UNDERSTANDING ASIAN AMERICAN FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

AND THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING

A thesis presented

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Delia Cheung Hom

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Abstract

Asian American students represent one of the fastest growing populations of students on college campuses in the U.S. (National Commission Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). Despite this fact, there is a lack of research addressing the experiences of Asian American students (Buenavista, Jayakumar & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Museus & Chang, 2009). Understanding the experiences of this population of students is an important component to providing appropriate levels of support for Asian American students to insure their success as students. In particular, Asian American female college students have a unique experience based on the intersections of their racial and gender identities. The current study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the ways that Asian American female students experience the concept of sense of belonging on a college campus. The primary research question for this study asks: How do Asian American female students experience the concept of sense of belonging? This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to give voice to the experiences of Asian American female students. In particular, this study explores sense of belonging in the context of students’ involvement on campus. Exploring these experiences can help create a deeper understanding of the experiences of Asian American female students.

Keywords: Asian American female college students, sense of belonging, student involvement
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the context of higher education, it is imperative to understand the needs of all of the students which make up the diverse populations on today’s college campuses. In particular, Asian American women have a unique set of experiences, yet there is little research focusing specifically on the needs of this population of students. One concept that is especially relevant to this population of students is the concept of sense of belonging. The current study seeks to understand the experiences of Asian American feel students with the concept of sense of belonging. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study aims to give voice to the experiences of Asian American female students so that meaningful forms of support can be developed for this group of students on college campuses.

Many scholars have pointed to the model minority myth as one root cause of the paucity of research done on Asian American college students (Buena vista, Jayakumar & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Museus & Chang, 2009). The model minority myth suggests that as a group, Asian American college students are highly successful in the realm of education. This myth seems to be supported by data which suggests that Asian American college students have higher rates of college entry, persistence, and graduation than any other racial or ethnic group (Buena vista et al., 2009). Museus and Chang (2009) point to the importance of disaggregating data on Asian Americans and educational attainment. Looking more closely at the educational attainment of various Asian American subgroups, it becomes clear that not all groups of Asian American college students are experiencing “exceptional rates of educational success” (p. 95). This myth thus contributes to the invisibility of the needs of Asian American college students. As a result of the predominance of the model minority stereotype, issues such as mental health, establishing a sense of belonging, and representation within the faculty and administration are paid little to no
attention. Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, and Day (2009) suggest that Asian American college students experience more self-segregation, exclusion and less satisfaction with the social support they receive in college.

Much of the existing research on college student development was developed using highly homogenous student samples (Museus & Chang, 2009). Pascarella (2006) suggests that this is a subject which needs to be addressed in the research, not only because of the growing population of non-White students in American colleges and universities but because of a need to recognize that various interventions will affect diverse groups of students differently. This acknowledgement that different groups of college students experience college in a variety ways emphasizes the importance of research on populations such as Asian American college students. Prevalent models, such as Tinto’s model for student departure neglect to take in to account the varying experiences of students of color on college campuses.

Tinto’s theory of student departure (1993) suggests that social integration is one factor that plays a role in student persistence. Others have suggested that this model does not appropriately consider the needs and experiences of students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992). For students of color, the concept of sense of belonging can be seen as more accurately capturing their experiences PWIs (Johnson, et al., 2007). Whereas integration emphasizes participation in mainstream activities on college campuses (Tierney, 1992), sense of belonging encapsulates the extent to which a student feels included in the college community (Johnson et al., 2007). This concept has been explored with students of color in residential life (Johnson et al., 2007), Latino students (Hurtado & Carter, 2007), and under-represented minorities (Carter, 2006). There remains little, however, addressing the experiences of Asian American students and their sense of belonging. As one of
the fastest growing populations of undergraduate students in the United States, it will become increasingly important to understand the various factors affecting the success of Asian American college students (National Commission Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). Lee and Davis (2000) investigated the relationship between cultural orientation and sense of belonging for Asian American college students. They found that students with bicultural and assimilationist orientations were able to develop a sense of belonging on campus (Lee & Davis, 2000). This suggests that racial identity plays a role in sense of belonging for students of color. In particular, sense of belonging is an especially important context for Asian American women in college because of connections between sense of belonging and mental health. The current study seeks to extend these findings by using a qualitative approach to give voice to the experiences of Asian American female college students and their sense of belonging on predominantly White campuses.

Gloria and Ho (2002) suggest that adaptation to college campuses is affected not only by a student’s individual identity, but is instead an interaction of the student’s identity (for example race and/or ethnicity) and other social and environmental factors. Iwamoto and Liu (2010) report that racial and/or ethnic identity can mediate students’ response to race-related stress. Despite the fact that research suggests an interaction between students’ identities on campus and their experiences as college students, little research has been done to learn about how students’ racial and ethnic identities develop while in college. At the same time, there is a growing amount of research which suggests that first-generation college students also experience college in ways that differ from the general population of students. Specifically, while first-generation college students tend to be less involved in co-curricular activities, it has also been suggested that their co-curricular involvement has a strong effect on their experiences (Pascarella, Pierson,
Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). As the population of college students on American campuses has continued to shift, many institutions have implemented programs specifically aimed at leveraging an increasingly diverse student body towards more specific learning outcomes (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002; Umbach & Ku, 2006). What remains to be seen is an in-depth understanding of the ways in which these programs affect the racial and ethnic identity development of college students, specifically, Asian American students.

Learning more about how Asian American college students’ experiences are affected by programs, interventions and the environment of college will help in the development of more intentional programs and services. For Asian American college students in particular, who have higher rates of suicide than other racial ethnic groups (Hijioka & Wong, 2012), learning about their sense of belonging is especially important. Qualitative research with Asian American female college students will help to create a more nuanced understanding of the interactions of their individual racial identity development and their experiences with programs and activities on their college campuses. Understanding these interactions will help faculty and administrators on college campuses plan and implement programs that can have a greater impact on the overall experiences and well-being of Asian American female college students.

Significance of the Problem

While social integration has been seen as one factor in college student persistence, some researchers have suggested that the concept of sense of belonging more adequately applies to students of color (Johnson et al., 2007). Sense of belonging has been linked to a number of measures of student success including persistence and academic progress (Walton & Cohen, 2011). On the other hand, factors such as first generation college student status (Ostrove & Long, 2007) and racial discrimination (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) have been connected to
declines in sense of belonging. Involvement on campus is one factor which has been suggested to promote a sense of belonging amongst students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For Asian American college-aged women in particular, the prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts heightens the importance of understanding their experiences of sense of belonging. The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of the nature of Asian American female students’ sense of belonging on college campuses and their co-curricular involvement. Understanding the factors that contribute to a sense of belonging for Asian American female college students will help colleges and universities better meet the needs of this growing population.

**Problem Statement**

Asian American students represent one of the fastest growing populations of students at colleges and universities in the United States. Despite this fact, relatively little is known about what contributes to their sense of belonging on college campuses. Student involvement on campus is one factor that has been shown to affect students’ sense of belonging on campus. Other research has suggested that cultural orientation affects students’ ability to develop a sense of belonging on campus (Lee & Davis, 2000). This suggests that racial identity development plays a role in sense of belonging for Asian American college students. Understanding that students experience college through the lens of their multiple social identities, the current study will focus on Asian American female college students, and will thus address both racial and gender identity. The current study will explore the ways that student involvement and sense of belonging are experienced by Asian American female college students.
Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to give voice to the experiences of Asian American female college students with the concept of sense of belonging. In order to better understand these experiences, the following research questions are addressed:

- How do Asian American female students experience the concept of sense of belonging?
  - How do Asian American female students experience the concept of sense of belonging in terms of their racial identity?
  - How do Asian American female students experience the concept of sense of belonging based on their co-curricular involvement?

Organization of this Study

This study is organized in to five different chapters. Following this introduction, chapter one includes with a discussion of the model of sense of belonging proposed by Strayhorn (2012). This model is seeks to clarify the ways in which various input factors affect sense of belonging. Chapter two is a literature review focusing on research about the experiences of Asian American female college students as well as research on student involvement as it relates sense of belonging for college students. The research methodology for this project, which will be a phenomenological study, is described in chapter three. This section also includes a discussion of the research site and participants, which will be a private research university in the northeast. Chapter three also addresses the data collection process, data analysis process as well as actions taken in insure validity and credibility of this research. Also included in chapter three is a description of the steps taken for the protection of human subjects in this research project. Chapter four provides a detailed analysis of the major themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants in this study. Chapter five concludes this study with a discussion situating
these themes within the existing literature on Asian American college students and sense of belonging.

**Strayhorn’s Model of Sense of Belonging**

The purpose of the current research project is to develop a better understanding of the ways in which Asian American female college students experience a sense of belonging at PWIs. In order to understand the experiences of these students, this research is grounded in the model for sense of belonging proposed by Strayhorn (2012). Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others” (Strayhorn, 2012, location 571). Strayhorn’s model focuses on students’ belongingness need in various spaces and contexts during their college experience. These needs reflect the fundamental needs described by Abraham Maslow (1987). In satisfying the basic physiological and safety needs, students are then motivated by a need to belong. As college students seek a sense of belonging, this need will drive their decisions and behaviors. Strayhorn’s model is depicted below in Figure 1.
The current study uses Strayhorn’s model of sense of belonging because it emphasizes the fact that students must navigate multiple spaces and contexts throughout their college careers. Some of these spaces include academic spaces, living spaces such as residence halls, and general campus spaces. This study focuses on the experiences of Asian American female students in the context of co-curricular student life. While sense of belonging has often been conflated and operationalized as student engagement and or student involvement (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008), the current study uses Strayhorn’s model to understand students’ sense of belonging located within the context of student life. That is to say, within the space of co-curricular life at New England University, how do Asian American college students experience a sense of belonging? Strayhorn’s model goes on to suggest that if students are able to develop a sense of belonging, then they will experience positive outcomes such as involvement, happiness.
and retention. Conversely, if a student fails to develop a sense of belonging, then they are at risk for negative outcomes such as depression and suicide. Strayhorn suggests that this process occurs repeatedly as students progress through various spaces and contexts over the course of their college experience. The current study focuses on students’ perceptions of belonging in the context of co-curricular involvement and student life on campus.

**Core elements of sense of belonging.** In his model, Strayhorn identifies seven core elements of sense of belonging which emerged from existing literature and theory. Of these seven core elements, three relate directly to the experiences of Asian American students at PWIs. The first of these elements suggests that sense of belonging is a basic human need. The psychologist Abraham Maslow (1987) discussed sense of belonging as an important part of his hierarchy of needs. The love and belongingness needs fall in the middle of Maslow’s hierarchy. The basic physiological and safety needs come first, and therefore must be met before subsequent belongingness and self-actualization needs can be met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the context of higher education, this suggests that the basic food and safety needs must be met before love and belonging needs can be met. Progressing further through Maslow’s hierarchy, this suggests that further self-actualization needs cannot be met until students have satisfied their belongingness needs. In defining sense of belonging as a basic human need, Strayhorn is suggesting that the higher outcome of higher education, such as self-actualization, cannot be achieved without satisfying a college student’s fundamental need for belonging (2012).

