through that experience.” Joy also had trouble processing the situation, yet acknowledged in hindsight that she may have overreacted at the time:

It’s so disorienting. It makes you question everything. You definitely are like, well, because I failed this class I am a failure. I have now failed at life. But, it was that one performance. That was one isolated academic moment, incident…you think you won’t make it through it, you think you won’t survive.

The way Joy phrased her reflection showed how time and distance from the experience has helped her to compartmentalize the failure and begin to see beyond it.
In contrast to the other participants, Steve’s foremost emotion when realizing that he had failed a course was relief. He explained:

I guess at that time, I think it was definitely a mixture of feelings because it wasn’t so much that I was disappointed, but at the same time, I felt more…I felt a sense of relief at the same time. I think I would’ve been more disappointed if I did have the intentions of wanting to become a pharmacist, but for me, I think it became more of a relief.

Steve acknowledged that he did not desire to be a pharmacist, which contributed to a lack of investment in his academic performance and subsequent reaction to failing a course. Regardless, Steve still struggled in the aftermath of failing a course. He admitted to battling mental health issues and feeling lost as he made plans to transition to a new program.

These accounts demonstrate the debilitating extent to which the participants felt disorientated, helpless, and isolated from their peers when they learned that they had failed a course. Each participant either explicitly stated or alluded to feeling “out of control,” which was a particularly uncomfortable position given their families’ preoccupation with stability and aversion to risk. After a period of initial panic, most of the participants found themselves attempting to frantically manage the situation and regain their footing. Marvel resorted to pleading with his professor for a grade change, which was ultimately unsuccessful. Tony did his best to keep his failure a secret by simply not talking about it for as long as possible. Others began plotting ways to change their major as an avoidance tactic. In all cases, the participants felt a considerable amount of stress in finding a way to move forward from their failure.

**Erosion of Self-esteem**

After the initial shock of failing a course had dissipated, nearly all of the participants began to see their failure as a negative reflection of their abilities and worth as a person. Seven
of the eight participants made comments that pointed to a lowered sense of self-esteem and efficacy as a direct result of failing a course. When asked how he felt after he had processed the news of failing a course, Marvel declared: “I hated myself.” Tony, on the other hand, was more reserved when he simply said that he “was really not happy with [himself] for having failed.” He seemed proud of himself for keeping his outward emotions at bay, except for one time when he had a “breakdown” in his academic advisor’s office. This “emotional show” was the product of pent up fear, frustration, and despair that he had refused to share with his friends and family due to shame and embarrassment. Laura’s self-worth was compromised by having to admit to herself that she had not accomplished something, an entirely new feeling for someone that was accustomed to excelling at everything up to that point. Her confidence was shaken to its core, as evidenced in her commentary: “I don’t know what feels real or what feels good enough.” For Laura, whose entire existence had focused on being academically superior to her peers, the experience of failing a course disrupted her reality and confidence. Whereas she once believed herself capable of anything, she began to doubt herself for the first time and was forced to redefine her measures for evaluating success.

Kim viewed failing a course not just as an isolated incident, but as a major hit to her self-esteem and as an indication that she had downright failed at life. While this conclusion might otherwise appear to be exaggerated, it is not surprising or out of context given the propensity for the participants’ parents to enforce stringent academic standards. In reference to her family, Kim said:

The number one hardest part about the experience of failing a course is the feeling that I have failed everyone who had believed in me. I think for most of my life, I have been
seen as someone who my family and peers could look up to, therefore when I fail, I feel like I have disappointed all of them and am not worthy.

Kim’s account reveals the true impact of failing a course when it came to how she felt about herself and how she believed her family and peers would feel about her. She valued her position as someone that others held in high esteem for her academic achievements, so the possibility that her status would be compromised after failing a course was just as damaging as the failure itself in Kim’s case.

The participants’ inability to separate their self-worth from their academic performance demonstrates the extent to which failing a course can be psychologically damaging and socially disorienting. Most of the participants believed that others, specifically family members and close friends, held them in high regard exclusively because of their academic achievement. In turn, they interpreted that if they failed to achieve, they would lose the respect and esteem of their loved ones. These insights provide evidence as to why the experience of failing a course was perceived as a “rock bottom” moment, to borrow Laura’s words, for each of the participants.

Conclusions

The realization that they had failed a course was not only startling, but was also exceedingly distressing for the participants in this study. The superordinate theme Responding emotionally to failing a course explores the emotional fallout of the participants’ academic difficulty, focusing on the short-term and long-term feelings that ensued through the subordinate themes of Feeling disoriented and out of control and Erosion of self-esteem. All participants noted an intense stream of emotions including disappointment, anger, and fear when they first learned of their failure. These feelings were coupled with shame and embarrassment, resulting in social isolation and the belief that they were alone in their experience. Whether or not their
family members, peers, or university faculty and staff would have been supportive, none of the participants referenced leaning on anyone else as a first course of action. That is, they dealt with their initial emotions insularly and in many cases, found themselves in denial or falling into a worrisome state of depression. The participants began to see themselves as failures and believed that their primary role as a family member, which was to be academically and professionally successful, was in jeopardy. These patterns, seen across multiple participants, reflect the high level of stress and anxiety that failing a course caused, especially for the participants that perceived themselves to lack supportive networks. This is not to say, however, that the participants were not able to overcome the initial shock of failing a course. Several participants explicitly mentioned that their first response to failing was blown out of the proportion and that having processed the situation they were able to see the failure with greater clarity and sensibility. However, none of the participants appeared to have fully recovered emotionally from failing a course. The disappointment and self-doubt that accompanied the failure brought on a lasting shift in how the participants saw themselves and their capabilities, even after their initial reactions subsided and they were faced with determining how to proceed.

Coping with Failing a Course

The participants’ journeys in dealing with their academic difficulties are the subject of the fourth superordinate theme: *Coping with failing a course*. First and foremost, all participants struggled with the practical matter of figuring out how to tell their parents what happened as discussed in the subordinate theme *Anxiety about telling parents*. The second subordinate theme, *Reevaluating future goals*, explores the complex mental processes associated with accepting that their failure had occurred. Failing a course was a pivotal event for the participants in this study without exception. Its impact was far-reaching, not only causing interruptions to the
participants’ educational and professional plans, but also generating discord in their relationships with family and friends.

**Anxiety about Telling Parents**

A critical aspect of coping with failing a course for the participants was the act of telling their parents. In fact, the majority of the participants reported that telling their parents was the worst and most difficult part of the entire experience. The participants varied in their strategies for involving their parents, and their respective conversations yielded different reactions. For the participants that told their parents about the failure, the decision was grounded in necessity. Many of them needed to repeat a course, causing their graduation to be delayed and requiring additional money to be spent on tuition, circumstances that the participants were not able to manage on their own. The participants described their strategies for telling their parents as calculated and deliberate, often the product of much thought, contemplation, and concern.

Both Amy and Marvel were so troubled by the prospect of telling their parents they had failed a course that they planned out exactly what they would say. Amy recalled what it was like for her leading up to the moment that she told her mother about the course she had failed:

That experience, like before I told them, I was actually really scared because I thought my parents would kill me for not passing a class. Before I told them, I would come up with scenarios of what would happen and I thought about what I would say to them, like word for word, before I actually talked to them.

In the end, she waited an entire week before she mentioned the failure and even then, only told her mother; she did not feel comfortable facing her father with such news. During that time, Amy was extremely anxious in anticipation of her parents’ reaction and while they were disappointed and upset, they were not nearly as harsh or unforgiving as she had expected.
Like Amy, Marvel rehearsed his conversation and developed various scenarios in his head in order to be prepared for anything his parents might say or ask. His approach was to divert blame away from himself, even though he admitted in the interview that he had not prepared adequately for the course: “To me, I had to make up excuses. I had to think of a way to make it so that it wasn’t my fault.” Marvel stated that he opted not to be completely honest with his parents as a means to preserve their happiness because he knew how much it meant to them that he be successful as a pharmacy student, despite his lack of interest in the profession. Since all of Marvel’s time and energy was spent in “damage control mode,” he never appeared to assume responsibility for the course failure and even mentioned that the whole ordeal “went by like nothing.” Marvel determined that ensuring his parents viewed him as an innocent victim was more important than being fully honest about the situation or allowing himself the chance to address the causes of his academic difficulty.

Other participants, like Molly and Kim, also grappled with a perceived inability to be completely honest with their parents. For instance, Molly failed two courses in the same semester but made a conscious decision to only tell her parents about one course. Even so, her parents’ reaction was marked by disbelief and lack of empathy, which Molly interpreted as indication that she had “failed their love”:

It was very difficult for them to understand. It was as if they didn’t know what I was saying to them for the first hour. It was like I disappointed them, this is how I think they felt. It’s like I disappointed them as their only kid in the family and they rely on me a lot. It’s like I failed their love for me because that’s how they base their love. I based their love on how much I was successful. They reacted with surprise in the beginning and they
felt like it was unbelievable. They were shocked that their own daughter who had a stellar education all her life suddenly failed a course.

Molly’s account brings to the fore a pair of issues that made her situation particularly difficult. Firstly, the pressure she felt to succeed was amplified by her status as an only child. She noted that her parents rely on her, referring to the future when she is working and able to provide for them as they age. Having a stable, well-paying job as a pharmacist would ensure that she has adequate resources to perform this duty. Secondly, she felt certain that her parents based their love on her academic and professional success. Her failure to deliver the results they expected left her feeling incompetent, helpless, and rejected as a daughter. No longer would her parents be able to brag to their friends about her achievements, something that had been a source of pride for Molly throughout her upbringing. Instead, they claimed to be so embarrassed by her failure and mandate to fall back one year in her program, that her parents funded her to travel abroad for the gap year, telling their friends and family that she was doing an extra internship. For these reasons, Molly’s process of coping with failure was largely comprised of desperate attempts to maintain her relationship with her parents and in turn, preserve her parents’ image in the community.

Kim was similarly reluctant to share the truth about her academic troubles with her parents and ultimately never told her parents about the failure. She was able to repeat the course that she failed without delaying her graduation or incurring additional tuition costs, enabling her to proceed without her parents’ knowledge. Having always been the most successful and compliant child in her family, Kim was primarily worried about being burdensome to her parents:
…I think they have enough things on their plate right now and telling them this will only drive them crazier than they already are. And I guess a part of me is used to being the person they don’t have to worry about…I’m not comfortable with being someone they will have to worry about now. Especially when I’m so far in the program…I don’t feel comfortable sharing that.

Kim, unlike the other participants, had lived apart from her parents throughout high school and seemed to feel a greater degree of independence as a result. Yet, she was still highly attuned and sensitive to her parents’ perception of her. The thought that they might question her dependability was an assault on her identity and was deeply unsettling. Because she kept her failure a secret from her family and most of her friends, Kim’s way of coping with her academic difficulty was private and solitary. Kim conceded that failing a course eventually evolved into an opportunity for personal growth, though it remained a painful part her identity and the way she viewed herself even many months after it occurred.

Given the active role that parents played in the academic lives of the participants, it is not unexpected that having to tell them about failing a course was such a daunting task. The participants were exceedingly anxious about how their parents would react to the news, leading some of the participants to evade the truth or to avoid telling their parents about the failure at all. Joy asserted that her anxiety about telling her parents that she had failed a course was exacerbated by being Asian American, claiming that academic failure was “one of the worst atrocities you could ever inflict on your family.” This idea was evident in other accounts as well, with participants referencing the shame and embarrassment they felt not only for themselves, but also for their parents and even extended family.
It is also significant that none of the participants mentioned seeking or receiving emotional guidance and support from their parents. Laura, for example, cited how difficult communicating about her failure was with her mother since “she didn’t really have the capacity to really empathize with the struggles that [she] was going through.” Laura saw her mother’s lack of empathy as an innate personality trait, as opposed to a choice, and therefore accepted that her mother would not be a source of support for her. In general, the participants only told their parents what happened because they felt they needed to, especially when their graduation was delayed or they needed money to finance remediation coursework.

**Reevaluating Future Goals**

Coping with failing a course for the participants meant taking the opportunity to reevaluate their academic and professional goals in the context of their academic setback. All of the participants expressed serious doubt in their major or their ability to succeed, although only one participant, Steve, eventually left the pharmacy program after his course failure. Steve had never been enthusiastic about studying pharmacy but did so at his parents’ insistence. However, Steve’s course failure was followed by a diagnosis of depression and a period of hospitalization that, according to Steve, served as a signal to his parents that something needed to change:

Really, it opened my parents’ eyes to have the diagnosis of depression…it became a very raw kind of situation where they, to me, for the first time, really set aside their wants for me and had a more honest kind of discussion about my future plans and the current state I was in. Yeah, it just became a very open dialogue, and then we moved on from there.