Strayhorn suggests that sense of belonging is a fundamental human motive, and that it can drive human behavior. This suggests that in the context of higher education, the need to belong is strong enough that it affects students’ behaviors. Strayhorn also suggests that sense of belonging can take on a heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and for
certain populations. Osterman (2000) also suggests that the social context can play a significant part in determining the extent to which students’ needs can be met. Taken together, these two elements suggest that for a population such as a population of Asian American female college students, the belongingness need may become especially important in the context of college. For students who are transitioning in to new environments, sense of belonging has the power to shape the decisions and behaviors of students. The current study focuses specifically on the decisions and behaviors of students as they relate to co-curricular involvement on campus.

An additional element of sense of belonging that is especially relevant to the current study is the role of social identity. Other models of sense of belonging do not explicitly make a connection between sense of belonging and social identity (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Strayhorn (2012) asserts that an exploration of sense of belonging requires a careful and simultaneous exploration of intersections of social identity. The current project focuses specifically on the racial and gender identity of Asian American college students and the ways that these social identities influence sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) does not explicitly address variability in students’ social identity before they enter the context of college life. For racial minorities, their understanding of their own social identities can have a profound effect on the ways in which they interact with their peers, both within and across racial boundaries. The current study seeks to understand the ways in which racial identity, gender identity, and sense of belonging are interconnected.

**Sense of belonging and student retention.** Strayhorn asserts that sense of belonging has the potential to bring about positive outcomes for students (2012). One positive outcome in the context of college student development that does receive a lot of attention is the concept of student retention. Vincent Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1993) has emerged as a central
theory in this field, driving programs and services in higher education (Tierney, 1992). Tinto suggested that the reason why students do not persist in higher education has to do with an interaction between a student’s background characteristics and their experience in college. Tinto points to background characteristics, goals and institutional commitments, and integration as three factors that are important in affecting student persistence (1993). Background characteristics refer to characteristics students bring to college, ranging from socioeconomic status to family background to high school academic achievement. Students’ goals and commitment to higher education are another factor that then relates to how students experience college. Lastly, integration refers to being incorporated into the community of the college. Tinto views integration as happening after a process of separation from communities of the past, and through a transition into college. According to Tinto, the concept of integration applies to both social and academic aspects of a student’s experience within the context of college (1993). The absence of integration, in Tinto’s view, can be characterized by incongruence and isolation. Tinto draws an analogy between persistence in higher education and Durkheim’s theory of suicide which emphasizes the role of integration and community membership on suicide. Furthermore, according to Tinto, a student who has not successfully integrated into the college community is at risk for “suicide” in the context of college, which he considered departure (1993). These themes raise questions for Asian American women in particular, who have a higher lifetime rate of suicidal thoughts compared with that of the general population (Hijioka & Wong, 2012). In the context of college, the ways in which Asian American female college students experience integration (or lack thereof) is therefore of particular importance.

Critics of Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure have focused on the implicit assumption in Tinto’s discussion of integration that students must assimilate to the dominant campus culture
in order to be successful (Tierney, 1992). In particular, Tinto’s discussion of integration does not specifically address the experiences of students of color, who may inherently feel at odds with the dominant culture on college campuses in the United States. Tierney (1992) questioned Tinto’s basic assertion that there is a direct relationship between a student’s integration into the campus community and the likelihood that that student will persist. More specifically, Tierney points out that Tinto’s theory of integration places the burden of responsibility on the student (1992). That is, if the student does not conform to the dominant campus culture, then it is their responsibility to assimilate in order to persist at that university. Tierney suggests that Tinto’s theory is overly focused on individuals, and neglects to incorporate the ways in which smaller groups and culture affect the college student experience (1992). In responding to these criticisms of Tinto’s theory, Hurtado and Carter (1997) propose that looking at sense of belonging is a more appropriate lens to understand the experiences of students of color.

Much of the existing literature on sense of belonging for students of color focuses on the experiences of African American and Latino students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). The experiences of Asian American students with the concept of sense of belonging are becoming increasingly important as the population of Asian Americans in higher education continues to grow (National Commission Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). As suggested by Samura (2010), Asian American students in particular receive contradictory messages about whether they belong in higher education in the United States. The connections that Strayhorn (2012) makes between sense of belonging and negative outcomes such as depression and suicide are particularly relevant for Asian American female college students. This population is one in which issues of mental health are a serious concern, given reports that Asian Americans have the highest rates of suicidal thoughts and suicide
attempts compared with other racial groups (Duldulao, Takeuchi, & Hong, 2009; Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005). In particular, suicide is the second leading cause of death for Asian American women between the ages of 15 and 24 (Duckworth, 2009).

Given this framework, understanding the ways that Asian American female college students experience sense of belonging on their college campuses will promote a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these students. As a growing population on college campuses in the United States, it is imperative that the experiences of these students be understood in more depth so that programs and services can be designed with the needs of these students in mind. The qualitative approach used in the current study will contribute to this understanding in a manner not possible with quantitative research. The lived experiences of Asian American female college students represent one lens through which to understand this population of students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The concept of sense of belonging has been connected with various measures of student success. The current study focuses on giving voice to the experiences of Asian American women and their sense of belonging on college campuses. For Asian American women in particular, understanding their experiences with this concept has important implications for how these students can be supported on college campuses. This study focuses on understanding these students’ experiences through the lens of their involvement on campus and their racial identity. This literature review focuses first on the concept of sense of belonging and then delves more in depth to the experiences of Asian American college students and racial identity development.

Sense of belonging is an important concept to understand for populations of students such as Asian American female college students. As a concept, sense of belonging has been
connected with other critical college outcomes such as retention and student satisfaction. The existing literature looks to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which various factors and circumstances affect students’ sense of belonging on college campuses in the United States. While this is one stream of literature that can provide useful information about the conditions that impact students’ sense of belonging, this literature does little to give voice to ways in which students experience a sense of belonging on college campuses. For populations that are already outside of the mainstream culture of college life, exploring these experiences can help to provide a richer understanding of the Asian American female college student population. In particular, the connections between student involvement and sense of belonging have not been thoroughly addressed in the literature on this topic. The following literature review looks first at the existing literature on sense of belonging, focusing specifically on research on college students and involvement on campus. Next, this literature review focuses on the existing literature on the experiences of Asian American college students. In particular, this review explores the student experiences with involvement on college campuses and also experiences affecting racial identity development. The current study focuses on one particular gap in the literature, that is, the experiences of sense of belonging for Asian American female students through the lens of their involvement on campus and their racial identity development.

**Sense of Belonging**

Abraham Maslow (1962) identified sense of belonging as a basic human need, supplanted only by the survival needs of food and safety. As a concept, sense of belonging has often been linked to similar concepts such as social integration and on college campuses, student involvement and engagement. Early discussions of social integration defined this concept in terms of a subjective feeling of a sense of belonging (Spady, 1971). Spady (1971) identified
social integration as one of the most important factors in predicting student attrition, and further operationalized sense of belonging in terms of friendship support and structural relations. It is important to note that despite this operationalized definition, sense of belonging is still at the heart, a subjective measure of how individuals feel that they are supported or have built relationships. Strayhorn (2012) more specifically distinguishes these concepts, pointing to student involvement as what students do on campus and student engagement as an allocation of student time and energy. Sense of belonging, in comparison, remains subjective, as an affective feeling of inclusion and mattering.

Despite its subjective nature, sense of belonging has been described as a fundamental and pervasive motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Arguably, the need to belong can be seen a driving much of human behavior. Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose two main features of a sense of belonging. First, they suggest that sense of belonging implies positive interpersonal interactions. Secondly, they suggest that these interactions are characterized by stability and affective concern. Their discussion of sense of belonging, however, fails to identify the role played by social context. While Baumeister and Leary (1995) broadly discuss the implications of in-group and out-group interactions, they do not address the ways that social identities can affect sense of belonging. That is, given that some social identities are privileged in the context of higher education, these social identities can provide heightened motivation for a need to belong.

In the context of education, the belongingness need has been connected to the broader concepts of a sense of community and membership. Osterman (2000) suggests that a secure connection within the context the school community is a necessary precursor to important psychological processes that are connected to student success and academic achievement. Most
notably, sense of belonging has consistently been found to be associated with student learning and student engagement. On the other hand, a lack of belongingness is associated depression and other mental and physical illnesses (Osterman, 2000). In the context of school, this kind of isolation and alienation is often associated with student departure. More broadly, feelings of isolation and alienation are associated with suicide (Osterman, 2000). While Osterman draws on the literature focusing primary and secondary schools, these themes are certainly relevant within the context of higher education. What is missing from the literature is a deeper understanding of the factors that make a successful community, specifically from an organizational perspective. In seeking to understand what contributes positively to a sense of belonging for students, there is a need to gain insight into the ways that students experience this concept of sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging is a critical issue for students in the context of higher education because of the connections between sense of belonging and student persistence. The connection between student persistence and sense of belonging is primarily seen through evaluations of student integration. As discussed by Strayhorn (2012), student integration can often be operationalized in terms of student behaviors. Sense of belonging, on the other hand remains a subjective evaluation, and as such, is less frequently explicitly looked at in the literature (Tovar & Simon, 2010). Student integration can be observed perceived membership in college communities, or through measures of the notion of institutional fit. While the relationship between student integration and student persistence has been generally accepted (Tovar & Simon, 2010), there is a growing body of literature which suggests that sense of belonging plays a critical role in persistence for students of color (Tierney, 1992).

What then do we know about the ways that student involvement on campus affects sense of belonging for students? Strayhorn (2012) addresses this question with both quantitative and
qualitative data seeking to answer this question. Operationalizing sense of belonging through questions on the College Student Experience Questionnaire, Strayhorn found a direct connection between student involvement on campus and sense of belonging. That is to say that students who report being frequently involved in meaningful activities on campus also report a greater sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Meaningful activities might include involvement with student organizations on campus, participation in recreational sports, and also developing relationships with faculty member outside of the classroom.

The qualitative data collected by Strayhorn (2012) provides insight into the specific ways that involvement on campus enhances sense of belonging for students. Strayhorn (2012) describes three major findings about how student involvement contributes to a sense of belonging for students. First, students articulate a need to belong as a primary motivation for becoming involved on campus. This resonates with earlier assertions that sense of belonging represents a fundamental need for students. Secondly, being involved on campus helps to create a sense of belonging for students by connecting them to similarly-minded students and creating a sense that they matter in the context of their college campus. Lastly, students also acknowledged that some kinds of involvement on campus can have negative effects for students. This reflects some of the ways in which sense of belonging has been defined in the literature; that a feeling of sense of belonging was engendered through positive interactions on campus.

Some researchers have argued that for students of color, a sense of belonging is especially salient given the historical context of race and higher education in the United States (Johnson et al., 2007; Tierney, 1992). One of Strayhorn’s original assertions about the importance of sense of belonging for students emphasized the fact that in certain contexts, this need will become especially salient. Given the histories of racial exclusion and the dominant
culture at PWIs, it makes sense that a need to belong would become especially salient for students of color at PWIs in the United States. Strayhorn (2012) suggests that in contexts where students are likely to feel alienated or invisible, there would be an increased motivation to feel a sense of belonging. This could be based on any number of social identities that students bring to college: race, gender, sexual orientation, first generation college students. Given this motivation, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which student involvement contributes to a sense of belonging for students of color.

**Asian American College Student Experiences**

Asian American college students are one of the fastest growing populations of students in the United States (Gloria & Ho, 2003). Because most theories addressing college student development focus on the experiences of a homogeneous group of White students, it is crucial that research focus specifically on Asian American college students. Despite their growing presence on American college campuses, there has been relatively little research done on the experiences of Asian American college students (Museus & Chang, 2009; Suyemoto et al., 2009). Research on Asian American college students has been approached from many different perspectives varying from their academic experiences to their co-curricular engagement, from the development of their racial identity to their mental health. In each of these areas, Asian American college students have unique experiences that must be understood in order to better serve this growing population of college students.

**Model minority myth.** Many researchers have attributed the paucity of research on the experiences of Asian American college students to the model minority stereotype (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Suyemoto et al., 2009). This stereotype suggests that as a group, Asian Americans are “successful minorities who have quietly moved to the pinnacle of success in various contexts
through hard work” (Wong & Halgrin, 2006, p. 38). Viewed as “Asian American whiz kids” and especially universally successful in education, Asian American students are often overlooked as a population in need (Museus & Chang, 2009). These stereotypes of Asian American students portray this group of students as homogeneous and monolithic. In reality, Asian Americans are an extremely diverse group. The term itself connotes a singular identity whereas in reality, Asian American comprises a group of people that are ethnically diverse. Over 30 different ethnicities fall into the category of Asian American with varying histories of immigration to the United States (Iwamoto & Liu, 2010). Within this group, there are subpopulations with some of the highest rates of educational attainment, but also subpopulations with some of the lowest rates of educational attainment (Gloria & Ho, 2003). This kind of bimodal distribution is hidden when Asian Americans are viewed as a homogeneous group. Thus, the prevailing stereotypes of Asian American students as highly successful can mask some of the important needs of this population of college students.

In the literature, this group is most often referred to as Asian American (for example Chang & Kiang, 2002; Chew & Ogi, 1987; Suzuki, 1989; and Ying et al., 2001). Others, however, refer to this group as Asian Pacific American (for example Hune & Chan, 1997; Kodama, McEwen, Liang & Lee, 2001; and Yee & Kou, 2000), Asian-American (Hune, 2002; Osajima, 1991; Yeh & Huang, 1996), and Asian/Pacific American (Mau, 1995). The 2000 U.S. Census divided this group into two distinct categories, Asian and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander. All of these labels refer to the same group of people. Clearly, as suggested by Hsia and Hirano-Nakanishi (1989), this group is diverse in many different aspects. These range from linguistically to culturally and ethnically, from generational status in the U.S. to socioeconomic status in the U.S.
and in the country of origin, and from the context of immigration to the transferability of skills to the U.S.

**Mental health and Asian American college students.** The overall well-being of Asian American college students should be a focus of research on this population. Surprising statistics suggest that students in this group tend to be more at risk for suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts as compared to White college students (Hijoka & Wong, 2012). Gloria and Ho (2003) suggest that it is important to understand the environmental and social impacts on the psychological well-being of Asian American college students because ultimately, these factors will affect academic persistence. Some of the key factors that Gloria and Ho (2003) investigated were the effects of the university environment, social support, and self-efficacy. Key areas for discussion included the role of family and mentors in providing support for students. Gloria and Ho (2003) found that the campus climate was a significant predictor of depression in Asian American college students, regardless of whether the campus climate indicator was based on the perceptions of Asian American college students or based on broader institutional measures. This suggests that the campus climate plays an important role in the mental health of Asian American college students. For Asian American women in particular, mental health is a particular concern, given the fact that suicide is the second leading cause of death for Asian American women between the ages of 15 and 24 (Duckworth, 2009). Compounded with the fact that Asian American students are less likely than other racial groups to use mental health services on campus, it is clear that the mental health of Asian American college students is a topic in need of additional research attention (Gloria & Ho, 2003).

Given the diversity of Asian American college students and their rapid growth of their presence on American college campuses, it is important for policy makers, educators and
administrators to have a rich understanding of the specific needs and challenges of this group of students. A richer body of knowledge about Asian American female college students will help develop programs and policies that will support and engage these students in a way that will further their educational experiences as well as those of their peers.

**Asian American student involvement.** While the early literature on student involvement focused primarily on the experiences of college students in general (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), more recent literature on specific populations of students has tended to focus on African American students (Baker, 2008; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Flowers, 2004) and Latino students (Baker, 2008). The National Survey on Student Engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005) reported that African American and Asian American students were the least satisfied with their college experience. Given the fact that Asian American students are typically portrayed as successful in college, this statistic suggests that there are structural issues which contribute to their dissatisfaction with their college experiences. Statistics like these underscore the need to further understand the experiences of specific populations of college students.

One area of growing research seeks to understand the effects of student involvement on Asian American college students. As this population of students has continued to grow, so has the number of student clubs and organizations focusing on Asian American students (Inkelas, 2004). These organizations range in type from ethnic-specific organizations to fraternities and sororities to religious organizations. Student involvement has been seen as having an important role in shaping the experiences of students of color (Museus, 2008). More specifically, Museus investigated the role of ethnic student organizations on the adjustment of African American and Asian American students to college at PWIs. Museus suggests that these organizations are
important because they provide an outlet for students to express their racial and ethnic identity, which in the context of a PWI, falls squarely outside of the mainstream. Indeed, through interviews with African American and Asian American students, Museus found that student organizations helped these students adjust to college by providing spaces of cultural familiarity and validation as well as allowing for expression and advocacy on behalf of these students (2008). Thus, while typical models of student adjustment to college portray a process of adjusting to the mainstream college culture, the experiences of students of color diverges from this process. For these students, identifying with a subculture appears to be a crucial part of their adjustment to being a college student at a PWI (Museus, 2008). While it is clear that the students interviewed by Museus did discuss themes such as finding a home on campus or finding social support within these student organizations, this study did not directly investigate the students’ sense of belonging on their campus. Museus’s work clearly points to a need to understand the cultural context of a college campus and how this particular context shapes the experiences of students, specifically those who fall outside the mainstream.

Liang, Lee, and Ting (2002) addressed the issue of leadership development with Asian American college students. These authors advocate for the acknowledgement and integration of cultural values in perceptions of leadership. They suggest that traditional Asian values such as deference to authority, harmony (instead of conflict), and collectivism may lead Asian American college students to perceive themselves as less fit for leadership. On the other hand, Liang et al. (2002) also suggest that taking on leadership roles and becoming involved with ethnic student organizations may be one productive way for students to deal with experiences of racism on college campuses. They conclude that individuals involved in student affairs must have an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of Asian American student leaders, as well as an
understanding of their motivations for becoming involved on campus. As suggested by Strayhorn (2012), these motivations are an important factor to understand about the context for Asian American students on predominantly White campuses.

Inkelas (2004) further investigated the experiences of Asian American students within Asian American student organizations, focusing specifically on the extent to which participation in such organizations increased awareness and understanding of issues faced by the Asian American community. In conducting this research, Inkelas noted a number of factors that were important in understanding the experiences of Asian American college students. These factors, such as family background and immigration history, provide important context to understanding the motivations and inputs that Asian American students bring to their college experiences (Inkelas, 2004). Other important factors are racial and ethnic awareness, acculturation, pre-college experiences with structural diversity (Hall, Cabrera, & Milem, 2011). Inkelas found Asian American students became more aware of the Asian American community through their participation in Asian American student organizations. What is missing from Inkelas’s research is a deeper investigation to the meaning that students make of their participation with Asian American student organizations. Some literature suggests that participation in ethnic student organizations increases racial/ethnic identification (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). Understanding how these experiences affect sense of belonging helps connect this involvement with broader theories of student success.

**Racial Identity Development**

In thinking about the experiences of Asian American college students, one important area for development is around the concepts of racial and ethnic identity. Alvarez (2002) focused specifically on the relevance of racial identity development to the work of student affairs.
Working off of Helm's racial identity model, Alvarez describes the ways in which Asian American students may progress through the stages of this model and the effects that this might have on their needs. For example, many Asian American college students may be in a stage of dissonance during college. This may be a time when they first become aware of the differential treatment of individuals based on race. Coupled with experiences of ethnic studies courses and Asian American student organizations, Asian American college students may be curious, confused or ambivalent about their racial identity. At this point, the needs of a student are drastically different from those of a student who has reached a point of comfort and confidence with her racial identity. Alvarez suggests that understanding these different stages will help student affairs practitioners better understand the perspectives and needs of their students.

For many Asian American college students, the context of college is their first exposure to a pan-ethnic Asian American community (Kodama & Abreo, 2009). In their research on racial and ethnic identity in the Asian American community, Kodama and Abreo (2009) found that the majority of Asian American students choose an ethnic specific label (i.e. Filipino, Chinese American, etc.) over the broader label of Asian American. This suggests that Asian American students would better be described as focusing on their ethnic identity. This presents a unique challenge because many programs and services aimed at supporting this group of students focuses more broadly on Asian American college students. This research suggests that it might be more effective to focus on specific ethnic groups and engage these groups in a way that promotes racial identity development (Kodama & Abreo, 2009).

Unfortunately, one way in which students may come to gain a deeper understanding of their own racial and ethnic identity is through shared experiences of racism. Iwamoto and Liu (2010) hypothesized that shared experiences of racism contributed to a pan-ethnic Asian
American racial identity. In investigating the relationships between racial identity development and the effects of racism, Iwamoto and Liu suggest that strong racial or ethnic identification may play a mitigating role on the psychological effects of racism or microaggressions (2010). Depending on the stage of racial or ethnic identity development, racial identity was correlated with different levels of race-related stress. For Asian American college students, it is important to understand the ways in which racial identity and experiences on campus contribute to their sense of belonging.

**Summation**

The growing body of research on the experiences of Asian American college students demonstrates that there are several key areas that are in need of further research. While student involvement has been a consistent theme in the research on college students in general, it is important to consider the unique histories and perspectives of Asian American college students and the factors that influence their involvement on college campuses. Equally important to consider is the process of racial identity development for Asian American college students. Racial identity for the Asian American community is a socially constructed identity that is not built on any specific common culture, language or heritage. Thus, in many ways, it makes sense that Asian American college students would tend not to arrive at college with a sense of their own identities as Asian American college students. Attending college may represent the first opportunity that these students have to connect and engage with a pan-ethnic Asian American community. As such, it will be important to understand the motivations for Asian American student involvement.

Given the fact that sense of belonging is by definition a subjective perception of mattering and integration on a college campus, it is important to gain an understanding of how students
experience this concept. For the population of Asian American college students understanding their experiences is especially important, given the overall paucity of research on this group of students. More specifically, Asian American students’ lower reports of satisfaction with their college student experience suggests that there are larger structural factors which contribute to their dissatisfaction with their college experience. This fact, combined with alarming statistics about the prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts amongst Asian American college-aged women, points to a need to better understand their college experiences. Understanding the ways in which sense of belonging contributes to Asian American students’ experiences and racial identity development can help practitioners design and implement programs that better suit the needs of this growing population.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative Research Approach

Despite growing populations on many college campuses, Asian American students often do not exhibit the kind of sense of belonging that would be expected given these populations (Samura, 2010). This suggests that as a group, Asian Americans are still marginalized on college campuses in the United States. The current project sought to explore the concept of sense of belonging for Asian American female college students. The research question for this study asked: how do Asian American female students experience a sense of belonging through their racial identity and co-curricular involvement on campus?