Steve’s story is a telling example of how legitimately difficult it can be for some students to communicate effectively with their parents about their academic uncertainties and struggles. As he noted, Steve believed that it was not until he had been hospitalized for depression that his
parents truly listened to him and acknowledged his plea to leave the pharmacy program. Despite
being a low point for his health, Steve’s hospitalization represented a watershed moment in his
relationship with his parents, and in turn, altered the course of his professional plans. His
example raises concerns for other students that may be in a similar situation to Steve, but never
reach a diagnosis or incur a startling event that catches their parents’ attention in the same way as
Steve’s hospitalization. Those students are likely to suffer silently while their hardships remain
unaddressed.

Other participants lamented their parents’ resistance to allow them to change majors after
failing a course, despite having firm evidence that pharmacy may not be a good academic fit. In
some instances, the participants’ parents insisted that they remain in pharmacy due to the amount
of time and money they had already invested in the program, often totaling more than $100,000
depending on how many semesters the participant had completed. Marvel’s parents, for
example, would only continue to pay his tuition and living expenses if he continued in the
pharmacy program, leading him to stay even though his academic troubles persisted beyond his
first course failure. He noted that he had doubts about his major from the beginning, but was
powerless to act on them:

I knew it since I came into pharmacy that this wasn’t for me but because I had that
shadow, that cloud over my head of my parents, I could never come to grasp or come to
terms with the fact that you know it’s wrong for you, you’re just prolonging the pain, you
know?

Like Marvel, Tony’s parents were also resistant when it came to changing majors. Tony likened
his experience in the pharmacy program to “going through a meat grinder,” but said that his
father forbade him from changing majors. According to Tony’s father, changing majors was
what White people do.” Tony interpreted this to mean that Asian Americans were expected to be more resilient, pragmatic, and less erratic in their decision-making, so he set aside the possibility of changing majors and did his best to focus on his remediation coursework.

Joy was similarly defeated in her efforts to change majors through what she called “emotional extortion,” whereby her parents “bullied” her into remaining in the pharmacy program:

They never cared. I think like I said, when I had trouble and like warning signs and I tried to get out of the program, they just like belittled me into staying…I was going to get that PharmD even if they had to drag me across the stage to get the diploma. To my parents…when I told them I was having academic trouble, my only options in my mom’s eyes, I swear to God, I could either continue in the pharmacy program and continue at this like flailing, struggling rate, or I could quit and then go back to Forever 21 for the rest of my life.

Joy saw her parents as dismissive of her feelings in their unwillingness to consider alternative career paths, but understood that they were unlikely to change their opinion. For Joy, coping with failure meant coming to terms with her parents’ rigidity, relegating her own anxieties, and working towards finishing the pharmacy program by any means possible, rather than making further attempts to change majors. It is important to point out that although Joy bemoaned that her parents did not express care or compassion for her academic struggles, she steadfastly believed that their strictness was grounded in genuine concern for her well-being and desire for her to have the best life possible. Therefore, she described herself as “resigned to [her] fate,” a sentiment that she believes is widespread amongst her Asian American peers trying to negotiate with their parents about college majors and future careers. Despite the overt anger and
resentment that flowed throughout her account, Joy’s actions were ultimately driven by an intrinsic recognition for her role and responsibility as the daughter of Asian immigrants.

Conclusions

Coping with failing a course required participants to dedicate time and energy towards managing their emotions and reevaluating their academic and professional plans. Several of the participants determined that pharmacy was not a good fit, but realized that their parents would not be receptive to them changing majors. In fact, the task of telling their parents that they had failed a course was so overwhelming that not all participants were fully honest with their parents about what happened. The hesitancy and fear that the participants felt is indicative of the weight that the failure bore on their emotional well-being and demonstrates the desperation, loneliness, and helplessness they dealt with as a result. Additionally, coping with failure meant reconciling their parents’ demands with their own abilities and desires. Several of the participants expressed a desire to change majors and find a professional pathway that was aligned more with their interests; however, in all but one case, their parents’ requirement that they remain in the pharmacy program prevailed. Furthermore, the participants had a difficult time naming individuals that they felt comfortable turning to for support during and after failing a course. They certainly did not view their parents as emotionally supportive and were reluctant to talk about their failure with them. As a result, failing a course and coping with its consequences was an isolating experience for the participants.

Developing an Identity as an Asian American College Student

In the scope of their college experiences, the participants in this study considered failing a course to be a significant event. The participants viewed their failure as a pivot point, where they began to see their goals, priorities, and obligations in new ways, even if they did not end up
changing majors or delaying their graduation. It was emotionally stressful for all participants, compelling them to think deeply about their future plans and weigh their responsibilities to their parents and extended families. In addition, experiencing an academic setback brought to the fore a barrage of racial stereotypes and societal expectations that confounded the participants’ sense of identity. The superordinate theme Developing an identity as an Asian American college student explores the racial and cultural dimensions of identity development for the participants. The subordinate theme Internalizing racial stereotypes considers the impact of race-based stereotypes that surfaced or resurfaced for participants as they struggled with failure, followed by a discussion of how participants reconciled the tension between their home and school environments in the subordinate theme Negotiating Asian and mainstream culture.

Internalizing Racial Stereotypes

One of the reasons the participants had such a difficult time dealing with failure was because of the pressure they felt to succeed as Asian Americans. The participants viewed success as an unrelenting and overt expectation of not only their parents, but also of society in the form of stereotypes and other sorts of implicit racial discrimination. According to the majority of participants, the greatest societal source of pressure to succeed was grounded in the model minority stereotype. The participants defined the model minority stereotype as the assumption that Asian Americans would be successful, especially in terms of academic performance and professional achievement. They shared examples of how the model minority stereotype had been applied to them, going back as far as elementary school for some participants. Laura described her childhood, growing up in a community without many Asian Americans:
I took to heart very much…my Asian identity in my culture, or in my school growing up because I was the only…I considered myself the only Asian kid in the community where I grew up. Just dealing with the pressures of living up to my Asian identity I guess is what I constantly felt growing up because a lot of my peers saw me as that high achieving person because I’m Asian. That identity focused on all around being a higher achiever academically, and extracurricularly...then I also do believe that influenced me in thinking I was good at math and science, which I have found that I can do it, but I’m not phenomenal at it. Those were the preconceptions that I had about Asian people that really influenced my own self-perception.

Laura’s recollection of her childhood underscored some important features of the model minority stereotype. It was clear that academic achievement represented a meaningful aspect of Laura’s identity, one that she leaned on as a source of pride and measure of her value. Her tone, however, indicated that the pressure of “living up to [her] Asian identity” was often burdensome and even led her to misestimate her strengths and interests. This pressure seemed exacerbated by her status as one of the only Asian Americans in her school, contributing to Laura’s perceived need to be successful. Laura believed that her entire school presence was predicated on being the highest achiever. With a degree of amusement, Laura recalled that her classmates would brag when they earned a better grade than her on quizzes or exams, making her shortcomings a public affair. She did her best to take those moments in stride, but internalized feelings of inadequacy and defeat each time she failed to come out on top. After many years of constructing her identity around being academically successful, it is not surprising that Laura had the same expectations for herself when she started college and admitted to being “fixated on upholding that image.”
Joy also encountered the model minority stereotype at a young age, and like Laura, grew up in a predominantly white school district. In her account, she described her awareness of the model minority stereotype:

I was wide-eyed and aware of this cultural, not necessarily discrepancy, but just difference fundamentally, from a very young age. I think I looked around in like third or fourth grade and just knew what was happening. I mean, even as young as kindergarten or preschool my friends would like talk to me about me being Asian. They would always be like…“Oh my God, she’s so smart.” I was always told I was smart and I was very confident when I was young, and I was like, “Yeah, I am smart.”

The racialized messaging that Joy received as a young person solidified her identity as the “smart one” amongst her peers and bolstered her self-confidence. Ultimately, she attributed her academic prowess to a fundamental cultural difference, drawing a racial line between her and her non-Asian classmates:

I think [academic achievement] is just part of who we are. I think culturally Asians have come from such adversity, like from our countries of origin, that our parents and I guess our forefathers were like, “Well, how do we get out of this? How do we survive?”

Joy’s understanding of academic achievement reflects her belief in a shared group legacy across Asian Americans that harkens back to a history of struggle and oppression. With a tinge of sarcasm, she referenced the hardships that her family endured when they immigrated to the United States as overshadowing any difficulty she has had to face, making her task of simply getting good grades seem like a small price to pay in comparison. In any case, it was evident that Joy saw doing well academically as an inherent responsibility of her identity as an Asian...
American and therefore, the model minority stereotype resonated with her and aligned with her views on the cultural and racial underpinnings of achievement.

Even though several of the participants endorsed aspects of the model minority stereotype, they held mixed feelings about how it impacted their lives and identity development. While the constant positive reinforcement of their academic abilities once served to boost confidence and motivation, the pressure to perform became overwhelming when the participants started college and found themselves having to work harder than ever before to do well. Amy, Marvel, Steve, and Tony discussed how the model minority stereotype, paired with the expectations of their parents and extended family, led to extreme disappointment when they struggled academically. Tony captured the linkage between achievement and race that other participants alluded to by bluntly stating: “if you don’t fulfill the image…you’re a bad Asian.” The notion of being a “bad Asian” was echoed in the accounts of other participants as well, suggesting the existence of a narrow set of traits that Asian Americans are expected to uphold in order to be considered respectable representatives of their race. Thus, failing academically was socially shunned and carried weight beyond the consequences the participants encountered at school.

Racial stereotypes exerted influence on the identity development of the participants in the form of microaggressions, or subtle acts of everyday racism. Laura specifically spoke about microaggressions, a term that was introduced to her by the Asian American center at her university, to partially explain why she was so obsessed with maintaining an “outward image of being a successful Asian American.” Laura and other participants in the study were accustomed to being singled out as smart by their peers, a presumption based entirely on their race. Nearly all participants had been assumed by their peers to excel at math and science, even though none
of them named these subjects as their strengths during the interviews. Amy was quick to dismiss comments of this nature as “jokes,” while Marvel was less forgiving: “It’s funny when they say you must be good at math, you’re Korean, right? Yeah, it’s funny for the first five minutes but after that it gets old.” Marvel’s commentary indicates frustration with stereotypes aimed towards Asian Americans, even those that might seem harmless, or even complimentary, at first glance.

Kim shared a troubling example of how she experienced a microaggression directly linked to her course failure, with the aggressor being a professor. Upon learning that she had failed a course, Kim visited her professor to glean more information about her grade and options for remediation. The first question that her professor asked when trying to diagnose Kim’s difficulty with the course was if she used her “native language” to study the material. On the surface, this may appear to be a valid and harmless inquiry. For Kim, however, the question was steeped in racial assumptions about her ability to speak English and cast her as an “other” in comparison to her white, native English-speaking classmates:

It actually made me feel worse and if I had low self-esteem after [failing] it was completely crushed and I was like wow, I don’t even belong here…what she said made me feel like I’m always an outsider…like you don’t belong here because you’re not white and clearly you don’t even speak English…it kind of hit me pretty hard.

Kim described how her professor’s comment was especially damaging in light of her course failure, which meant that she was already in a vulnerable state. She recalled completely “shutting down” and falling into a depressive state after the conversation. Kim’s experience serves as a telling example of how microaggressions and stereotypes, racial identity, and academic difficulties intersect, illustrating the complexity of issues pertaining to Asian American
college students. The situation left such a strong negative impression on Kim that she credited her eagerness to participate in the present study specifically to her desire to share this story.

**Negotiating Asian and Mainstream Culture**

The participants in this study consciously considered various characteristics of Asian culture and mainstream culture in order to curate a set of values to guide their emerging identities as Asian American college students. This process was meaningful in the context of their academic setback because failing a course changed how the participants viewed themselves and their performance, in addition to altering their way of thinking about the future. Finding a comfortable balance between Asian and mainstream culture was not easy and often left participants feeling confused and discouraged.

All participants except for Amy asserted that they felt tension between Asian and mainstream culture as it related to their identity as an Asian American college student. When asked about her identity as an Asian American, she shrugged her shoulders and said: “It doesn’t impact me that much…I don’t really think there’s much to it, at least not in my life.” Amy, however, spoke at length about being aware of stereotypes targeting Asian Americans and feeling pressure to be successful in light of her parents’ struggles as Chinese immigrants earlier in the interview, demonstrating that she is affected by her status as an Asian American, but perhaps not in ways that she explicitly links to her identity, considers in terms of race, or recognizes as problematic.

The other participants responded with examples of how Asian culture and mainstream culture collide in their lives. Some stated that starting college and moving away from their families was the first time they were exposed to other cultures. Being around peers that were raised differently caused them to reflect and attribute various aspects of their identity to being
Asian and raised by immigrant parents in ways that they had not previously contemplated. For instance, Marvel discovered that he envied his non-Asian college classmates that had not grown up with the intense focus on academics and parental influence that he had:

> When I started college, I was exposed to everything. I was exposed to people from different parts of the country. If there’s one thing that I wanted so much that my fellow colleagues had that I don’t is a childhood. Also they got to choose their profession. They got to pick the classes that they want to take. To this day, I’m so envious of that.

Marvel’s statement about his classmates choosing their professions and courses is meant to contrast with his own situation, in which his parents strongly guided his choice of major. His feelings of resentment were exacerbated when he started having academic difficulties and searched for someone or something to blame for his shortcomings. Marvel conflated his unhappiness with his upbringing as an Asian American, an aspect of his identity that became increasingly more apparent in college.

Tony and Steve described the tension they felt between Asian culture and mainstream culture as the cause of a significant amount of identity confusion. Tony saw himself as having two distinct halves, one Asian and the other American, and he listed the traits that he associated with each half. Like Marvel, Tony referenced starting college as a crossroads where his mentality and attitude started to shift in the direction of becoming more typically American especially in terms of his leadership and communication styles. But, his friends have contradictorily accused him of being both “White-washed” and “so Asian,” leaving him pulled in two different directions. Steve also felt conflicted, calling his identity a “really big question” that he has spent a considerable amount of time pondering. Due to his physical appearance, Steve noted that he would always be considered different from other Americans and felt
marginalized as a result. At the same time, he believes that other Asians see him as more American, leaving him genuinely puzzled and asking: “Wait, who am I really?”

For Tony, Steve, and several other participants, contending with identity confusion added a layer of complexity to their college experiences in general, but especially to their experiences with academic setbacks. Many participants felt a lack of control over how others viewed them, making it difficult to exert their opinions and individuality. Molly, for instance, considered her role as her parents’ daughter to supersede her own goals and ambitions. Joy agreed, saying “I don’t think there’s ever a break from when you can be your own person from when you were your parents’ child in Asian culture.” Knowing that their obligations to their parents were non-negotiable made it essential for the participants to persist in their majors even after they found themselves falling behind and failing courses.

The participants’ accounts inferred that failing a course impacted their identity development by pushing them to evaluate their situations from other perspectives. For example, the experience of failure caused the participants to envy their non-Asian classmates for their perceived freedom from their parents and ease with exerting individuality. It generated resentment for the aspects of their identity that they attributed to being Asian and left the participants feeling powerless and unable to influence their future career paths.

Conclusions

For the participants, developing an identity as an Asian American college student was complicated, especially as they encountered and dealt with academic difficulties. On one hand, they were forced to contend with race-based stereotypes that perpetuated assumptions about their strengths and weaknesses on a group level, with no appreciation for individual differences. This meant that their successes were ascribed to being Asian American rather than their personal
talents or hard work and likewise, their failures were recognized as signs that they were “bad Asians,” as Tony noted in his interview. While the participants seemed to internalize these racial stereotypes to varying degrees, it was clear through their accounts that they all felt pressure and stress as a result of the widespread social expectations for their success.

Another way that the participants described being conflicted was in sorting out the Asian and American aspects of their identities. Having to simultaneously navigate Asian culture and mainstream culture was laden with frustration and resentment for many of the participants. At their core, the participants felt obligated to their parents’ and their Asian values. Yet, as college students, they found themselves being lured by the independence and individualism they saw in their non-Asian classmates. The participants’ accounts suggested that they believed their college experiences and future outlooks would be different if they were not Asian American, a reality that was especially salient when they encountered their academic setbacks.

Moving Forward with Purpose

Moving forward with purpose is the sixth superordinate theme and depicts the participants’ final thoughts on failing a course, which converge around two subordinate themes: Taking time to reflect and Finding closure. The participants in the study were forthcoming in speaking about their academic setbacks and contemplating what went wrong leading up to failing a course, as summarized in the first subordinate theme Taking time to reflect. Indeed, reflection was a critical step in helping the participants to mentally process failure and their subsequent thoughts shed light on how campus environments might be improved to strengthen support for students in similar situations. The second subordinate theme, Finding closure, traces the growth and recovery process that the participants experienced as a direct result of failing a course. It
showcases the ways in which the participants came to terms with reality, achieved new levels of personal growth, and found motivation for the remainder of their college careers.

**Taking Time to Reflect**

All participants spent time reflecting on their experience of failing a course, both on their own immediately following the event and in preparation for the interviews that took place as part of this study. Thus, the reflection process was twofold: a natural response to the situation in the moment and a deliberate exercise many months later. The resultant data revealed helpful information for the participants themselves, as well as useful considerations for faculty and staff that support Asian American students through academic difficulties. First, reflection enabled participants to diagnose the underlying issues that led to their course failure. All participants were able to identify missteps, tracing back to their transition to college that contributed to their eventual difficulties. Interestingly, the data hinted at a gender divide amongst the participants with the male participants focusing on having an inappropriate mindset for college and the female participants believing that their overconfidence was to blame for their academic troubles. The male participants (Marvel, Tony, and Steve) all made comments suggesting that they started college with a lack of direction and discipline. They recognized that their previous success as high school students had been driven by their parents, who carefully monitored their study time and grades. In the absence of their parents’ daily oversight, they found themselves without the time management and study skills to do well. Hence, the over involvement of the participants’ parents in high school seemed to lead to their downfall in college. Their parents’ obsession with grades undermined the participants’ intrinsic motivation for learning as indicated by Marvel: “I wasn’t getting grades for me…I was getting the grades for my parents…I couldn’t care less.”
His comment echoed the sentiments of Tony and Steve, who also claimed to suffer from indifference and apathy towards their studies.

In contrast, the female participants viewed the origin of their academic difficulties to be their overconfidence, rather than lack of motivation. Amy, Kim, Molly, Laura, and Joy were all academically successful in high school and were accustomed to not putting forth much effort to be at the top of their class. Like their male counterparts, this meant that the female participants were unaware of what was required of them to get the grades they were used to earning. In particular, Kim and Laura found themselves overextended, drowning in a series of extracurricular activities they felt compelled to join as a continuation of their involvement in high school. Laura, acknowledging her shortsightedness, eventually realized that she could not do it all in college:

It’s really hard because you overachieve in a situation where you don’t even know how to achieve yet. That was the experience that I’ve had here in taking on a lot of extracurricular opportunities and not really solidifying my academic success yet because I actually took for granted that I was going to be able to succeed academically here. Because I thought I had built a good enough basis in high school to be able to continue that pattern in college, but it’s a completely different beast.

Laura’s reflection denotes an honest assessment of her admittedly naïve approach to college and her efforts to recalibrate her definition of success to fit the rigors of a challenging, science-based college major. Similar to Laura, the other female participants recognized that they needed to do things differently in order to achieve in college, but were not sure how to adapt and were reluctant to seek help from their advisors or professors. For instance, Amy recalled attending her professor’s office hours during the semester she failed and wrote the experience off as
“unhelpful.” She never returned, despite being well aware that she was in danger of failing. In hindsight, all participants readily identified signs that they were in academic trouble; it was unclear to them, however, whether they recognized their academic weaknesses at the time. Based on their accounts, it seems likely that the participants realized on some level that they were headed in the wrong direction, but were unwilling to take steps to rectify the situation due to lack of motivation, shame and embarrassment, or skepticism concerning the helpfulness of faculty and staff.

The participants also divulged disappointment with their campus environment as they reflected on their course failures. Several participants mentioned feeling inadequately supported by their professors, advisors, and other administrators with the most common issue being not treated as an individual. Marvel, Kim, and Joy felt as though all Asian students were treated as foreigners, despite the fact that many students of Asian descent at their school were born and raised in the United States. Kim agreed and found this tendency offensive, urging faculty in particular to act with more sensitivity for students’ diverse backgrounds:

So the most important thing is to break through the stereotype that all Asians are the same. And just start to treat students as individuals and get to know who they are before passing judgment or making any recommendations that may be completely off base.

Other participants agreed with Kim’s assessment, wishing that faculty and staff possessed a better understanding of Asian Americans in general. Several participants felt as though their professors looked down on them for pursuing a major out of obligation to their parents and were unwilling to see this as a valid reason for choosing a career path. In general, the participants perceived a lack of empathy on the part of their professors and as a result, felt disconnected and discouraged.
The participants reported that reflecting on their experience of failing a course was therapeutic, providing an opportunity for them to accept responsibility in part for what happened, but also to identify ways in which their campus environment had neglected to meet their needs. They recognized their own shortcomings, such as lack of motivation or reluctance to seek help, while pointing out valid reasons for feeling marginalized and unfairly treated by their professors. The participants also acknowledged that they underutilized certain campus resources, like career advising and mental health counseling, that may have facilitated a more successful transition to college or helped them to overcome their academic setbacks.

**Finding Closure**

After taking time to reflect, the participants exhibited noticeable signs of growth, maturity, and confidence as a result of their self-reflection. They searched for meaning through travel, new relationships, and the exploration of spirituality. By finding closure through an array of avenues, the participants were able to move forward with a fresh outlook and greater sense of self-assuredness than prior to their failure.

Nearly all participants wrestled with managing their emotions related to failure, especially in the context of their parents’ involvement. Several participants disclosed that they kept their feelings heavily guarded, out of shame and embarrassment, but also because they presumed they would not receive emotional support from their families and most of their friends. After having kept their feelings pent up and private during the period that followed learning about their failure and telling their parents, most of the participants experienced a monumental sense of relief when they started making plans for moving forward. For some participants, this meant taking time off until the course they failed was offered again. Others were allowed to continue taking courses, but needed to create a remediation plan to be approved by their
program’s academic standing committee. In both cases, the participants described feeling relieved and grateful to have what they viewed as a fresh start. Amy, for example, expected to take a year off and began making plans to do volunteer work, something she had always wanted to do but never had the time. Thinking back, she recalled feeling transfixed by the prospect of not being in school, having just completed such a difficult semester: “Oh, so now I have this entire year that is like free from classes and free from everything.” The emphasis she placed on feeling “free” contrasted with how she felt about being in school and trapped in a program that she did not feel she could leave. In the end, Amy was not required to take a year off, a decision that she met with “mixed emotions.”

In the aftermath of failing a course, several participants recovered by establishing distance from their parents. Performing an act of independence was important to the participants as a declaration of their autonomy. Both Tony and Kim took vacations where they found physical separation and refuge from their academic struggles in a new environment. Kim’s trip, in particular, played an important role in her coping process. Kim had been so distraught by her failure that she decided to travel to the west coast by herself, to a place she had never been before. She went without plans and felt liberated by the opportunity to chart her own path and find adventure in new relationships and experiences. While on her trip, she met a woman that had been in an accident that nearly left her paralyzed. The incident gave this woman, who also happened to be Asian American, the courage to follow her own dreams, rather than take over her family’s business. Kim found inspiration in this timely encounter and it helped her put her own situation into perspective. Here, the fact that the woman Kim met had been Asian American was significant to her and points to the value in having connections with same race peers and mentors. This idea was echoed in other accounts as well, with several participants mentioning
that they felt more comfortable seeking advice from other Asian Americans and deliberately sought out the services of Asian American counselors and advisors.

Another way that participants coped with failure once reality set in was by seeking emotional distance from their parents and alternative ways for making sense of their existence. Steve, for example, spoke eloquently and proudly about finally taking self-ownership for his actions, after having previously blamed his parents for his plight:

…instead of blaming my parents and instead of feeling in a sense, sorry for myself, the way I have now started to think about my experiences is that instead of regret, it’s become more of…self-ownership of my own experiences. In addition to self-ownership is to really hold that experience close and move forward with it…then, now, it’s no longer regret because I have evolved and I do have the ability to change and make decisions for myself.