The current study used a qualitative approach to explore co-curricular involvement and sense of belonging for Asian American female college students. In this study, the lived experiences of sense of belonging for Asian American female college students were given voice through individual interviews. This study provided a unique opportunity because the researcher
was directly involved in the Asian American student community and therefore could elicit informed and honest responses about the ways that students feel a sense of belonging. As such, the theoretical paradigm for this study took a constructivist perspective (Ponterotto, 2005). In this perspective, there is a recognition that reality is constructed in the mind of an individual, and as such, there are multiple, equally valid truths. A key part of the constructivist perspective is the interaction between the researcher and the participant. It is in this interaction that the “truth” can be discovered through the dialogue and interpretations of the researcher and the participant (Ponterotto, 2005). This study sought to develop a richer understand the experiences of Asian American college students, through a dialogue about their experiences.

The current study used a phenomenological approach to explore co-curricular involvement and sense of belonging for Asian American female college students. A phenomenological approach seeks to understand the lived experiences of a particular population. It is an appropriate approach which allows the researcher to bracket out their own experiences and perspectives these themes (Creswell, 2012). More specifically, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) acknowledges that understanding the experiences of others is inherently interpretive (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA research draws upon the philosophy of Husserl, who defines being phenomenological as intentionally reflecting or being conscious of an experience (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, the lived experiences of sense of belonging for Asian American college students will be given voice through individual interviews. This study provided a unique opportunity because of the involvement of the researcher with the Asian American student community. The relationship between the researcher and the student community on campus facilitated informed and honest responses about the ways that students feel a sense of belonging. Having an existing understanding of the
context and culture of the campus can help to create a deeper understanding of the experiences of Asian American female college students.

**Site and participants**

The site for this study was a Private Research University (PRU) in the northeast. Asian American students made up approximately 13% of the total undergraduate population of 17,000 students. With over 300 student organizations, the campus community was very active. There were approximately ten student organizations which directly serve the Asian American undergraduate population. An Asian American Center, housed within the division of student affairs, provided additional opportunities for co-curricular involvement. Given the breadth of opportunities for Asian American students to get involved, PRU was an ideal site for this qualitative study. Because the researcher has an in-depth knowledge of campus life and pre-existing relationships with many of the students, the researcher was able to have an informed and honest conversation with students about their experiences at PRU. As someone who was well-known within the student community at PRU, students were able to trust that anything that they share with the researcher will remain confidential.

All participants were required to self-identify as Asian American and female. In addition, they were all at least a third year student at PRU. Participants were active in student life during their time at PRU, defined as holding an executive board position for an Asian American student organization at PRU. Participants were recruited through the Asian American Center and through the Campus Activities Office. Specific staff members that work with Asian American students served as gatekeepers to recommend students to participate in this study. An initial email was sent to these students briefly describing the study. This initial email also invited students to complete a pre-interview survey to assist the researcher in collecting some
basic demographic data about the students. All information shared by students in the pre-interview survey remained confidential. This information was used to help achieve a level of diversity amongst the participants. A copy of the recruitment letter and pre-interview survey are included in Appendix A and Appendix B. If students chose to participate and were eligible to participate, they were asked to complete a consent form (included in Appendix C). This consent form informed participants that they may choose to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty, outlined the goals of the research project, outlined the potential risks and benefits to participating in this study, and discussed how the researcher would protect the confidentiality of the participant (Crewsell, 2012). For students who completed the pre-interview survey but did not ultimately participate in the study, their data from the pre-interview study was destroyed.

The purposeful sampling strategy used for this study was maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2012). Variation amongst the participants focused on ethnicity, major, and the types of organizations students were involved with on campus. A total of five participants interviewed. Each participant was interviewed twice. All participants were given the option to receive information about the study at its conclusion. The risks to participating were minimal, given that this study comprised of one-on-one semi-structured interviews about the students’ experiences. Despite the minimal risks posed by this study, all participants were given a resource sheet at the beginning of the interview. Due to the nature of the interview questions, students might be interested in exploring topics relating to Asian American identity after the conclusion of the interview. This resource sheet listed different resources available to students including University Health and Counseling Services, the Asian American Center, as well as other support services offered on-campus and in the local community. A copy of this resource sheet is included in Appendix D.
Procedures

The data collected for this study was in the form of interviews with participants. Each participant was interviewed twice. The interview format was semi-structured, using the interview protocol included in Appendix E. Each initial interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviews were conducted by the researcher and took place in a location convenient for the participant, in a private room. The second interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. During the second interview, the researcher shared with the participant the overall themes uncovered through all of the interviews. The participant was then given an opportunity to discuss whether they feel these themes match with their experiences or not. All of the interviews took place in a private meeting room in the Asian American Center on campus. At the beginning of the interview, the goals of the research project and interview process were described to the participant. All interviews were recorded using a hand-held audio recorder and lapel microphone to insure a high quality recording (Creswell, 2012). The researcher took minimal notes during the course of the interview to keep the conversation feeling as natural as possible.

After each interview, the audio files were uploaded to a dedicated hard drive that was used only to store data associated with this research project. All audio files were transcribed and transferred in to a Microsoft Word document. These data files (audio files and transcriptions) were stored in a password-protected file on the dedicated hard drive. This hard drive was stored in a locked file cabinet to which only the researcher had access. In addition, these files were backed up using Dropbox, a cloud storage site, also password protected. All files were labeled only with a randomly assigned participant number so as to protect the anonymity of the
participants. Only the researcher had access to the key connecting individual participants with the corresponding data files.

All audio files, transcriptions and notes will be saved for two years following the completion of this study. At that point, all data associated with this study will be securely disposed of and erased.

Data Analysis

Data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) begins with a statement of the researcher’s experiences with this phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) describe six steps for analyzing data in an interpretive phenomenological analysis. In the first step, the researcher read and re-read the transcript to immerse herself in the data. Next, the transcripts were coded with an initial set of notes. These notes include descriptive comments about what the participant said, linguistic notes exploring the specific language used, and conceptual notes which posed broader questions about the concepts discussed by the participants. In the third step, the comments and notes were then organized into themes that represent meaning units. These themes were member checked with participants in a follow up interview. The fourth step focused on mapping and connecting the themes that emerged from participant or case. The fifth step repeated this process for each of the individual cases. In repeating this process, it was important to bracket the themes that already emerged and to focus on each interview individually and as separate from each other (Smith, et al., 2009). It was in the sixth and final step that the connections were drawn across each of the different cases. At this stage in the analysis, more theoretical themes emerged as this step represents a higher order analysis of the themes.
Protection of Human Subjects

As described by Creswell (2012), ethical issues are an important consideration in the collection of data in qualitative research. The current research project did not present any immediate risks to the participants. All participants were current college students, and these students were not members of any protected classes of participants (inmates, children or other vulnerable populations). Given that this research project explored the personal experiences and social identities of the participants, the researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of these topics. This research had the potential to be beneficial to the participants as they explore their own experiences and relate these to their social identities. This research could have elicited an emotional response from the participants or raised questions relating to social identity. To help address these reactions, the researcher gave each participant a resource sheet listing different resources that may help the participant in processing their responses (see appendix D).

In order to obtain IRB approval for this study, the recruitment letter, the pre-interview questionnaire, the consent form and interview protocol were submitted to the IRB (see appendices A, B, C and E, respectively). In the current study, a process of informed consent insured that participants were fully aware about the potential benefits and risks of participating in this study. Most importantly, all data collected through this research did not reveal the identities of the participants. Anonymity is especially important in qualitative research where participants are sharing sensitive and personal information about their experiences. All participants were given pseudonyms in this study to protect their identity and other identifying descriptors were also changed (for example names of student organizations they are involved in). All data files associated with this research project were saved using a number that was randomly assigned to
each participant. Only the researcher had access to the key which connects each participant with the research number. The recordings of the interviews were destroyed after they were transcribed.

**Validity and Credibility**

In the context of a qualitative methodology, Yardley (2000) suggests that traditional measures typically applied to quantitative methodologies do not apply. It is important to keep in mind the broader goals of qualitative versus quantitative research in thinking about the validity and credibility of a qualitative research study. Yardley (2000) discusses four criteria for good (qualitative) research. These four criteria are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context and impact and importance both address the socio-cultural setting and understanding reached through a qualitative research study. Creswell (2012) makes suggestions for situating research in a particular socio-cultural context. The researcher, having worked with Asian American college students for over twelve years was intimately familiar the particular socio-cultural context of the experiences of these students. Moreover, the researcher brought a deep appreciation of the nature of her interactions with these students, particularly in the interview context.

In this study, peer debriefing was used as a strategy to have an external review of the research, research questions, methods and interpretations of the data. Peer debriefing sessions were held with colleagues from Student Affairs departments at PRU. Specifically staff members who work with student leaders and other multicultural student organizations were recruited to serve as peer debriefers. These peers had a grounded understanding of the community of students at PRU and helped to provide external validation of the interpretations of the data.
Additionally, transcripts from interviews were provided to the participants to provide feedback. This process, also known as member checking, allowed the participants to continue to be involved in the research process (Creswell, 2012). In addition, the researcher included a statement that clarifies any potential research bias. This statement addressed past experiences and biases that shape the way that the research connects to this particular study. Understanding the ways in which the background of the researcher contributed to the responses elicited from the participants is an important part of interpretative phenomenological research. These three different strategies help to contextualize the findings of this qualitative research project.

Yardley’s criteria of commitment and rigour address the care that will be used in approaching the data collection, and the thoroughness of the study as a whole. The researcher, being someone who is immersed in the Asian American student community, approached the interview process with the utmost care and empathy in thinking about the experiences of the participants. Additionally, the entire research process was conducted in a thorough manner, and was written up in a way that clearly describes the research process. This transparency is an important part of Yardley’s criteria. Lastly, coherence addresses the soundness of the argument and the ways in which this argument presents a clear and logical narrative based on the data. The analysis thus brings together the theoretical underpinnings of the research and the final research product.

**Personal statement**

My own personal experiences as an Asian American college student have played a significant role in shaping my life, both personally and professionally. As someone who grew up in a predominantly White suburban town in Massachusetts, I did not have an opportunity to connect with other people who looked like me. When I first got to college, I was very intent on
finding my place in a community of Asian Americans. The fact that there was a community of Asian Americans on campus was extremely important to me. I knew that for my own personal development, I wanted to connect with other Asian American students, to help me explore my own personal background and history.

It was my involvement with an Asian American student organization on campus that led me to then become a student leader at our campus’s ALANA Center (African American, Latino, Asian and Native American Center). In my senior year, I also served on the executive board of the student government. Looking back, it is clear to me that my involvement on campus truly began with my participation with the Asian American student organization. It was through my leadership positions that I also came to question the expectations and stereotypes that I faced as an Asian American woman. I know now that I learned and grew so much from these experiences, and I have a strong connection to the college and the friends that I made there. These experiences are what led me to pursue a career in higher education, and more specifically in student affairs.

**Limitations**

The current study has limitations that should be taken into consideration in attempting to places these findings in a broader context. In particular, one major limitation of this study is the particular institution that was the site for this study. The geographical location and other institutional characteristics are limiting factors for this study. For the Asian American population in particular, the fact that this study was conducted in the Northeast may lead to different findings as compared to other regions of the United States with vastly differing demographics regarding the Asian American population. Additionally, the fact that this
institution is an urban private institution also limits the extent to which any findings can be
generalized to a broader population.