Steve’s progression from being a struggling student to a confident, enlightened thinker is evident in his account, despite his struggles with depression and lack of motivation. The support of his parents in granting him permission to change majors contributed to his development, as well as the time he spent introspectively processing the situation. In addition, two participants discussed how exploring religion and spirituality helped them make sense of their failure and find the emotional courage to move forward. Laura mentioned that after failing she found comfort in spirituality, something that was not part of her upbringing. A desire for a different source of guidance and encouragement inspired her interest: “The answers that I had previously had from my normal, I guess, support network were not working for me at that point.” Molly, a follower of the Christian faith, also drew upon religion to aid her self-reflection after failing a course. She integrated Buddhist concepts, which were new to her, in her way of thinking about her place in
the world and purpose in life. Both Laura and Molly utilized spirituality as a strategy for finding meaning and direction that was distinct from their parents’ orders.

For the participants, coming to terms with failure involved taking steps towards creating a new reality in which they began to see themselves as more independent from their parents than they had before. Upon reflection, many of the participants were able to recognize why their parents imposed such a narrow definition of success. They were able to compartmentalize their parents’ views and begin finding meaning and comfort from other sources. While it is not clear whether or not the participants would have experienced this newfound independence organically as they progressed through their college careers, the participants pointed to their academic struggles and subsequent course failure as a catalyst for change. Looking back, the participants expressed feeling grateful for the chance to start anew in the wake of failure and most did so with clarity of purpose and resolve.

Conclusions

Moving forward after failure was a difficult task for the participants in this study, yet the time spent reflecting and rebuilding their confidence enabled them to mature emotionally, become more independent, and develop mental grit. Reflection benefited the participants in two ways. First, the process of reflecting was therapeutic and helped participants to see their failure as a consequence of their choices and circumstances, but not as an indication that they had failed at life. Second, reflecting allowed participants to examine the conditions of their failure and identify the issues that led to their academic difficulties. To varying extents, they were able to parse out the characteristics of their failure that had been within their control and distinguish them from aspects that fell outside their control, such as the influence of their parents or the insensitivity of faculty members. In addition to reflecting, failing a course initiated a desire for
the participants to explore different ways of finding meaning and purpose. They took trips, explored new religions, or proactively reframed their expectations for success. It was evident through the content and tone of the accounts that the participants grew tremendously as a result of their academic setbacks and emerged with a stronger sense of resolve and self-awareness.

Summary

This study explored how Asian American college students made sense of an academic setback while pursuing an undergraduate degree in the health professions at a highly selective university. An academic setback was defined as not passing a required course, not being allowed to progress in one’s major resulting in delayed graduation, or being academically dismissed from one’s major. At the time the data were collected, seven participants were majoring in pharmacy and one participant was majoring in health science. All participants took part in in-depth interviews with the researcher, during which they engaged in a semi-structured conversation about their academic setbacks. After carefully analyzing the data, six superordinate and twelve subordinate themes were identified that captured the essence of what failure meant to these participants. While each participant offered a nuanced perspective, all participants expressed similar comments for each superordinate theme. The subordinate themes provide detailed support for each superordinate theme, highlighting topics for which at least half of the participants shared aligning or related thoughts. The data revealed that failing a course was a significant event for the participants, given the pressure they felt to be academically successful and the perceived consequences of not living up to that expectation.

In order to interpret what an academic setback meant to the participants, it was essential to understand the broader landscape of why they chose their course of study and how they felt about their college majors. All eight participants emphasized that their parents played an
important and central role in selecting their major. Their parents, without exception, insisted that
the participants choose a major that would lead to a prestigious, financially lucrative career and
the health professions were commonly proposed as a reliable option. Even more desirable was
the pharmacy program offered by the participants’ university that admitted students directly out
of college to a six-year course of study terminating with a doctoral degree and the ability to
obtain a license to practice. All eight participants were pharmacy majors, although one
participant had transferred to the health science major by the time of his interview. The
participants’ viewed selecting a college major as a decision that required the endorsement of
their parents and as a result, suppressed their own ideas about what they might like to study and
eventually pursue as a career. Their mindset was focused on fulfilling a duty to their parents, as
well as maintaining their financial backing throughout college. Their accounts suggested an
underlying fear that if they did not comply with the expected plan, they would compromise their
relationship with their parents and subsequently lose their love, support, and respect. For these
reasons, the participants viewed their academic setback as an impediment to fulfilling an
obligation to their parents and perceived it as severely jeopardizing their role within their family
and community.

Despite having misgivings about their parents’ involvement in decisions related to
academics, the participants were willing to tolerate their input. In retrospect, the participants
recognized the ways in which their parents’ unrelenting focus on academics and narrow
definition of success impacted their childhood, negatively affecting their self-esteem and attitude
towards school. Nevertheless, the participants recognized that their parents poured enormous
resources into providing them with the highest quality educational experiences. They
acknowledged that their parents believed obtaining an education and securing a stable career was
the most certain way to ensure that they have a comfortable life, validating the hardships, sacrifices, and racism that they endured as immigrants. Ultimately, the participants perceived their parents as having their best interests in mind, despite the overwhelming stress and anxiety associated with their demands.

For nearly all of the participants, failing a course brought upon a phase of debilitating emotional distress followed by a period of coping, reconciliation, and reevaluation of goals and plans. The participants described feeling shocked, devastated, and disoriented by their course failure, which they attributed to never having failed anything before and to a perceived lack of supportive networks. Many of the participants allowed their failure to consume them, believing that they had failed at life and would no longer have the respect of their friends and families. In fact, telling their parents about the failure was viewed as the most challenging aspect of the academic setback for most participants. Nevertheless, all participants found ways to cope with failure and come to terms with their academic situations. While many of the participants determined that pharmacy was not a good fit, all but one remained in the pharmacy program after discovering that their parents were unreceptive to changing majors. That said, failing a course seemed to stretch the participants’ ability to regulate their emotions and consider their future outlooks more independently.

Another aspect of failing that the data exposed as salient to the participants’ experience was the development of an identity as an Asian American college student. The participants were acutely aware of race-based stereotypes, most notably the model minority stereotype, which presumes Asian Americans to excel academically and professionally. All participants readily shared examples of times when the model minority stereotype had been applied to them, expressing mixed feelings about its impact. Some participants felt they had benefited from the
fact that society perceived them to be successful. At the same time, they acknowledged the
downsides as feeling excessive pressure to achieve and being disappointed and embarrassed
when they are unable to meet expectations. In addition, the participants felt tension between the
Asian and American sides of their identities. While the Asian values espoused by their parents
ultimately dictated their academic and career paths, their worldview was altered by exposure to
peers with diverse backgrounds and the independence they gained by starting college and
moving away from home.

Finally, the participants’ accounts provided encouraging evidence that the experience of
failure provided an important opportunity to reflect, find closure, and eventually move forward
towards reframed future goals. Despite the initial shock and devastation associated with failing a
course, the participants were able to emerge from the setback with greater levels of confidence,
independence, and mental fortitude. The jolting experience of failure served as an impetus to
find meaning in new ways, pushing the boundaries of their parents’ narrow view of success. The
participants described being enlightened by travel, seeking mentorship, and exploring
spirituality, activities they would have been unlikely to undertake if they had not experienced an
academic setback. They also alluded to ways in which campus environments might be improved
to better serve Asian American students that experience academic challenges, such as enhancing
faculty and staff awareness for issues pertaining to Asian Americans, making a concerted effort
to treat Asian American students as individuals, and providing opportunities for Asian American
students to interact with same-race role models or mentors.

The data gleaned from this analysis provide support for an approach to working with
Asian American students that takes into account their unique circumstances, especially during
times of academic difficulty. The following chapter will consider the thematic findings in
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore how Asian American college students experience and make sense of academic difficulties while pursuing an undergraduate degree in the health professions at a highly selective, private, research university. Kodama et al.’s (2002) Asian American psychosocial student development model served as a theoretical framework for the project. The model, a derivative of Chickering’s (1969) seminal work on student development, highlights the centrality of identity, purpose, and the expectations of family and society for Asian American college students. The model emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Asian American college student experience in pointing out a particular set of factors that influences the ways in which this population views their time in college and makes decisions about their future careers. In addition, critical race theory, which encourages the undoing of racial stereotypes and the uplifting of voices from marginalized groups (Parker, 2015), inspired the design and spirit of this inquiry. The study utilized a qualitative research approach in keeping with the goal of exploring the problem rather than explaining it and focusing on learning directly from participants (Creswell, 2012). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as the research methodology for this study. The purpose of IPA is to discover how individuals make sense of their lived experiences by carefully examining and offering an interpretation of their personal accounts (Smith et al., 2009). IPA places importance on understanding the meaning that individuals attribute to their experiences, which aligns well with the research question and overarching goals of this study.
Given the lack of research on Asian American students that struggle in college, this study aimed to address a critical gap in the knowledge base while raising awareness for a growing, and largely misunderstood, population of students. The study answered the following research question: What does encountering an academic difficulty mean to certain Asian American students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a highly selective, private, research university? Eight participants enrolled in health professions majors were recruited using purposeful sampling to take part in in-depth interviews about their experiences with an academic setback. All participants were first or second generation Asian American students that had failed one or more requirements for their major and faced consequences ranging from remediation coursework to delayed graduation.

Analysis of the data revealed six superordinate themes that were of significance to the research question and for which all or most of the participants made similar or related comments. The superordinate themes were: Choosing a career path, Tolerating parental involvement in educational decision-making, Responding emotionally to failing a course, Coping with failing a course, Developing an identity as an Asian American college student, and Moving forward with purpose. In this chapter, the superordinate themes will be discussed in the context of existing literature with a focus on how this study’s findings either clarify or problematize what other studies say. The findings will also be considered in relationship to the theoretical framework. The chapter will conclude with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

**Choosing a Career Path**

Several studies have examined the conditions that contribute to selecting a college major for Asian American students (Dundes et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2014; Min & Jang, 2014; Museus,
These studies suggest that Asian Americans consider a different set of priorities than their non-Asian peers when deciding on a major. The participants in this study were asked to speak about their decision to pursue majors in the health professions in order to understand what their major meant to them, forming the basis for the first superordinate theme, *Choosing a career path*.

The data revealed the finding that participants viewed selecting a major as a family decision spearheaded by their parents, rather than an individual choice based on their own ambitions. All participants in this study cited the first subordinate theme, *Influence of family*, as their primary motivation for selecting their majors in the health professions. In contrast, the second subordinate theme, *Interest in field*, was referenced with less frequency and conviction. In their accounts, the participants emphasized the central role that their parents and other family members played in the decision-making process, ranging from offering guidance towards certain majors to imposing ultimatums that severely limited their choices. The participants were inclined to defer to their parents’ wishes when it came to choosing a major, even when it meant setting aside their academic strengths and personal interests. Moreover, the participants’ parents possessed an extremely narrow opinion of what was deemed an acceptable career path. The participants referenced majors in the health professions, the focus of this study, along with law or engineering as fields that their parents actively endorsed. Careers in teaching, the arts, and the social sciences were commonly regarded as unacceptable. The health professions, specifically doctoral degrees in medicine and pharmacy, were highly desirable for the participants’ families due to the job security, financial rewards, and social prestige they were expected to deliver.

The current body of literature supports this study’s finding that parental input drives college major choice for Asian American students and that certain majors are more desirable
than others. In a study conducted by Dundes, Cho, and Kwok (2009), Asian American students were more likely than their White counterparts to feel that parental influence was the determining factor in their decision about which college to attend and which major to pursue. Moreover, Dundes et al. found that parents exerted influence by emphasizing the importance of practical matters, namely prestige and earning potential, over their children’s happiness or personal fulfillment. Their participants, similar to the participants in this study, assumed a sense of familial honor or duty that ultimately led them to comply with their parents’ demands. This is consistent with research on East Asian cultural values that promote collectivism and interdependence, elevating the importance of the family at the expense of the individual (Kim et al., 2001). Another consequence of interdependence is the notion that a child’s successes and failures represent an entire family’s worth and status, adding to the pressure Asian Americans are under to achieve.

The participants in this study spoke extensively about the types of majors that their parents supported, echoing what Shen (2015) called “culturally valued majors” in a study on how Asian American college students select their majors. Asian American parents, in particular, are well known for encouraging their children to take up culturally valued majors. Culturally valued majors, for many Asian Americans, are those that lead to high salary and prestigious careers. They are often concentrated in the fields of math and science, among which the health professions are a popular choice. Previous research has shown that a strong parental preference for certain majors is indeed associated with the decision-making behavior of their children (Okubo et al., 2007; Poon, 2014; Shen, 2015; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). In the present study, participants recounted various ways that their parents expressed a preference for majors in the health professions. Their parents ensured that they were prepared academically, conducted
research on universities offering health professions majors, helped with the application process, and routinely downplayed other majors that did not meet their culturally valued criteria. These explicit actions took root in the participants’ psyches, shaping their sense of purpose and leading them to make choices that aligned with their parents’ wishes.

According to the participants, another way their parents exerted influence was by emphasizing the success stories of family members and close Asian American friends that had launched lucrative careers in the health professions. While advocating in this way for their children to pursue certain fields, their parents were implicitly reinforcing the existence of cultural stereotypes about the appropriateness of certain careers for Asian Americans (Shen, 2015). Research on the vocational pathways of Asian American college students provides empirical evidence for the high concentration of Asian Americans in the health professions, as well as other math and science fields, relative to other races (Min & Jang, 2014). Xie and Goyette (2003) proposed a framework to explain why Asian Americans tend to choose from a similar set of occupations. Their framework, known as “strategic adaptation,” argues that Asian Americans elect to pursue careers in the math and science fields because of a desire to avoid discrimination in jobs with less representation among Asian Americans and to capitalize on an opportunity to earn marketable credentials, such as licensure in the health professions, to overcome a perceived disadvantage in the labor market. The strategic adaption framework is consistent with the participants in this study who felt that their parents, at least in part, desired to “level the playing field” or “play it safe” by encouraging health professions majors. It also substantiates the sentiment that participants believed their parents were not acting arbitrarily by influencing their choice of major, but rather had their best interests at heart.
This study’s finding that choosing a major was a decision predominantly shaped by parental influence is important to consider in the context of encountering an academic difficulty, an angle that has not been explored in previous studies. As demonstrated through the analysis of the participants’ accounts, studying the health professions was first and foremost a vehicle for fulfilling a familial obligation. Even though several participants expressed an interest in the field, many of them also shared concerns about the compatibility of the health professions with their academic strengths and interests, resulting in nearly all participants starting college with varying degrees of doubt, hesitancy, and regret. Yet, the participants felt constrained by their parents’ demands and recognized their major and subsequent career as a non-negotiable responsibility and expression of duty. Because they viewed their major in this way, the participants were reluctant to explore alternatives, even when they struggled academically and were encouraged by advisors to consider other programs. The participants’ descriptions of how and why they chose to pursue majors in the health professions provide a telling glimpse into their mindsets as they embarked on their college journeys and navigated challenges both on campus and at home with their families.

**Tolerating Parental Involvement in Educational Decision-making**

Asian American parenting practices are often discussed in the context of academic achievement, leading up to and extending beyond the college years (Lee & Min, 2013; Lee & Zhou, 2014; Louie, 2001; Samura, 2015; Turner, Chandler, & Heffer, 2009; Zhou & Kim, 2006). The participants in this study noted that education and academic success formed the foundation of their relationship with their parents, yielding the superordinate theme *Tolerating parental involvement in educational decision-making*. As such, the participants made keen observations, even as young children, that they were different from their non-Asian peers at school.
Recollections of their childhood encompassed the subordinate themes Parental prioritization of academics and Recognition of parental sacrifice and hardships.

The key finding emerging from this set of themes is that the participants endured extreme pressure to succeed throughout their upbringing, which they acknowledged during their interviews either explicitly or implicitly as the natural and unavoidable consequence of “Asian parenting.” The participants characterized Asian parenting as prioritizing academics over all else, superseding social interactions with peers and emotional well-being. Chao (1994) wrote about Asian American parenting in a seminal article published in the early 1990s. Chao asserted that Asian American parenting is guided by two concepts with roots in Confucianism: chiao shun and guan. Chiao shun is most often translated as training or educating children how to behave according to cultural expectations; guan means to govern or control. The pairing of chiao shun and guan is directly linked to an emphasis on academics, as the most common way of “training” children is to ensure that they perform well in school. Whereas the words train and control are often assigned a negative connotation in Western cultures, Asians interpret chiao shun and guan as a positive form of fulfilling parental responsibility and caring for children. This is resonant of the participants’ accounts, in which they acknowledged that their parents’ prioritization of academics, albeit intense and extreme, had their best interests at heart. It also aligns with the participants’ belief that doing well in school was a matter of obligation to their families, rather than a personal pursuit.

Other researchers have investigated Asian American achievement and parenting practices, offering additional explanations for the phenomenon and analyzing its consequences for children and young adults (Lee & Min, 2015; Park, 2012; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Sue and Okazaki (1990) proposed the concept of relative functionalism, arguing
that the reason Asian American parents place importance on achievement is because they have been unsuccessful in attaining upward mobility in careers that do not reply upon education. Therefore, Sue and Okazaki do not recognize emphasizing academics as a cultural trait, but rather they see it as an adaptive quality with underpinnings in larger issues such as discrimination and social marginalization. Lee and Zhou (2015), on the other hand, argue that Asian American achievement is grounded predominantly in immigration patterns that favor Asians with higher levels of education than nonimmigrants from their countries of origin, as well as the average native-born American. As of result of this “hyper-selectivity” (p. 6), Lee and Zhou suggest that Asian immigrants import class-specific mindsets and the wherewithal to reproduce educational success once they arrive in the United States. It also explains the development and prolific circulation of educational resources within Asian immigrant communities, such as private academies offering accelerated lessons in math, English, and standardized test preparation (Park, 2012; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Several participants mentioned attending supplementary education courses like these at the insistence of their parents, ensuring that they were well prepared for college and underscoring the importance of social capital for Asian Americans as it relates to academic achievement.

In a separate study, Lee and Zhou (2014) proposed the existence of an Asian American success frame, which depicts success as “getting straight A’s in high school, graduating from an elite university, and pursuing an advanced degree” (p. 52). Lee and Zhou concluded that adhering to the success frame was common across Asian American families from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, perhaps accounting for the children from poor and working class families that have been able to overcome structural barriers in order to attain educational success on pair with their middle and upper class peers. The success frame theory was echoed in the
participants’ accounts of their parents’ emphasis on academic excellence and insistence on working towards socially prestigious and financially lucrative degrees. The participants in this study discussed how their parents enforced the success frame by providing endless resources and support towards meeting its goals and by shunning anything that did not fit within its bounds. As several participants noted, it was very important to their parents that they major in the health professions because those careers require specialized degrees and licensure, which were perceived to be advantageous in a competitive job market and a reliable way to achieve stability. Furthermore, the participants in this study came from varying socioeconomic backgrounds with parents that immigrated to the United States under assorted circumstances, reinforcing Lee and Zhou’s (2014) idea that the Asian American success frame is applicable irrespective of class.

The fact that all of the participants came from immigrant families influenced their attitudes towards education, leading to the second subordinate theme, Recognition of parental sacrifice and hardships. Because the participants’ viewed their parents as having endured a multitude of difficulties in their lives associated with being immigrants, the participants felt indebted to their parents and obligated to make use of the advantages afforded to them in the United States. They acknowledged that their parents had experienced discrimination in the workplace, loss of social standing, and financial insecurity as a result of their status as immigrants. The participants, as a result, were inclined not only to suppress their own interests and career aspirations and defer to their parents’ wishes, but they were also averse to burdening their parents with their frustrations and insecurities related to academics. Louie (2001) reported similar findings in her study of Asian American immigrant families in which participants “framed their achievement in school as the payoff for their parents’ migration journeys” (p. 464). Louie’s work reinforces the transactional nature of the relationship between Asian American
immigrant parents and their children, whereby the parents provide resources for their children’s education and the children are responsible for meeting expectations for academic success. This dynamic was evidenced in the accounts of participants in the present study, most overtly those with parents that had proposed ultimatums offering to fund applications only to certain universities or to pay tuition for some college majors and not others.

Tseng (2004) demonstrated that immigrant families display higher levels of family interdependence than non-immigrant families and that children of immigrants often interpret family obligation as their primary motivation to succeed, both academically and professionally. Building on Louie’s (2001) research, Tseng adds that the awareness children have for their parents’ struggles as immigrants is meaningful and strengthens the desire for them to be able to provide for their parents in the future. Family interdependence is often associated with acculturation, or the extent to which an individual has adapted to the host culture, with lower levels of acculturation meaning higher levels of family interdependence (Poon, 2014). This line of reasoning suggests that Asian American college students that are more acculturated are more likely to place less value on family interdependence and as a result be willing to deviate from their parents’ demands and pursue majors and careers that would be considered atypical or unacceptable by traditional Asian standards. In contrast, the data from this study indicated that the significance of family interdependence is independent of acculturation. The participants presented themselves as highly acculturated in all aspects of their lives except for family interdependence, especially when it came to education and standards for academic success. This discovery emphasizes the prominence of family for many Asian American college students and those with immigrant parents in particular, showing that decisions related to education require parental input and being academically successful is an imperative subject to strict criteria.
Responding Emotionally to Failing a Course

For the participants, encountering an academic setback and subsequently not meeting their parents’ expectations was an unsettling experience. The superordinate theme *Responding emotionally to failing a course* captured the essence of the participants’ first reactions as they processed the shock of failure. The participants described the numbing emotions they felt upon discovering they had failed a course with vivid clarity, recalling the devastation, despair, and hopelessness that consumed them in the days that followed. Most notably, the participants conveyed *Feeling disorientated and out of the control* in the short-term and dealing with *Erosion of self-esteem* in the long-term, the two subordinate themes in this section.

The participants noted that they had an immediate and strong reaction to failing a course characterized by uncontrollable negative emotions that eventually devolved into the deterioration of their self-efficacy and self-esteem. Several of the participants stated that their reaction was amplified due to the fact that they had never before experienced failure. To the contrary, academic perfectionism had been the goal of the participants up to that point. Castro and Rice (2003) examined perfectionism using a sample of Asian American, African American, and Caucasian college students and showed that Asian American students internalized more dimensions of perfectionism than the other ethnic groups in the study. In particular, Asian American students reported higher personal standards, more fear over making mistakes, greater levels of self-doubt, and frequent criticism from their parents, leading to maladaptive depressive symptoms. The participants in the present study exhibited similar characteristics of perfectionism, exacerbating the shock of failing a course and explaining the intensely negative feelings they harbored while facing their setback. The tunnel vision that the participants had developed after years of being focused on perfectionism and adhering to the strict Asian
American success frame (Lee and Zhou, 2014) obscured their ability to manage their emotions and view their failure as an isolated occurrence, rather than a warning that they were doomed to a lifetime of failure.

Little has been written specifically about how Asian American college students react to incidents of academic failure. Like Castro and Rice (2003), Saw et al. (2013) found that Asian American college students were more likely to worry about academic matters and hold themselves to higher standards for scholastic performance than their White counterparts, implying that failing a course might trigger a negative response. Indeed, the participants in this study recalled a sudden torrent of emotions when they realized they had failed a course. Rather than seeking support, nearly all participants remained isolated and some fell into a state of depression. The participants’ accounts indicated that the moment when grades are released is a time of vulnerability for students, deserving of heightened surveillance and outreach from university personnel, especially given that Asian Americans tend to report higher levels of suicide ideation compared to other college students (Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005). One study that investigated Asian Americans revealed that unfulfilled expectations and perceived burdensomeness were the primary causes of suicide ideation (Wong et al., 2011). It is not hard to see how an academic failure, such as the ones experienced by the participants in the present study, could fall into those categories.

Another area of research speaks to how students understood their failure by considering the interplay between ability and effort. Weiner (1986) proposed an attribution theory in which reactions to success or failure are intuitively outcome-dependent: achieving success results in positive feelings and undergoing failure results in negative feelings. Weiner suggests, however, that when individuals experience failure their perceived actions leading up to the incident may
produce distinctive emotional reactions. In other words, a student that believes he or she made a concerted effort throughout the term but still failed a course may feel worse than a student that admits to not making an honest effort. This was true of the participants in the present study, with most of them claiming to have worked hard. One participant, Steve, had decided early on that he did not want to be a pharmacist and assessed his effort as low in the course that he failed, leaving him less disappointed than the others that felt they had tried. Fwu, Wang, Chen, and Wei (2017) point out that for students raised with Confucian values effort is viewed honorably as a guarantor of success, even more so than intelligence or predilection for the subject matter. This means that when a student puts forth effort yet still fails a course, they may be inclined to overgeneralize the failure and see it as a negative reflection on who they are as a person, causing an onslaught of destructive feelings similar to what the participants described in their accounts.