Conclusion

The existing literature on sense of belonging does not adequately capture the experiences
of Asian American college students. In particular, this project explored sense of belonging
through the lens of participation in ethnic student organizations and also racial identity
development. Understanding the ways in which these factors contribute to a sense of belonging
for Asian American female college students has the potential to shed light on the motivations of
these students.

This research project aimed to give voice to the experiences of Asian American female
college students by using an interpretative phenomenological approach. This qualitative
approach focused on ways in which the participants experience the concept of sense of
belonging. Through the process of engaging students in interviews, this research project aimed
to uncover perspectives on the concept of sense of belonging for Asian American female college
students. By exploring this concept, the current project explored sense of belonging in a way
that can provide faculty and staff in higher education with a richer understanding of the student
experience so that they may be better equipped to support this population of students.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which Asian
American female college students experience a sense of belonging on college campuses, with a
specific focus on students who are involved in co-curricular life on campus. Three superordinate
themes emerged based on an analysis of the interviews. Subsumed within these three
superordinate themes were eight themes. The three superordinate themes were: 1) building
community, 2) exploring identity and 3) making meaning of student involvement. The themes subsumed within these superordinate themes were: 1a) lack of connection with mainstream organizations, 1b) finding comfort in groups centered around race/ethnicity; 2a) facing challenges and stereotypes as a woman, 2b) learning from others with different experiences, 2c) reflecting on personal identity with a focus on racial identity; 3a) exploring leadership, and 3b) defining purpose on campus. Each of the superordinate themes and nested themes emerged in at least three of the five interviews. The themes are listed by participant in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Themes by participant (with superordinate themes in bold)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sarah</th>
<th>Roshni</th>
<th>Joliana</th>
<th>Esther</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with individuals of similar racial/ethnic background</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of connection with mainstream (predominantly White) organizations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploring Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing challenges and stereotypes as a woman</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from others with a different experiences (in the context of race/ethnicity)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on personal identity, with more of a focus on racial identity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making meaning of</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Collectively, these themes address the ways in which Asian American female college students make meaning of their experiences on college campuses.

**Building Community**

The first superordinate theme that emerged in this study was building community. The participants all spoke at length about the ways in which their experiences and involvement on campus allowed them to become part of a community at PRU. Students sought out a sense of belonging and a connection with peers who shared a common background or interests with them. These attempts to connect and find community were met with varying degrees of success in different environments. The participants made different meanings of the communities they built and defined their need for these communities in distinctive ways. The two nested themes that emerged from the interviews with participants reflected the participants’ different experiences trying to find a community where they felt a sense of belonging. As the participants sought to connect with peers on campus, many reached out to mainstream organizations that did not address specific social identities. These types of organizations included academically focused organizations and community service organizations, for example. In these contexts, the participants found a lack of connection with other students in these organizations who were predominantly White. On the other hand, the participants related feelings of comfort in becoming involved in organizations that did focus on race and ethnicity. For Asian American students, these organizations included both pan-ethnic Asian American student groups as well as groups focused on specific Asian American cultural groups. These two themes will be identified...
and discussed as lack of connection with mainstream organizations and finding comfort in groups centered around race/ethnicity.

**Lack of Connection with Mainstream Organizations**

For all of the participants, entering college was described as an opportunity to become involved on campus and to connect with a diverse set of peers. The participants described a desire to connect with their peers in a variety of spaces, ranging from academic settings to community service, to ethnic organizations to connecting with individuals with diverse backgrounds. In describing her expectations with coming to college, Esther shared, “I expected to meet someone from Ohio and [be like], ‘I don’t know you, but we will be friends…’ I had that attitude when I first came to college.” She went on to share about her experiences with different activities on campus such as yoga and participating in a community service organization. Esther stated,

I enjoyed them, but I didn’t feel like, ‘Hey, this is where you’re going to make friends…’

There wasn’t a sense of belonging there. It was just, ‘Oh, this is what I like to do, but not make friends here.’

Esther’s expectations of meeting diverse peers in college were not met, despite her attempts to get involved in different ways on campus. While Esther expressed an interest in connecting with a diverse set of peers on campus, her comments indicate that there were perceived barriers in how she was able to make friends and connect with students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds on campus.

Similarly, Joliana was also initially drawn to getting involved with more academically oriented student activities on campus. She shared, “it has a specific meaning that goes with the
meetings, or a major meeting, like for neuroscience majors. That seemed to have more of a purpose to it, versus a culture club.” After being involved with the neuroscience club, Joliana expressed, “I felt like they weren’t as open.” Joliana also discussed meeting peers as a Women’s Studies minor and said,

I never joined a club… I never really talk to them because I feel it’s a different experience being an Asian American female… It’s a little different, when I talk about being Asian American, that I can’t relate to other students.

Joliana initially felt that there was a stronger sense of purpose in meeting with other peers with similar academic interests, but instead found that there was a lack of connection in these spaces on campus. While Joliana’s initial mindset regarding connecting with peers indicated an openness, her experiences with different organizations did not reflect this same openness. For students like Joliana and Esther, the juxtaposition of their openness to connect with students and their experiences not feeling welcomed represents a conflict in how diversity was experienced on their college campus. While college campuses are often depicted as open and welcoming environments, the experiences of the participants reflects an entirely different experience from the perspective of Asian American women.

Sarah’s comments reflected these conflicting sentiments about the welcoming environment on college campuses. Sarah articulated her fears about trying to get involved with mainstream student organizations on campus very clearly in relation to her ethnic identity. She stated, “I don’t want to assume saying if I went [to a mainstream student organization] they would say all these semi-racial microaggressions… I don’t think students at PRU are narrow-minded or anything like that, but sometimes you hear things, and you’re not sure.” On one hand Sarah’s comments reflected an optimistic attitude hoping that her peers at PRU were open-
minded individuals, but at the same time, she expressed reservations about putting herself in a situation that might result in discomfort because of racial and cultural differences. These comments depict an environment that was not overtly racist or hostile, but suggested that Sarah had reason to believe that peers on campus were not always welcoming or supportive of diverse students. These subtle messages suggest that the campus environment was not entirely welcoming to these Asian American students.

Other participants who did become involved in mainstream organizations also expressed that these settings were not conducive to building community. Roshni articulated the ways in which race and gender affected her ability to connect with peers in the Finance and Investment Club that she had been involved with on campus. Roshni described, “It was me and five White males. It was interesting… these are people who have never really thought about the fact that not everyone… is given the exact same opportunity all the time.” Roshni expressed that she had learned from her experiences being involved with this club, but that she had not connected with her peers. She stated, “they sort of make it seem like everyone has the same opportunities, which is not the case.” While Roshni acknowledged that she had learned and built networking connections through her involvement, this was not a club that she chose to be involved with in the future because these differences in perceptions of opportunity. Roshni was a committed member of this organization, and held a leadership position with this organization for a year. However, the differences in experiences and perceptions alienated Roshni to the extent that she chose not to continue to be involved with this community. This decision reflects a need for students to build communities that are relevant to their experiences on campus.

All of the participants expressed an interest or desire to become involved in mainstream activities on campus, such as organizations and clubs focusing on their major, career path or
other shared interests such as community service. In expressing these interests, the participants clearly held expectations about what their communities would look like in college. For the most part, these expectations were grounded in a notion that building community in college was primarily about connecting with others around common interests. Some of the participants expressed discomfort around building community around a racial or ethnic identity, signifying an unease with their own racial identity and the perception of self-segregation. Despite their initial interest in mainstream organizations, the participants found a lack of connection with their predominantly White peers in these activities. This was expressed in different ways, ranging from a vague experience of not fitting in to fears of experiencing subtle forms of racism in the form of racial microaggressions. Across these different experiences, there was little expressed by the participants that explicitly described their need to connect with other Asian American students. While the participants’ experiences seem to point to a lack of openness to diversity on campus, the participants did not explicitly point to this as a reason why they did not connect with others in mainstream student organizations. This suggests an overall discomfort with open dialogue about different forms of racism on college campuses.

**Finding Comfort in Groups Centered around Race/Ethnicity**

While the participants did not find a sense of belonging with various mainstream organizations and activities on campus, they did express a comfort in connecting with students from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. For some participants, this occurred through connecting with a pan-ethnic group of other Asian American students. For others, this meant connecting with others of a similar cultural or ethnic background. Some participants, such as Joliana, expressed an initial discomfort around being involved with organizations focused on race and ethnicity. This discomfort reflects some of the social stigma that is associated with
racial self-segregation and may also reflect a more assimilationist perspective on racial identity. Joliana related, “it seemed odd at first, [to] join a club just for your culture… What do you do at a club meeting? Just talk about how Filipino you are, how Asian you are?” These comments minimize the importance of connecting with others of a similar cultural or ethnic background and imply a lack of understanding of the value of connecting with others of a similar background.

This perception of the activities of racial and cultural organizations is juxtaposed with Joliana’s perceptions of the activities of academic organizations. While Joliana stated that she “started out kind of hesitant to join,” she came to appreciate the fact that she became involved with Katipunan, the Filipino student organization on campus. Joliana shared,

As I started becoming involved in it, I really started to appreciate my culture more… I met some other people at PRU that I felt like didn’t have similar values, and I really enjoyed that when talking to my peers [in Katipunan], … they all understood the importance of school, they all understood the importance of family and community.

Joliana acknowledged that she discovered a new importance around connecting with individuals who shared a common set of values. At the same time, by connecting with other Filipino students, Joliana was able to gain a better appreciation for her Filipino heritage. This contrasts with her earlier expectations about the purpose of cultural organizations compared with the purpose of academic organizations. While Joliana did not find community through other organizations she joined, she was able to connect with other students in Katipunan. Through her involvement with Katipunan, she was able to make personal connections with her peers and develop meaningful friendships.

Whereas Joliana was initially reluctant to join cultural organizations on campus, Roshni approached building community from a different perspective. Unlike Joliana, Roshni was
“enthusiastic” about getting involved with the South Asian community on campus. Coming from a high school with a large population of Asian American students, PRU was a less diverse environment for Roshni. Roshni recalls,

One of first events I attended was the Diwali dinner and Diwali was a really big holiday [for me], so not being able to be at home was kind of upsetting, so it was cool because it was one of the first things that I got to experience where I was like, okay, I can celebrate the same thing here and I don’t have to feel like I’m missing home too much.

Roshni shared that this kind of experiences had been a point of connection for her and reinforced her desire to be involved with this particular community. Roshni acknowledged that being involved in the South Asian community was “a way for me to connect to what I knew best,” but that her involvement had been “a great way to meet friends… because that’s where I’ve made my closest friends at PRU.” Interestingly, despite the initial differences in Roshni and Joliana’s intentions, their experiences were very similar. In particular, regardless of whether these participants sought out involvement in cultural organizations, this was where these participants made the strongest connections to a community on campus. On the other hand, both of these participants also felt disconnected with other students in mainstream organizations. This would indicate that their experiences were less connected with their own attitudes and orientations towards their racial identity and more indicative of a reaction to the overall campus environment.