Battling a diminished sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem after failing a course was a persistent issue for the participants in this study. Self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s ability to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1977), is commonly regarded as a predictor of academic performance (Yuan, Weiser, & Fischer, 2016). The participants in the study grew up believing that they were smart and capable when it came to academics, signs of strong self-efficacy. They were accustomed to doing well in school and being respected for getting good grades. However, failing a course caused them to question their abilities, implying that their self-efficacy was fragile and easily disturbed. Yuan, Weiser, and Fischer (2016) compared the self-efficacy of European American and Asian American college students, discovering that for Asian Americans, parent-child relationships were associated with self-efficacy. In their study, Asian American college students seemed to draw on their parents’ high expectations for success to bolster their self-efficacy, producing desirable academic outcomes. That said, Yuan et al. found that Asian
American parents tended to demand that their children perform well, but paid less attention to nurturing their children’ confidence in their abilities. In the present study, this subtlety may be responsible for the frailty of the participants’ self-efficacy and self-esteem, which seemed to break down when they hit an academic obstacle. It also suggests that support programs targeting Asian American students should concentrate on affirming and strengthening self-efficacy, both as a strategy for bolstering confidence in their academic abilities but also as a coping mechanism to help students regulate their emotions and persist through difficulties.

**Coping with Failing a Course**

The next superordinate theme, *Coping with failing a course*, dealt with how the participants made sense of their failure and how failing a course changed their academic and professional plans. One of the challenges that all participants grappled with was telling their parents that they had failed a course, as described in the subordinate theme *Anxiety about telling parents*. The participants anticipated that their parents would be disappointed or angry with them, and as a result, they avoided telling them for as long as possible and in some cases, evaded the truth. Underlying the anxiety that the participants harbored was a fear that their parents would not understand the failure and what it meant for their standing in their academic program or for their desire to continue on the path towards a career in the health professions, which is the focus of the subordinate theme *Reevaluating future goals*.

In the immediate aftermath of their course failure, none of the participants felt adequately supported. They feared their parents, felt isolated from their peers, and were weary of university personnel. This finding underscores the need for accessible and responsive support structures on campus that can provide the logistical information students need to navigate their academic setback, as well as the emotional support that may be missing from students’ family and social
networks. One explanation for this perceived lack of support might have been the participants’ own tendency to disengage and withdraw, rather than seek the guidance of others. Several of the participants in the study expressed a reluctance to ask for help, a pattern often found among Asian Americans struggling with mental health stressors (Cheng, Chang, O’Brien, Budgazad, & Tsai, 2016; Wong, Kim, & Tran, 2010). Many reasons have been proposed to explain the reluctance of Asian Americans to seek help, including a cultural aversion to sharing one’s problems with others, a general misconception about mental health issues, and a dearth of same-race practitioners to serve as confidants, advisors, and mentors on college campuses (Ruzek, Nguyen, & Herzog, 2011). Two participants specifically mentioned seeking help from a mental health counselor after failing a course due to their lack of success in coping on their own, one of which intentionally enlisted an Asian American psychologist. Both reported benefiting from the relationship and conveyed a desire to destigmatize mental health counseling within the Asian American community.

A striking commonality across participants was their perceived inability to be honest with their parents about their academic troubles. For the participants, performing well in school was a mandate that their parents had imposed on them since they were small children and admitting that they had failed a course, jeopardizing their future careers as health professionals, was unfathomable. This anxiety appeared to be deeply rooted in feeling embarrassed and regretful for not fulfilling their parents’ expectations. The treatment of shame within Asian American families is distinctive and relevant to understanding how the participants made sense of their failure (Bedford, 2004). Shame causes individuals to make broad harmful assessments of their self-worth in which overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, avoidance, and social withdrawal are common (Wong et al., 2014). Li, Wang, and Fischer (2004) identified over 100 words explicitly
associated with shame when asking individuals of Chinese descent to explain the meaning of the term in Mandarin, emphasizing it’s gravity within East Asian cultures. The participants reported experiencing two varieties of shame linked with academic failure: internal shame, which is feeling badly about oneself, and external shame, which is anticipating that others will see them in a negative way (Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011). Beyond being apprehensive about how their parents would react to their failure and view them as a result, the participants were concerned about how their failure would tarnish their entire family’s reputation and standing within their broader social circles. The weight and responsibility attached to failing a course was devastating for the participants, leaving them in a compromised mental state and wrestling with a sense of defeat, isolation, and guilt as they coped with their setback.

Another challenge that the participants faced was talking to their parents about their future plans. In particular, some of the participants desired to change majors after they failed a course in order to find a program that was a better academic fit. Almost all of their parents, however, were adamantly unwilling to support changing majors. Little is written specifically about how Asian American college students navigate changing majors, but inferences can be drawn from the body of literature centered on the influence of parents in selecting a career path from the beginning of the college journey, as previously discussed. Asian American parents often believe they have a right, or even obligation, to exert control over their children’s career choice (Samura, 2015), and the participants in the present study found that to be true even after they encountered significant struggles and setbacks. The one participant that changed majors was only able to garner his parents’ support after he was hospitalized as a result of mental health issues. This insinuates that an important aspect of helping Asian American students to cope with
Developing an Identity as an Asian American College Student

The participants in this study asserted that their racial identity as an Asian American impacted their encounter with academic failure, a finding drawn from the superordinate theme Developing an identity as an Asian American college student. As is typical of college students, the participants found themselves reassessing their racial identity and its various components, especially in the context of being exposed to a new and wider circle of peers from diverse backgrounds (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012). In addition to seeing other perspectives and ways of life, the participants mentioned several issues linked to race that emerged for them in the university setting ranging from making friends and carving out a comfortable social space on campus to combatting race-based assumptions about their citizenship, ability to speak English, and even personality traits. Nonetheless, many of the participants still clung to their high school identity of being academically successful. Thus, failing a course was not only an obstacle to their scholastic plan, but also represented a significant affront to their identity and sense of self. The participants believed that their experience of failing a course was worsened due to Internalizing racial stereotypes and difficulties Negotiating Asian and mainstream culture, both subordinate themes related to developing an identity as an Asian American college student.

A large segment of the existing literature on Asian American college students discusses the prevalence and impact of racial stereotypes on the student experience. Much of this scholarship focuses on the model minority stereotype, which typecasts Asian Americans as hardworking and high achieving, especially in comparison to other racial groups. Despite the
persistence of model minority imagery in the popular media, many researchers have attempted to
dismantle the stereotype by offering evidence to demonstrate that not all Asian Americans are
achieving high levels of success and in fact, some subgroups are lagging far behind (Li, 2005;
Museus & Kiang, 2009; Suyemoto et al., 2009; Suzuki, 2002; Tran & Birman, 2010; Trytten et
al., 2012). Furthermore, the damaging effects of the model minority stereotype are well
documented, leaving Asian American students without the support and recognition they need to
persist through times of academic difficulty (Kim & Lee, 2013; Li, 2005; Yeh, 2002). The
participants in the present study held mixed feelings about the model minority stereotype, having
dealt with it since they were small children. Some claimed that they used it to their advantage,
benefiting from the positive portrayal of Asian Americans as an easy way to gain respect,
credibility, and confidence at school and in the workplace. Yet, they recognized that the model
minority stereotype also creates unfair social pressure to succeed, subjects them to lofty
expectations for achievement, and makes it difficult for them to seek help. The stereotype,
coupled with their parents’ urging to be academically successful, led to the participants
internalizing a high personal standard for performance. As such, failing a course was an
extremely embarrassing, shameful, and unsettling experience for the participants, several of
whom had strongly identified with being an academic overachiever for many years and were
unaccustomed to feeling inadequate and vulnerable.

Because being academically successful was such a significant aspect of their identity as
Asian Americans, the participants believed that others viewed them as poor representatives of
their race after they failed a course. As one participant openly declared, he felt like a “bad
Asian.” The participants divulged that academic success was just one of many expectations they
were held to as Asian American college students, compounding the challenge of developing an
identity as a young adult and rebuilding a strong sense of self in the wake of failure. Many participants referenced being the targets of microaggressions, or everyday acts of racism that are often unintended or believed to be harmless by the instigators. The participants cited several examples of microaggressions that they have encountered, including the belief that all Asians are good at math and the presumption that Asian women will be quiet and submissive. Since microaggressions are subtle and commonplace, Asian Americans themselves are reluctant to define them as racist incidents (Sue et al., 2009). Instead, they tend to discount or ignore microaggressions, or as some of the participants in the present study said, they brush them off as jokes. Ong et al. (2013) found that although microaggressions are by definition small occurrences of racism, their psychological impact compounds over time and can take a serious toll on targets. Moreover, microaggressions serve as a constant reminder for Asian Americans that they straddle two identities, as Asians and as Americans, but are often not fully accepted by either group. The participants lamented this tension and admitted to being confused about who they were and what others expected of them.

Overall, the participants in this study revealed that the most frustrating consequence of racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and their dual-identity as Asian and American was the feeling that they were constantly misunderstood and unfairly categorized with little regard for their individuality in their personal, social, and academic lives. As a result, the participants found it difficult to confide in others when it came to their shortcomings and weaknesses, meaning that when they were in most need of support, they were reluctant to seek it. This insight offers guidance to faculty and staff members that work with Asian American students and reinforces the need to make support services proactive and to normalize seeking help, while making a concerted effort to set aside biases and treat all students as individuals.
Moving Forward with Purpose

As the final superordinate theme taken from the participants’ accounts, Moving forward with purpose captured the essence of how the participants were able to recover from the emotional stress of experiencing failure and launch the next phase of their college careers with a greater sense of resolve and tenacity. Inherent to this process was Taking time to reflect and ultimately Finding closure, subordinate themes that trace the participants’ journey towards overcoming their academic setback. The body of scholarly literature is scant regarding Asian American college students and their encounters with incidents of academic failure. As such, very little is known about how they deal with failure and what can be done to facilitate a smooth recovery. The participants in this study pointed to several possibilities for improving support to Asian American students that fail a course or encounter other types of academic setbacks, contributing to this often overlooked aspect of the Asian American college student experience.

First and foremost, taking ample time to reflect was an essential step for all participants. Reflection is considered one way to help individuals process their emotions and better understand their problems after confronting a negative experience. While some evidence suggests that Asian Americans tend to feel distressed when self-reflecting (Tsai & Lau, 2013), the participants in this study conveyed the opposite, claiming that introspectively reflecting and talking about their failure with others after their emotions had settled was beneficial and therapeutic. Additionally, reflection allowed the participants to assess their failure and the factors that contributed to it in a way that put the incident into perspective and dissuaded the participants from viewing themselves as permanently damaged or worthless.

The relationships that the participants had with faculty and staff members at their university also seemed to matter in the context of overcoming their academic failure. In general,
the campus environment and the messages that institutional leaders and personnel send about race are important to cultivating a positive college experience, especially for racial minority students (Museus & Truong, 2009). Similar to other racial groups, Asian Americans are often the targets of racial hostility and jeering on campus (Johnston & Young, 2014; Liu, 2009; Wei et al., 2011). However, the impersonal and unconstructive interactions that some participants in this study described having one-on-one with faculty and staff are most concerning to the academic welfare of Asian American students. When the participants perceived a conversation with a faculty or staff member to be judgmental, racially insensitive, or culturally inappropriate, they were not only unlikely to seek help again, but felt like second-class citizens. As a result, they were weary of turning to faculty or their designated academic advisors out of fear that they would be misunderstood or disregarded after having failed a course. According to Lagdameo et al. (2002), the participants are not alone in feeling marginalized by faculty and staff, nor are they unfounded in their belief that some university personnel possess unfair racial biases towards Asian American students (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003). These perceptions led the participants to needlessly deal with failure on their own, at least initially, rather than availing themselves of various campus resources.

Although the participants likely would have benefited from improved support from faculty and staff, they were all eventually successful in finding closure on their own terms, a topic that is largely unaddressed in previous studies. This study found that experiencing an academic setback provided participants with the stimulus to claim some independence from their parents and as result, emerge from their failure with newfound motivation and clarity of purpose. In particular, several of the participants were intentional about having a fresh start after they failed a course. The participants’ actions ranged from taking a trip to experimenting with
spirituality, and also included mindset adjustments acquired through seeking advice from career counselors, mental health practitioners, and mentors. Experiencing an academic setback seemed to help the participants distinguish between their internal expectations for performance and the external expectations imposed upon them by their parents, family members, and society. The participants were forced to find a balance or compromise between these expectations, a choice that was accelerated by failing a course and having to give serious thought to their academic and professional plans. Their process of discernment in the aftermath of setback provides support for advising strategies that encourage reflection, taking ownership of the situation, and exploring new ways to find meaning.

Revisiting the Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Kodama et al.’s (2002) psychosocial student development theory to examine the meaning of academic setbacks for Asian American college students majoring in the health professions in a competitive university environment. The framework, which emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Asian American college student experience, takes a psychosocial perspective on development focusing on “what students will be concerned about and what decisions will be primary” (Parker, Widick, & Knefelkamp as cited in Kodama et al., 2002, p. 46). The central component of the model is identity nested in purpose, with society, family, and culture as major influences to one’s sense of self and career aspirations. Interdependence, relationships, integrity, emotions, and competency are key aspects of development that emanate from the core. This study confirmed the salience of identity for Asian American college students, as well as the importance of purpose as a driver of vocational goals. The participants’ accounts also validated the significance of family interdependence on educational decision-making and provided evidence to show that social stereotypes and racial microaggressions are
fixtures in the daily lives of the participants. Kodama et al. emphasized that identity can shift and that student development is the outcome of finding balance between how students see themselves and how they perceive others to view them, which this study also supported.

The analysis of this study’s data adds to Kodama et al.’s (2002) model by demonstrating how a critical event, such as experiencing an academic setback like failing a course, can stimulate identity development and help students to achieve a more secure sense of self. Despite causing an initial jolt of emotions and feelings of destabilization, failing a course seemed to result in participants achieving clarity of purpose and being able to find a comfortable balance between their family’s expectations and their personal ambitions. Even though nearly all of the participants continued on the path that their parents chose for them after experiencing their academic setback, they did so with increased intrinsic motivation and a more mature outlook.

Overall, this study supported Kodama et al.’s (2002) psychosocial student development theory and its approach to understanding the Asian American college student experience through the centrality of identity and purpose. By applying the model to analyze how a small group of Asian American students made sense of an academic setback, this study also provided instructive examples of how family, culture, and society are significant to students during times of crisis and vulnerability that can be used to inform practice and future research.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to answer the following research question: What does encountering academic difficulty mean to certain Asian American students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a highly selective, private, research university? Using Kodama et al.’s (2002) psychosocial student development theory as a framework, the study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis to qualitatively explore the research problem. The researcher
carefully analyzed in-depth interviews with eight Asian American participants that had experienced an academic setback while pursuing a major in the health professions. The interviews were semi-structured and the participants were encouraged to speak about how they made sense of their academic failure, as well as to discuss how they chose their major and to elaborate on other significant aspects of their college student experience.

Analysis of the data affirmed the importance of family interdependence in setting academic and professional goals, a well-established pattern for Asian American students with immigrant parents (Dundes et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2001). The participants’ families wielded their influence not only in driving the types of majors that their children were permitted to pursue, but also in establishing extremely high standards for academic performance (Shen, 2015). This study demonstrated that in the context of extreme pressure to succeed in a narrowly defined career path, academic failure represented a breakpoint moment for the participants. Failure evoked a strong emotional reaction, leaving the participants in a frantic, devastated, and hopeless state. To worsen matters further, the participants were reluctant to rely on family or friends for support and were skeptical of support services and personnel available to them at their university. The weak help-seeking attitudes of Asian American students are concerning (Kim & Lee, 2013; Ruzek et al., 2011), especially in light of their higher than average suicide ideation rates (Wong et al., 2011). Yet, this study revealed that the participants were able to recover from their failure by reflecting on the experience, finding balance between their parents’ expectations and the expectations they have for themselves, and taking the initiative to find meaning through new avenues such as travel, mentorship, and religion. These findings suggest opportunities for faculty and staff charged with supporting Asian American students during times of academic difficulty.
Recommendations for Practice

Given the growing number of Asian Americans pursuing a college education, it is paramount that higher education professionals take notice of the unique set of qualities, expectations, and challenges that Asian American students bring with them to campus. The following are several suggestions for administrators and practitioners generated based on the findings from this study. They are intended to enhance the college experience for Asian American students in general, but particularly during times of academic difficulty. Specific actions that the researcher is committed to undertake in her role as a higher education administrator and scholar-practitioner are also included.

Build awareness for the Asian American student experience. With increasing racial, ethnic, and national diversity on college campuses, it is essential that university personnel be informed about the variety of backgrounds that their students possess. Given the lack of research and understanding for the Asian American experience, there is a compelling need to address this population of students (Museus and Kiang, 2009). Suzuki (2002) points to a number of implementable strategies for enhancing the knowledge of administrators, faculty, and staff on issues pertaining to Asian American students. His recommendations include holding ongoing trainings on diversity and multiculturalism, establishing a systematic way to monitor issues related to racial harassment with a focus on detecting cases against Asian Americans that are unreported, attempt to recruit qualified Asian Americans to positions within student affairs and advising offices, and offer adequate funding to support the development of Asian American students’ leadership skills and to encourage the participation of Asian American students in campus organizations. Although offering specific training sessions is one of the most direct ways to convey information and collectively discuss examples of Asian American student
welfare, time and interest are often constraints to bringing people together in a productive way for these types of conversations. For this reason, Suzuki’s (2002) recommendation to elevate Asian American voices by deliberately hiring Asian Americans to serve in various roles on campus and investing in the leadership enhancement of Asian American students are other more practical approaches for infusing this important perspective into everyday discussions and practice.

The researcher is committed to being an advocate for Asian American students. She will participate and share her research findings with appropriate committees and working groups at her institution, such as the diversity committee, the academic affairs committee, and the admissions committee. When meeting with colleagues to discuss advising issues, the researcher will provide examples of Asian American students to illustrate the nuances of working with this highly varied population and suggest approaches to offering support and guidance that may not be intuitive to those less familiar with Asian American students. Through this approach, the researcher intends to actively seek opportunities to educate others about Asian American students as part of the regular interactions she has in her role. In addition, the researcher will encourage the Asian American students that she works with to pursue leadership opportunities. Cultivating Asian American leaders will enable and embolden students, giving them greater presence on campus and the confidence to advocate for themselves.

**Identify ways to engage Asian American parents as partners, rather than adversaries.** Understanding and respecting the importance of parents and family for Asian American students is an essential responsibility of faculty and staff members. The data from this study indicated that going to college for Asian American students does not necessarily symbolize separation from their parents’ influence or imply the ability to act as independent decision-
makers. The participants’ accounts suggested that parents were instrumental in choice of college major and in setting expectations for academic performance. The critical role of parents was brought to the fore when the participants encountered an academic setback and began to question their major and future plans, but viewed their parents as roadblocks to any decisions that involved straying from the health professions. Therefore, faculty and staff should ask the Asian American students they advise about their relationship with their parents and earnestly help them to navigate the familial expectations that shape their outlooks, options, and attitudes towards their college education.

The researcher would like to continue the work that she started in this study by exploring ways to engage Asian American parents and leverage their influence to advantage and support, rather than hinder, students. The participants in this study reported that their parents remained heavily involved in their education, even after starting college. For this reason, the researcher suggests inviting parents to certain academic advising meetings with the permission of the student. This has the potential to be especially helpful when students experience academic difficulties and are having trouble communicating with their parents. The advisor, if the student desires, can serve as a mediator and diffuse some of the tension that often accompanies conversations about course failure or changing majors.

Take measures to address race-based stereotypes and improve campus racial climate. Racial stereotypes are another key factor in the college experience and identity development of Asian American students. All of the participants in this study had been subjected to stereotyping as a result of their race, which was a source of angst and frustration. The participants cited the model minority stereotype as creating unfair and unrealistic standards for their academic and professional success. Due to the widespread and public nature of this
stereotype, the participants internalized a great deal of pressure to succeed and were met with disappointment, shame, and guilt when they fell short of its ideals. An additional negative consequence of the model minority stereotype is the tendency to ignore the needs of Asian American college students under the assumption that they are performing better as a whole than other racial groups. This not only devalues the individual experiences of Asian American students, but it also oversimplifies the vast amount of difference in achievement patterns found across students that identify as Asian American.

The participants noted that they were often the targets of racial stereotypes or microaggressions that were not outwardly malicious in intent, but resulted in them feeling as though faculty and staff members were not treating them as individuals. The participants cited examples of comments or questions from well-meaning peers or university personnel that were perceived as racially insensitive, unbeknownst to the aggressors. These findings insinuate that universities have a responsibility not only to take measures to establish a welcoming and inclusive campus racial climate, but also to encourage and properly prepare faculty and staff to forge supportive and respectful relationships with students of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. In order to do so effectively, faculty and staff members would benefit from a more robust flow of information about enrolled students, specifically those that identify as Asian American, to ameliorate the participants’ frustration with not being treated as individuals. The term Asian American encompasses a group of people with vast backgrounds depending on their countries of origin, immigration status, length of time spent in the United States, socioeconomic status, and many other factors (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Universities should support and incentivize capable faculty and staff to conduct rigorous assessments of Asian American students in order to more fully understand the challenges and opportunities they face within their
institutions. The findings of such studies should be disseminated in such a way that they influence policy, practice, and further research.

Another recommendation is to allocate more resources towards affinity groups that serve Asian American students, functioning as a signaling device that an institution values the presence of Asian Americans on campus and benefiting students that elect to participate. Encouraging affinity group involvement provides students with a forum to explore their identities and build relationships with same-race peers, which in turn facilitates belonging and confidence. A few of the participants in this study mentioned that being involved with their school’s Asian American student center helped them to deal with stereotypes and microaggressions. It also gave them the support and assurance they required to seek help and to be proud of their dual identity as Asian Americans.

The researcher plans to share the results of this study with administrators at the research site to establish the need to make the learning environment more inclusive. In addition, she will suggest that the Asian American students she works with consider involvement in an affinity group geared towards Asian Americans for the camaraderie and the aforementioned opportunities to learn, gain leadership skills, and network.

**Adopt a proactive approach to advising.** Finally, this study revealed that Asian American students might not be as resistant to receiving help as previous studies have reported. The participants in this study were admittedly weary of utilizing campus resources at first, but several eventually ended up speaking with a mental health counselor, career coach, or academic advisor that assisted them in overcoming their failure. Moreover, the participants consistently spoke about the importance of reflection and the therapeutic benefits of talking to a trusted third party about failing a course, especially after some time had passed and their emotions had
settled. This evidence implies that academic advisors, as well as other faculty or staff in student-serving roles, should take an assertive approach to building relationships with their Asian American students from the onset so that they are perceived as accessible and reliable in the event of an academic difficulty. Museus and Ravello (2010) found that academic advising has a significant impact on the persistence and retention of ethnic minority students. According to their study, academic advisors that are proactive and regularly reach out to students, that humanize the experience of academic advising by getting to know their students and personalizing their guidance, and that are holistic in their approach to advising and willing to consider the nonacademic factors that contribute to performance are more likely to have effective relationships with their advisees. In addition to working with academic advisors, previous research argues that having constructive connections with faculty is also important to college success (Kim et al., 2009). That said, Asian Americans are less likely than their counterparts of other races to interact with and have high quality relationships with faculty. Orientation programs or courses geared towards helping students adapt to college should address the importance of developing relationships with faculty and acquiring tools and confidence to seek out opportunities to engage faculty. Taken together, these recommendations suggest that increasing the touch points that Asian American students have with academic advisors and faculty is likely to positively influence their adjustment and success, as well as improve the chances that they will seek help when needed.

Based on the findings in this study and her professional experience in the field, the researcher believes that Asian American students would benefit from having individualized mentoring relationships with faculty. These relationships might be even more crucial after a student experiences an academic setback and their self-esteem and self-efficacy are damaged.
The researcher proposes that academic advisors coach their Asian American advisees on how to interact with faculty members, holding them accountable to attend office hours and to take advantage of other opportunities to engage outside of the classroom. The researcher also plans to create a protocol for advising students that fail courses. The protocol will encompass the immediate emotional needs of students and offer assistance in communicating with their parents, as well as include follow up meetings to encourage reflection and help students to rebuild their self-esteem.

In summary, the researcher aims to advocate on behalf of Asian American students through the normal duties of her role, helping her colleagues to see Asian Americans as a diverse and complex group that deserves their attention. She is committed to sharing these research findings with administrators at the research site with the goal of elevating the institutional importance of issues facing Asian American students. She will also seek out opportunities to present her findings with external audiences, perhaps through conference presentations or publication.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several aspects of the Asian American college student experience that may contribute to how individuals make sense of academic failure that this study was unable to adequately address. First of all, future studies should take socioeconomic status into account. This was not specifically measured in the present study, but several participants made reference to their parents’ level of educational attainment and their current professions during the course of their interviews. Secondly, this study alluded to gender differences in how the participants interpreted their experiences with failure that warrant further investigation. Other dimensions of
the participants’ identities, such as birth order and sexual orientation, also present opportunities to more fully understand how Asian American students assign meaning to academic difficulties.