The comments of other participants reflected similar experiences. Sarah, who came from a high school with a large Asian American student population spoke explicitly about the comfort in connecting with an Asian American community on campus. In talking about her involvement with the Asian American community at PRU, Sarah stated, “it did give me a sense of comfort which allowed me to excel in other areas of school just by knowing the community on campus.”
For Sarah, connecting with the Asian American community reflected a desire to find comfort and familiarity at PRU. Sarah understood the importance of finding this connection, “especially in college when you’re not in your comfort zone.” For both Roshni and Sarah, there existed an understanding of the importance of finding a sense of familiarity and security in connecting with peers of similar backgrounds on campus.

For these participants, there was a difference in their feelings of connection and their sense of belonging with mainstream, predominantly White, organizations and activities as opposed to Asian American organizations and activities. Overall, there existed a lack of connection with the mainstream organizations because of the perceived differences in their peers’ experiences, based around race and ethnicity. The participants expressed an interest in connecting with peers from diverse backgrounds, but in attempting to do so, found the lack of shared experiences to be too large of a barrier to overcome. Interestingly, this was both the case for participants who were hesitant to join racial and cultural organizations as well as for participants who were already interested in connecting with racial and cultural organizations. The participants discovered a strong connection with peers of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, whether this was a familiar experience or not. The participants expressed that shared cultural experiences and shared values were important points of connection that helped to create a stronger sense of belonging in these particular contexts. While the participants initially perceived that college was an opportunity to connect with peers of different backgrounds, what they found instead was a desire to connect with a community based on shared cultural experiences. The difference between how students perceived college and the reality of their experiences created an environment for further reflection about self and social identity.
Building community was clearly an important developmental task for the participants in this study. While all of the participants were able to articulate a need for connecting with a community, their sense of what factors were important in creating these communities was less clearly expressed. For some participants, their initial desire to connect with mainstream White organizations reflected a discomfort with connecting with an Asian American community. These kinds of sentiments were originated from a general lack of awareness about Asian American racial identity. Even for students who felt more comfortable and more aware of their own racial identity, the role of race in building communities on campus was something that these participants did not clearly articulate. While the participants’ experiences with building communities suggested that race played an important role, the participants were not able to articulate what this meant to them as Asian American students on campus.

Exploring Identity

For many students, college is a unique opportunity to explore identity. Here, identity refers to social identity, which can be defined as an individual’s sense of self, as defined by their membership in a certain socially defined group (Strayhorn, 2012). This may include a student’s race, gender, or sexual orientation, among other social identities. For Asian American students in particular, college may be the first time that they are exposed to a broader pan-ethnic Asian American community. For some Asian American college students, arriving on a college campus may be the first time that they are exposed to a significant population of Asian Americans. For others, college campuses may be significantly less diverse than the communities that they come from. As a result, college becomes an important time for Asian American students to reflect and engage around their racial and ethnic identities. Additionally, as college students engage in different kinds of environments, as scholars, as employees, or as interns, they may be presented
with new experiences that give them a different perspective on their identity. One identity in particular that may gain additional prominence is their gender identity, especially for women. Working in environments with diverse co-workers and experiences on campus begin to highlight some of the different experiences and expectations that society demands of women. The interviews revealed three themes that addressed an exploration of identity. First, participants shared examples of the challenges and stereotypes that they encountered based on their identity as women. Additionally, participants had significant learning experiences based on interactions with students who had different experiences growing up, but who shared a racial or ethnic identity. Lastly, participants had meaningful opportunities to reflect on their personal identity. These three themes will be discussed as facing challenges and stereotypes as a woman, learning from others with different experiences, and reflecting on personal social identity.

**Facing Challenges and Stereotypes as a Woman**

The participants described three major areas where they felt that they had faced challenges and stereotypes as a woman: socially, academically and professionally. Many of the participants felt that they had not faced overt sexism, but in sharing their experiences described examples of ways in which specific stereotypes of women affected them directly. Esther, for example, reflected explicitly on her experiences with stereotypes of women in a social context. Esther stated that, “women are more prone to be judged for whatever you do. Girls are more cautious about their image. You always have to be careful and know what you’re doing.” She also spoke at length about the specific beauty standards that women were expected to live up to, saying, “what you’re striving to achieve is just not possible, but everyone’s brainwashed, in my opinion… if you don’t fit this certain image from this age, you have to change. Everyone expects you to.” For Esther, these stereotypes and expectations pointed to some of the
Esther’s experiences with these differing expectations for men and women on campus highlighted for her the fact that men and women experience college campus life in different ways. Despite her acknowledgement of these issues, Esther did not discuss these issues in regards to her decision to join an Asian American sorority on campus. The fact that this decision was fueled more by her interest in the organization as a pan-ethnic Asian American organization points to the different roles that Esther’s race and gender played in motivating her involvement on campus.

Whereas Esther discussed her experiences as a woman on campus by focusing on the social context, others such as Joliana discussed her experiences by concentrating on academics. Joliana, a neuroscience major, shared her challenges in finding a mentor, and talked about the ways that gender dynamics played out in the classroom. She said,

I feel like to prove myself as worthy in science, that I have to work harder, and that I’m not as outspoken, and that’s seen as a weakness, because you’re supposed to be open and be able to present your findings and things.

Joliana also talked about how being a woman had shaped what her family had encouraged her to do as a career. She shared that when she first entered college, she said, “for a time I entered engineering, and [her parents were] like well, that’s for men… Women are more towards helping people, because you’re more personable.” This attitude encouraged her to pursue neuroscience, with the goal of becoming a doctor. She went on to say, “First I fought it, but I realize that it is one of the main reasons I want to be a doctor versus lab research. I like working with people. I’m intuitive, so it would be better suited for me.” Subtle messages, such as those received by Joliana, shaped the academic and professional choices that these women made, and highlighted ways in which women were presumed to have different strengths as opposed to men. Despite the
fact that some of the messages that Joliana received reflected stereotypes of women, Joliana’s attitude towards these messages remained accepting of these messages. While she may not have agreed with all of these messages, these experiences did not motivate Joliana to take specific actions to connect more with women or to create change in people’s attitudes towards women.

Other participants, such as Roshni, reflected on their gender focusing more on experiences in the workplace and in a professional context. As a business and finance major, Roshni stated that she was usually a minority in her classes and in the internship programs in which she had participated. Roshni recognized the challenges that women faced in the workplace, such as differences in compensation. She stated:

I know that I am just as capable and I know for a fact and it’s very upsetting to know when I enter the job market after next year, after I graduate, chances are I’m going to have to fight to be paid the same as someone else who has applied for the job, just based on the fact that I’m a woman. And that is very upsetting to know. I’m going to be fully aware of that fact as I move into the market, but how much can I do to change it?

Roshni’s comments reflected an awareness of the unequal treatment of women in the workplace. However, similarly to Joliana, Roshni was not compelled to connect with a community of women around these issues, nor did she feel empowered to take action to try to create change in the treatment of women.

Other participants, such as Sarah, spoke about experiencing sexism in the workplace. Sarah described her reaction to hearing co-workers making sexist remarks at her off-campus internship. She said,
I kind of turn around and laugh about it… I don’t feel like there’s anything wrong, but at the same time I know it is but I don’t really know what to say. It’s just one of those things where I just don’t feel like I’ve gotten there yet.

Sarah’s descriptions reflected a simultaneous acceptance and complicity with these sexist statements, but also an awareness of the potentially harmful repercussions of such comments. These reactions also reflect a lack of knowledge about the experiences of women, especially in the context of workplace dynamics and sexual harassment. Sarah additionally identified challenges that Asian American women in particular may face when entering the workforce. She mused that perhaps this was something that the career services department on campus should work on addressing. However, she still stated, “after my three years here, we haven’t really been exposed to this aspect… I never really thought about it until now.” Especially in a professional context, Roshni and Sarah addressed the subtle and also institutional ways in which they had had different experiences compared to their male counterparts, yet they expressed some resignation and discomfort in addressing these differences in experiences.

The participants had varying experiences in terms of the experiences with challenges and stereotypes they faced as women. On the one hand, women like Sarah stated that “I feel like as a woman… it hasn’t hindered my abilities to do anything that I feel like… or prevented me from doing the things that I want to do.” This statement reflects an attitude that suggests that women can pursue their dreams, and that their experiences are similar to men’s experiences. However, on the other hand, all of the participants were also acutely aware of the expectations that society placed on them and the challenges that they faced as women. College was an important space for these women to explore how they would respond to these expectations and challenges. In other environments, their identity as women may not have carried as much meaning. However,
faced with social, professional, and academic decisions in college, gender identity and their identity as women became one more area for exploration of identity. The participants expressed ambivalence about their identity as women as they were in the process of reconciling their beliefs about their own experiences and how others perceived them. Despite the fact that these participants were aware of different manifestations of sexism in their lives, these concerns did not motivate them to take action and connect with communities focused on gender identity.

**Learning from Others with Different Experiences**

Another key experience in helping the participants explore their own identity was the opportunity to learn from others who had similar backgrounds but who had also encountered very different kinds of experiences. For example, Sarah described how she grew up in a community with a large Chinese American population, and felt that she had not faced prejudice or racism. While Sarah felt that she had a strong sense of her ethnic identity, she felt that others she met at PRU did not. Upon arriving at PRU, Sarah states,

> I think it was just a bit more difficult coming here and seeing other people be like, ‘I don’t even know what I am’ and how can you not know who you are? It kind of opened my mind a bit that not everyone was has been able to identify what they were before or come to terms with, who I am or who they are.

Sarah had grown up in an environment that allowed her to connect with a community of other Asian Americans. Her comments indicated that this was important in her own development of her ethnic and racial identities. For Sarah, connecting with peers who grew up in different kinds of environments pushed her to think more critically about her own identity. Hearing about the perspectives of other Asian American students who were less aware of their racial and ethnic identities led Sarah to reflect more on her own identity and specifically what it meant to her to be
Chinese American. On the other hand, hearing about others’ experiences dealing with both subtle and explicit forms of racism also helped Sarah to reflect on her racial identity as an Asian American.

Similarly, Roshni discussed her experiences growing up in New Jersey, yet still being able to grow up immersed in South Asian culture. Roshni stated, “Some people who have no idea where they came from makes me realize how valuable it is to know where I came from.” Roshni described how this led her to be more appreciative of the way her family raised her, giving her the knowledge and experiences to help her connect to her South Asian heritage. Roshni continued by stating,

I think when I was younger, I didn’t really understand the importance of keeping in touch with my culture, but I would say that as you get older you sort of realize how important it is to know what’s going on… you can sort of connect with your roots, I guess. It is a very cliché phrase, but I think it’s really important… I think a big part of it was coming here and realizing how many people are not aware of the same thing.”

Roshni spoke about being “annoyed” at the fact that she had to take Classical Indian dancing or attend South Asian culture camps when she was younger. However, she grew to become proud of her racial identity, in part due to meeting other students who were not as aware or proud of their identities. For Roshni, her participation in the Asian American community on campus gave her a meaningful space to reflect on her own Asian American heritage.