A final recommendation is to continue producing research that features the voices of Asian American college students with the goal of raising awareness for the distinctiveness of their experiences and calling attention to their strengths, as well as their vulnerabilities. The participants in this study demonstrated that they felt neglected as individuals by their families, their friends, and their university during a time of critical need, an important issue that needs to be reversed. Future research aimed at practitioners should build upon this study’s finding that Asian American college students possess the mental fortitude to persist through difficulties and strive to learn more about how faculty and staff members can foster self-efficacy, facilitate reflection, and assist with goal-setting, making the college experience more enriching and meaningful.
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Appendix A: Theoretical Framework

*Figure 1.* A model of psychosocial Asian American student development theory (Kodama et al., 2002, p. 48)
Appendix B: Recruitment Email (Initial Message)

Recruitment Email (Initial Message)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Sender: Bouvé Office of Student Services, bouvestudentservices@neu.edu

Subject Line: Sarah Olia Requests your Participation

Dear Students,

My name is Sarah Olia and I am a former academic advisor in the Office of Student Services. I am also a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and am seeking research participants.

I am researching what it means for Asian American college students in the health professions to experience an academic challenge, such as not earning the minimum passing grade in a required course. My goal is to raise awareness for the Asian American college student experience and to strengthen the support services offered by faculty, staff, and administrators.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be interviewing you about your academic experiences. The expected time commitment is between two and three hours over the course of three interactions (two in person, one either in person or via email). You will be offered a $20 gift card for participating.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please email me at olia.s@husky.neu.edu and include the information listed below. I will provide you with additional details about the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred days and times to meet (including weekends):</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Regards,

Sarah Olia
Appendix C: Recruitment Email (Follow Up Message)

Recruitment Email (Follow Up Message)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Sender: Bouvé Office of Student Services, bouvestudentservices@neu.edu

Subject Line: Sarah Olia Requests your Participation

Dear Students,

One week ago you received an email about a research study that I am doing for my doctoral thesis.

This is a reminder to email me at olia.s@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating.

Participation is entirely voluntary.

Thank you again for considering participation in the study.

Regards,

Sarah Olia
Appendix D: Recruitment Email (Researcher to Student)

Recruitment Email (Researcher to Student)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Sender: Sarah Olia, olia.s@husky.neu.edu

Subject Line: Research Study with Sarah Olia

Dear (Student),

Thank you for your interest in my research study. As you know, my name is Sarah Olia and I am currently working on my doctoral thesis for the Doctor of Education degree program at Northeastern University under the guidance of Dr. Joseph McNabb.

I am researching what it means for Asian American college students in the health professions to experience an academic challenge, such as not earning a passing grade in a required course or not being allowed to progress in their major for academic reasons. My intent is to learn more about what it is like for Asian Americans to struggle academically and to share this information with faculty, staff, and administrators that provide support to students. Not much is known about Asian Americans that encounter academic difficulties, given the widespread belief in the model minority stereotype and other similar assumptions that are commonly made about Asian Americans.

For this study, I am recruiting participants that meet the following criteria:

- Asian Americans of East Asian ancestry (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Taiwanese)
- Enrolled in health professions majors
- Completed at least one year of their major
- Did not earn the minimum passing grade in at least one required course

If you decide to participate in this study, you will have three interactions with me. The first interaction is an in person meeting that will last approximately 30 minutes. I will ask you to fill out a short form with information about yourself, you will select a pseudonym to protect your identity, you will be presented with a consent form, and you can ask me questions about the study. The second interaction is an in person meeting that will last approximately 45 – 90 minutes. This meeting will be an in-depth interview about your experience as an Asian American college student and your academic difficulty. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. I have attached the questions that I will ask you so you can review them in advance. Finally, you may choose to meet in person or send me an email for the third interaction. I will provide you with the transcript of our in-depth interview and a summary of my interpretation of your account. You will have the opportunity to share additional information and clarify points of confusion or inaccuracy. In total, these interactions are expected to take about two or three hours of your time.
Based on your availability, I would like to propose __________ as the time for our first meeting. Please let me know if you have a particular place where you would like to meet. Keep in mind that we will need a quiet place suitable for audio recording our conversation.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Please email me (olia.s@husky.neu.edu) or call me (978-239-7183) if you have any questions.

Regards,
Sarah Olia
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Title: What it means to fail: Exploring how the model minority makes sense of academic struggles in college
Principle Investigator (PI): Dr. Joseph McNabb, Northeastern University
Co-Investigator: Sarah Olia, Northeastern University

Purpose: We are inviting you to take part in a research study. The study will explore what failing a required course means to Asian American college students majoring in the health professions. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are an Asian American college student of East Asian ancestry (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Taiwanese) studying the health professions and because you failed a required course for your major (referred to as an academic difficulty). This study will involve three points of contact with the researcher, two in person and one either in person or via email. The first point of contact will be an initial meeting with the researcher (approximately 30 minutes). The second point of contact will be an in-depth interview with the researcher (approximately 45-90 minutes). The third point of contact will be a follow up conversation with the researcher. You can elect to hold this meeting in person (approximately 30 minutes) or you can respond to the researcher via email (time varies). The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

The purpose of this study is to understand what it means to Asian American college students of East Asian ancestry to experience an academic difficulty with the overarching goal of improving support for Asian American students and expanding the body of knowledge about the Asian American college student experience.

Procedure: If you decide to take part in this study, you will participate in individual interviews. As noted above, we will have three points of contact: two in person and one either in person or via email. For in person interviews, you may select a location that is convenient and comfortable for you. All interviews conducted in person will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. Any information you provide in writing will also be analyzed. All materials will be stored securely and your name will be omitted. Instead, a pseudonym, which you may select during the initial meeting, will be used to organize the information.

Risks: The primary risk associated with this study is the discomfort you may feel discussing your academic struggles. The researcher will respect your boundaries during the interviews and allow you to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. The researcher will provide you with resources for seeking additional guidance relative to your situation if needed.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the researcher hopes that the information gathered through this study will raise awareness for what it is like to be an Asian American college student of East Asian ancestry, particularly during times of academic difficulty. The findings from this study will be shared with faculty, staff, and
administrators with the intention of strengthening support services for Asian American students on college campuses.

**Confidentiality:** Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers will see the information about you. If you decide to participate, you will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions associated with this study (i.e. doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any personal information linked directly to you. Information about your age, gender, race, and field of study will be included to help others understand and interpret the research findings. Our interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. The researcher will code the written transcript to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. All physical documents or files related to this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All electronic files will be stored in a password protected online file storage program and on an external data storage device. Only the researcher will have access to these storage mechanisms. All data will be retained for seven years and then destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decide not to participate and you may withdraw at any time. You are not obligated to answer all questions that are asked of you during interviews. You may indicate your desire to skip a question by stating “pass.”

**Will I be paid for my participation?** You will be offered a $20 gift card for your participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?** You will be responsible for the cost of traveling to the interview site. However, you will be able to select an interview site that is convenient and comfortable for you.

**Contact Person:** Please contact Sarah Olia at (978) 239-7183 or via email at olia.s@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Joseph McNabb who is overseeing my research at j.mcnabb@neu.edu if you have any questions about this study.

**If you have questions about your rights as a participant,** you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of the person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Olia, Student Researcher</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Participant Questionnaire

Participant Questionnaire
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Personal Information

Today’s date: ________________________________________________
Full name: _________________________________________________
Pseudonym: ________________________________________________
Date of birth: ______________________________________________

Where did you grow up? Please include the city, state/country and the length of time you lived in each location. ______________________________________________________________ 
____________________________________________________________________________ 
____________________________________________________________________________ 
____________________________________________________________________________ 
____________________________________________________________________________ 

Approximately what percentage of your high school graduating class was Asian American? _____%

Please select one of the following that best indicates your racial identification. If none apply, please share your preferred racial identification in the space provided below.

__ Chinese American  __ Korean American

__ Japanese American  __ Taiwanese American

__ Mixed Race Asian American (please identify your races): ____________________________

__ Other: _______________________________________________________________________

Academic History

Major: _________________________________________________________
Year of study: _________________________________________________
GPA: _________________________________________________________

Please list the required course(s) in which you did not earn the minimum passing grade.

______________________________________________________________________________
Have you ever been blocked from progressing in your major, requiring you to drop back in your curriculum? If yes, please explain.

Why did you decide to attend Northeastern University?
Appendix G: Interview Guide

Interview Guide
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

1. Can you tell me about why you decided to study the health professions?

   Possible prompts: Did anyone influence your decision to select this major (i.e. parents, friends)? What do you think are the most important things to consider when selecting a major?

2. What do you like the most about your major? The least?

3. Tell me about your parents. How have they influenced your academic and career decisions?

4. People define success differently. Some value money and stability, others value happiness and other types of satisfaction. Many people want a combination of these and other qualities. How do you define success?

5. How is that different from how your parents define success?

6. How do you think most Asian Americans define success? Why?

7. What does it mean to you to be Asian American?

   Possible prompts: What aspects of your identity do you see as Asian? American?

8. What is it like to be an Asian American college student? What types of expectations do others have about you because you are an Asian American?

   Possible prompts: What assumptions do others make about you because you are Asian American?

9. Are you familiar with the term model minority? What does the term model minority mean to you?

   Possible prompts: Has the term ever been used to describe you? How did it make you feel? Do you think the term is positive or negative?

10. Can you describe what it was like to fail a course?

    Possible prompts: Were you surprised? How did it feel? What was your initial reaction? How did you feel after you processed the news?
11. Did you want to talk about it with others? Or keep it quiet? Why? Who did you want to talk to about it?

12. What was it like to tell your parents/family about what happened? How did they react?
   
   *Possible prompts:* How did you expect them to react? How would you have liked them to react?

13. Given the model minority stereotype, do you think the experience of failing a course is different for Asian American students when compared to students of other races? Do you have any examples from your own experience?

14. Thinking back about what it was like to fail a course, what could your professors/academic advisors/family members/peers have done or said to support you?
   
   *Possible prompts:* What resources would have been helpful? What resources were not helpful?

15. Having failed a course, do you approach your academics differently now? How so?

16. What are you most excited about when you think about your future career?
## Appendix H: Thematic Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Participants contributing to sup-theme</th>
<th>Subordinate themes</th>
<th>Participants contributing to sub-theme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choosing a career path</td>
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<td>Influence of family</td>
<td>All</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interest in field</td>
<td>Amy, Molly, Kim, Joy, Laura</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tolerating parental involvement in educational decision-making</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Parental prioritization of academics</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition of parental sacrifice and hardship</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding emotionally to failing a course</td>
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<td>Feeling disorientated and out of control</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Erosion of self-esteem</td>
<td>Marvel, Tony, Amy, Molly, Kim, Joy, Laura</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coping with failing a course</td>
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<td>Anxiety about telling parents</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reevaluating future goals</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Developing an identity as an Asian American college student</td>
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<td>Internalizing racial stereotypes</td>
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<td>Negotiating Asian/mainstream culture</td>
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<td>Moving forward with purpose</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Taking time to reflect</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finding closure</td>
<td>All</td>
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Appendix I: Audit Trail

**Joy**: In the moment, it feels like you’re dying. But then you survive it…It feels like the ground is opening up right at your feet and you’re falling in, and then you have no idea, it’s just darkness that surrounds you. You can’t see past two feet because all you can think about is, “I failed.”

**Laura**: …I was struggling with…an episode of depression and anxiety that I had built up because I didn’t know how to handle failure. I didn’t know how to accept my limits yet, and I’m still working on that to this day.

**Kim**: I will say it was pretty devastating…I was very disappointed. I think a lot of it was…anger with myself and disappointment, both of those combined. I guess because I don’t usually fail or I don’t always have that kind of encounter because I haven’t actually failed anything in my life ever…

**Tony**: When I finally saw the grade online, I can say your heart just drops and you’re like, “Okay, what are you going to do now?” At that point, I didn’t know how to handle everything.

Failing a course leads to tunnel vision, making it difficult to see beyond the initial shock of the experience, at least at first.

Experiencing a failure led to extreme emotional distress and required Laura to reframe her expectations.

Failing is followed by a period of confusion and not knowing what to do next.

Failing is an all-consuming experience, yet possible to overcome with time.

Failure as a catalyst for self-growth and development.

Loss of direction in the moment.

Loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy as a result of failing.