Esther, on the other hand, described a very different experience of not connecting with her Korean American peers in college. In general, Esther found it hard to connect with other Korean Americans, which she attributed, in part, to her refusal to buy in to Korean/Korean American standards of beauty. Despite this lack of connection, Esther found connections with a
broader Pan-Asian American community. Esther stated, “Here, I’m more Asian American. I’m part of this group, but I don’t limit myself to just being Korean because it’s not like I exclude people [just] from being not Korean.” Whereas Esther did not feel comfortable in the Korean American student group on campus, she did connect with a pan-ethnic Asian American sorority on campus. This connection led her to identify more as an Asian American on campus and gave her a new perspective on understanding her Asian American identity. For Esther, these interactions provided her with an opportunity to explore her identity, especially in terms of making sense of the American part of her identity. Esther stated, “I identify myself more as a Korean-American, more focused on the American part because I actually am very Americanized I guess in my opinion.” Interestingly, Esther’s comments about her identity and her participation in a pan-ethnic Asian American sorority focused more on the racial identity that connected this group rather than the gender identity that the group shared as women. Esther’s comments reflected how important it was for her to have a space to help her understand her identity as an Asian American. For Sarah, Roshni, and Esther, the opportunity to interact with peers with different backgrounds and childhood experiences had been valuable in giving them a new perspective on understanding their own individual identities.

The context of college provides Asian American students with an important opportunity to engage with a more diverse Asian American community. As articulated by Sarah and Roshni, the experience of arriving on campus exposed them to a more diverse population of Asian American students. This diversity of background and experiences growing up provided the participants with a better understanding of their own identity. It also provided a more nuanced perspective on what their ethnic identity meant to them. Because the racial category of Asian American is inherently a political identity as opposed to a cultural identity, the participants
initially had a strong affiliation with a specific ethnic identity as opposed to the broader Asian American racial identity. The context of college allowed these students to connect with an Asian American community, creating opportunities for increased awareness and understanding of their identities as Asian Americans, beyond their specific ethnic identities. Discovering a pan-ethnic Asian American community was one way in which these students began to explore a broader racial identity.

Reflecting on Personal Identity

The participants all discussed different ways that they had reflected on their own personal identity in the context of college. For some participants, this was in large part due to their involvement in ethnic and cultural organizations on campus. For others, this was in response to having a greater understanding of the stereotypes and challenges they faced based on their identities as both women and Asian Americans. For example, Sarah, stated that, “I think I know more about ignorance about being Asian American… I’ve never been confronted with ignorance about being female… I feel like a lot more passionate about Asian issues opposed to like gender.” Sarah recognized issues such as the insufficient representation of Asian American women on campus and the lack of resources specifically targeting this group. In particular, she identified challenges that this group may face when entering the workforce and mused that perhaps this issue was something that the career services department on campus should work on addressing. However, Sarah still stated, “after my three years here, we haven’t really been exposed to this aspect… I never really thought about it until now.” This points to a disconnect between Sarah’s experiences as an Asian American student and as a female student. While identity is often portrayed as overlapping and intersecting, Sarah’s comments suggested that she did not experience her identity as intersectional. Her racial identity as an Asian American was
more salient than her gender identity. This indicates that despite the fact that identities are often described as overlapping and intersecting, the ways that students experience these identities may not match these kinds of descriptions.

When Roshni discussed her identity as a South Asian American, she talked about recently becoming more aware of issues such as internalized racism and cultural appropriation. At this point in her life, she was extremely proud of her identity as a South Asian American. She said, “I think that being able to appreciate parts of myself is sort of knowing that, I should be allowed to do that without … feeling like one is better than the other.” Roshni gave an example of giving a presentation to incoming first year students about the South Asian student organization on campus. She shared that some students responded,

Oh, I don’t really do brown things. And I’m like why? Why don’t you want to? And it’s very upsetting, because you know that somewhere along the way someone had made them feel like they’re less worthy because of their skin color and that’s really unfortunate.

This understanding had propelled Roshni to become a leader within the South Asian student organization at PRU where she hoped to give South Asian students an opportunity to become proud of their identity. For Roshni, her participation in the South Asian student organization gave her an opportunity to connect with other students in a way that helped her better understand her own identity. Her comments indicated that despite being raised in a way that helped her connect with her identity, it was Roshni’s experiences with being involved on campus that gave her the context to further understand her own racial identity.

Similarly, Jessica identified her involvement on campus as having given her many opportunities to reflect on her identity. Jessica stated,
I've done a lot more self-reflection than I think the average college student does towards my cultural identity and even just my overall identity. Just because when we have discussions of identity, it's very much an understanding of not just what does just this one individual think. It always plays into your overall perspective and your overall view of yourself.

However, despite the fact that Jessica felt like she had reflected on her overall identity, she stated the following about her identity as a woman: “It's not something I've ever questioned… I've always known I was a woman. Always checked off female. Never really thought about wanting to be anything else.” While Jessica stated that she has reflected on her overall identity, her gender identity does not seem to have been a part of this overall reflection. This indicates a broader complacency about her identity as a woman, which was juxtaposed with Jessica’s engagement around her identity as a Chinese American.

For these participants, reflecting on their identity primarily meant reflecting on their racial identity. Clearly, the fact that they had been involved in ethnic and cultural student organizations had helped facilitate their reflection on their ethnic and cultural identities. Yet at the same time, there seemed to be few opportunities for these participants to reflect on their experiences as women, despite the fact that most of them identified challenges that they have faced as both Asian Americans and women on campus. While participants had a clear understanding of the intersections of their identities as Asian Americans and as women, there existed a distinction for these students in terms of how they engaged with their racial identities and their identities as women. While the participants all discussed their racial and ethnic identities with passion and a commitment to creating change, there was a broader sense of resignation about their experiences as women. For these students, they were presented with
more opportunities to explore their racial and ethnic identities in the context of a broader Asian American community. This was contrasted with the fact that they had not had as much of an opportunity to connect with a community of women and explore their gender identity. Each of these participants discussed their racial and ethnic identity as being much more salient as compared to their gender identity.

Overall, the participants in this study explored their own identities through the experiences as college students. Their experiences dealing with various stereotypes that they faced, both based on their gender and racial identities, was one context that encouraged them to explore their identities. Another context which promoted self-reflection and understanding of identity was the opportunity to connect with other peers in the Asian American community. Interestingly an analogous experience did not exist that centered around connecting with other women on campus. Lastly, the experience of reflecting on identity was primarily focused on racial identity. While the participants were aware of and described experiences that were associated with their gender identity, their reflections on their identities focused on their experiences on campus as Asian Americans, not as women. Overall, this suggests that there is a heightened salience of students’ racial identity on college campuses. Taken together with the participants’ experiences with feeling a sense of belonging, this suggests that the campus itself created an atmosphere of subtle racism which led students to be more aware of their Asian American identity. Collectively, these subtle experiences and the experience of connecting with an Asian American community on campus created an environment on campus where racial identity was significant and explored while gender identity remained less salient.

Making Meaning of Student Involvement
All of the participants interviewed for this study were involved in programs and activities hosted by PRU. In discussing their involvement on campus, the participants spoke about opportunities that their involvement provided for them to grow and develop. While the participants had all explored different opportunities to become engaged on campus, the areas in which they were most involved and connected focused on the Asian American community. The participants reflected on their involvement as contributing to their experiences on campus in two main ways. First, their involvement allowed them to explore themes of leadership and to develop and practice specific leadership skills, such as public speaking or organizing groups of people. Secondly, their involvement gave them a sense of purpose on campus and represented a means by which to connect with a community on campus. These two themes will be discussed as exploring leadership and defining purpose on campus.

**Exploring Leadership**

Leadership in the Asian American community reflects values which differ from traditional values that are discussed in the context of student leadership in higher education. For these participants, leadership was a less intentional and sometimes unexpected way to become engaged with student life on campus. Reflecting on their experiences, the participants discussed various ways that they had become involved in campus life. For Joliana, exploring leadership was not intentional, yet this was an experience that had contributed to her own development as an individual. Originally, Joliana had not even been interested in becoming involved with a cultural student organization on campus, yet she became a leader within the Filipino student organization. In describing how she became an officer in Katipunan, Joliana said, “At first, I thought it was going to be an easy job…. I didn’t think it would be that difficult. But then I learned so much about how to actually get things done.” Joliana eventually became a leader
within Katipunan, which she claimed “really helped me grow as a person.” More specifically, she stated, “it really helped me become more open… I learned it was really important to socialize with other people, really connect with them.” Joliana reflected on wanting to take on leadership positions to help recreate the kinds of environments that helped her first get involved. She said, “I really want to focus on being in a club and being more socially open and having activities that were more welcoming of people.” Joliana also shared, “I feel connected to the campus life through leadership roles… and through Katipunan, but I feel like there’s a general sense of disunity in PRU generally.” For Joliana, Katipunan had helped create her community on campus. Joliana’s involvement with Katipunan gave her a space to connect with peers and then explore themes of leadership.

Similarly, Jessica stated, “I don’t think I came here expecting to be as involved as I did.” In describing her own path to becoming a student leader, Jessica shared,

I’ve been actively participating in the Asian Student Association. It’s where I found my niche. It’s where I met my closest friends… from there, it was just that and joining [the executive board] because my friends were on eboard… I was like, sure, why not?

Jessica described how her student involvement had been one of the most influential experiences of her college career, something that made her very proud. Jessica stated that being a leader has, shaped my experience in that I feel like the people around me… know me best. They know me well enough to know that what I want is to continue to better myself. That’s a shared goal. That shared goal takes us forward in that we’re always doing it together.

For Jessica, leadership was primarily about interpersonal relationships and learning to work with a group of people. This had led her to connect with “a very specific subset of people.” While Jessica had not explicitly sought to become involved in the Asian American community, this
involvement became a defining part of her college experience. Jessica’s participation in the Asian American community was critical in creating the space for her to grow as a student leader on campus.

Other participants, such as Sarah, explicitly acknowledged the role of the Asian American community in providing her with the grounding and support to take on new challenges. Sarah described the Asian American Mentoring Program (AMP) as helping her find her comfort zone on campus which had allowed her to take on new challenges, such as a number of leadership positions within the Asian American community on campus. “In a way, I felt like a comfort-zone in my non-comfort zone. It kind of helped me branch out that way.” In this statement, Sarah recognized the importance of first feeling comfortable, of belonging, before being able to face other challenges, such as taking on leadership roles. This was juxtaposed with the trepidation that she expressed around what it would be like for her to participate in mainstream student organizations. For Sarah, the context of her leadership development within the Asian American community on campus had given her a safe place to explore new kinds of leadership roles.

For all of these participants, exploring leadership represented one way that they felt they had grown throughout their college experience. The interviews revealed that this exploration happened in both serendipitous and intentional ways for the participants. What the participants’ experiences had in common, however, was that they were rooted in an Asian American community where the participants felt a sense of connection. Most importantly, within this community, the participants expressed that they could identify shared experiences. As articulated by students like Joliana, exploring leadership was rooted in community and a desire to give back to a community that had played an important role in her college experience. For
Defining Purpose on Campus

The participants in this study discussed their own sense of purpose on campus in relation to their student involvement. While the participants all recognized the important role of academics in their lives on campus, they also expressed a desire to experience more than just academics during their time at PRU. For these participants, defining purpose and seeking a sense of belonging were fundamentally connected themes. By finding common ground with other students, the participants succeeded in creating a sense of belonging which contributed to defining a shared purpose on campus.

Many of the participants expressed that their involvement was initially motivated by a desire to connect with other students on campus. Roshni described herself as someone who needed to be busy, but also someone who needed to be around people. She stated,

I’m the type of person, I don’t enjoy having too much free time… if I had too much time, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself… if I have too much time by myself, then I sort of get really…. It freaks me out.

Roshni described this need to have different things to do, but also described how being active with the South Asian Student Association (SASA) had represented an opportunity to develop many close friendships. This finding contrasted with her involvement in the Finance and Investment Club. Roshni’s descriptions of this club made it seem like just a time commitment that kept her occupied, but did not yield any meaningful friendships. In talking about how her involvement with SASA had contributed to her college experience, Roshni asserted, “this has
been a good way for me to be a part of something… I really enjoy being able to contribute to something that I have a lot of knowledge about.” For Roshni, her involvement with SASA not only kept her busy, but connected her with a community that gave her a clear and meaningful role in the context of student life on campus.

Similarly to Roshni, Joliana had been active in both a cultural organization, Katipunan, and also organizations related to her major. Joliana described her experience with Katipunan as being more of a “personal interaction.” Reflecting about her involvement on campus, Joliana stated,

I have a couple of friends that aren’t very involved with student life, and I just can’t imagine doing that… It keeps me busy and keeps me active. I feel like I have a purpose versus if I wasn’t part of anything. And I like that.

Roshni and Joliana both expressed the importance of being “a part of something” that helped give them a purpose on campus. Joliana elaborated more on this sense of purpose and said that by being a part of something, she gained “a community of people to talk to, people that I can automatically connect with… A community. A center.” Joliana articulated a clear sense of belonging through her involvement with cultural organizations. This feeling departed significantly from the ways that she described her involvement with more academic organizations on campus. Joliana’s comments suggested that she derived more meaning from her involvement with a cultural organization as compared to her involvement with academic organizations on campus. These comments reflected the fact that for these participants, their involvement on campus meant more to them than just being engaged on campus. For these Asian American students, their involvement played a role in connecting them to their racial and ethnic identities.
Jessica also reflected on her experiences with being involved on campus and stated, “I don’t think I came here expecting to be as involved as I did.” At the same time, however, Jessica described what it was like when she first arrived at PRU. She stated,

I think I was too overwhelmed by the fact that I was moving so far away from home… I was just like, ‘Find friends so I don’t miss home as much!’ … I was like, ‘I really need to make more friends… or else I’m going to be a hermit and not do anything besides come home.’

Jessica recognized how important it was for her to make connections that reminded her of her support networks at home. While Jessica did not expect to be so heavily involved on campus, she was very intentional about seeking out opportunities to be involved on campus and to connect with other students. Like Roshni and Joliana, Jessica’s attempts at getting involved in academic organizations were not successful. In talking about an engineering organization where she attended meetings, Jessica claimed, “They didn’t seem productive or interesting, so I stopped going.” On the other hand, Jessica’s involvement in the Asian American community on campus was something that she “want[s] to be proud of.” For Jessica, her involvement with cultural organizations “has shaped my experience at PRU” and had much more meaning for her in comparison to her participation with academic organizations.

These students all alluded to their involvement on campus as helping them “be a part of something.” While Roshni, Joliana, and Jessica all discussed a desire to be connected on campus, only Jessica articulated this desire in a way that connected to her experiences as an Asian American student on campus. Despite this, for all three of these participants, being a part of something more specifically meant being a part of something that connected them to their identities as Asian American students. Interestingly, none of the participants explicitly
mentioned wanting to connect with other female students. Whereas shared experiences was a prominent factor in students’ decisions to become involved in cultural organizations, there was not a sense that it was important or valuable to connect around shared experiences as women on campus. For these students, the shared experiences of identifying as Asian American were highly salient, while their shared experiences as women on campus had less significance. Clearly, for these participants, engagement on campus was connected to building community, exploring leadership and defining purpose on campus. Despite this engagement, the participants were less articulate about the ways in which their involvement on campus connected to their own individual identities as Asian Americans. There was an overall awareness which motivated the participants to build communities around their racial and ethnic identities. However, at the same time, there was an overarching discomfort or reluctance to talk about what this specifically meant to them as individuals and as Asian American students on a predominantly White campus. Overall, being involved in racial and ethnic students organizations on campus gave these students a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose, even if they were not always able to articulate what this involvement meant to them.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which Asian American female college students experience the concept of sense of belonging on campus. An analysis of interviews conducted with five participants revealed insights about the ways that these students experienced college as Asian American students and as female students. In particular, one overarching theme was that for these students their racial identity was much more salient in their experiences on campus compared to their gender identity.
As these students explored their identities on campus, it was clear from the interviews that the participants had experiences that highlighted both their identities as Asian Americans as well as their identities as women. Despite experiencing prejudice and discrimination both as Asian American students and as female students, for these participants, the experiences related to their racial identities were more salient. While students do indeed carry multiple and intersecting identities, the experiences of the participants in this study suggested that there are meaningful differences in the ways that these identities are lived on campus. Most importantly, gender and racial identity contributed differently to the ways in which these students experienced a sense of belonging on campus.

More specifically, the role of identity in creating community on campus emerged as a theme for the participants in this study. The participants overwhelmingly felt more connected to communities built on shared racial and ethnic identities as opposed to communities built around other commonalities. This is to say that the participants did not feel connected in communities built around common interests, and also did not feel connected to communities of women. In fact, many of the participants shared that they felt like they did not belong in campus communities that were predominantly White such as academic organizations. While the participants did not attribute this lack of belongingness to explicit racism or discrimination, they did acknowledge the comfort they felt in communities that shared a racial or ethnic identity. These findings point to the fundamental nature of the need to belong, especially in the context of college. For the participants, finding a community to belong to and connect with provided a strong foundation for their college experience. Despite the fact that the participants did not all seek out to become part of a specific racial or ethnic community, it was in these settings that the participants felt most connected. Connecting and becoming invested in a particular community
on campus fostered a sense of purpose for the participants in this study. Becoming engaged with the Asian American community on campus created opportunities for the development of leadership skills, but also contributed to a sense that students had a purpose on campus. This idea of being important and relevant on campus was another important component of feeling that one belongs.

The participants spoke at length about the ways in which they derived meaning from their involvement with the Asian American community. At the same time, their comments reflected a sense of alienation from the broader university community. The participants’ descriptions of their feelings of connectedness, support, and mutual understanding within the Asian American community stood at a sharp contrast to the ways in which these participants described a community of women on campus. Implied in these different experiences was a sense that the students were highly connected to and felt supported by the Asian American community on campus. In contrast, participants also expressed the ways in which they felt they were not connected and not supported by the larger university community. These differences in how students engaged with their identity in the context of college point to the multitude of ways in which students experience their racial and gender identities in college. Specifically, these differences reflect the fact that individuals can have vastly different lived experiences based on their multiple social identities.

Asian American women on college campuses have a unique set of experiences that lie at the intersections of racial and gender identities. As these students seek to define community on their campus, it is valuable to understand the ways in which their racial and gender identities inform their choices of which communities they become actively engaged with. Clearly, for the participants in this study, there was value in connecting with the Asian American community on
campus. This was articulated by participants through their acknowledgement of the importance of connecting with peers around shared experiences and shared values. What was lacking from the participants was an explicit articulation of the context and meaning of connecting with an Asian American community. Some of this centered on a lack of awareness and vocabulary for discussing these themes. Thus, for Asian American female college students, there is an ongoing need for understanding Asian American identity and the Asian American community. It is in providing this kind of understanding that Asian American female students can become better supported in the context of college.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of the current research study was to develop a better understanding of the ways in which Asian American female college students experience a sense of belonging at PWIs. More specifically, the current study looked at the experiences of Asian American female college students and sought to understand the role of their identity in shaping their experiences feeling a sense of belonging on campus. As Asian American women on campus, both their gender and racial identity were explored, specifically in the context of how these students built communities on campus through their student involvement. In order to give voice to the experiences of Asian American female college students, the approach used by the current study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis. In looking at sense of belonging, the current study sought to understand sense of belonging as defined by Strayhorn (2012). According to Strayhorn, sense of belonging is defined as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others” (Strayhorn, 2012, location 571). A close analysis of the data from this study revealed three superordinate themes in the students’ experiences. These three themes were 1) building community, 2) exploring identity, and 3)
making meaning of student involvement. First, this chapter will discuss each of these three superordinate themes and how these themes are situated with respect to the current literature. In discussing each of these themes, the researcher will also discuss the implications of these findings on current practice in student affairs. The researcher will then make suggestions for improving practice in student affairs as it relates to the experiences of Asian American female college students. Lastly, the researcher will make suggestions for future research that will further the conversation on how sense of belonging is experienced on college campuses by different populations of students.

**Building Community**

For the participants in this study, the concepts of sense of belonging and community were highly connected. The participants expressed a desire to connect with other students on campus both as a way to feel comfortable and cope with their transition to college, as well as providing an outlet to make new connections and benefit from the diverse student population on campus. For the participants, these intentions were met with different degrees of success. The students who were looking to connect with diverse peers experienced challenges in trying to become involved based on shared interests such as academic majors. The students who were looking to find comfort with students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds were more successful in creating relationships and building a community to which they felt connected. This was juxtaposed with a lack of connection to communities that were centered around the participants’ gendered experiences as women on campus. Thus, there was a clear distinction in the ways that the racial identities of the participants shaped how they defined a sense of belonging on campus.

The literature on sense of belonging often connects the concepts of sense of belonging and community, as was reflected in the experiences of the participants in this study (Strayhorn,
Researchers have suggested that connecting with the school community is a prerequisite to student success and academic achievement (Osterman, 2000, Tovar & Simon, 2010). Here, Osterman (2000) highlighted the importance of building a community within the school setting which can be seen as the foundation for student success. In these discussions of the role of community, the impacts of different social identities were not explicitly addressed. While Osterman (2000) acknowledged the role of context in affecting the various needs of students, the current findings point more specifically to the role of race in building communities. As pointed out by Tierney (1992), there needs to be a broader understanding of the culture of the institution and how this potentially presents conflicts from students from communities with different cultures. Consistent with Hurtado and Carter (1997), these findings suggest that the racial climate of the campus combined with the racial identity of the students together play an critical role in defining the needs of the students and the communities that are required to support them.

The participants identified themes such as shared values and common experiences as factors that contributed to the supportive nature of the Asian American community on campus. This notion of community builds upon the definition of community used by Osterman (2000). Osterman suggested that the four key components of a community were membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. The experiences related by the participants in this study move beyond the connections implied in this definition of community. While the participants in the current study attempted to join communities that were build on shared interests, there was an underlying difference in connecting with a community with a shared racial experience and other communities. This reflects the types of conflicts discussed by Tierney (1992) as students of color are often torn between remaining connected with their community or separating to connect with a mainstream community. The connection
around shared racial experiences can be compared with the participants’ experiences based on their gender identity. While the participants all articulated an awareness of the challenges they experienced as women on campus, these participants did not seek out communities based on their gender identity. This suggests that for Asian American female students on predominantly White campuses, there are certain requirements for what constitutes a meaningful and supportive community. More specifically, this suggests that for these students, there is an important need to connect with others of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The context of being on at a PWI clearly impacted the needs and experiences of the participants in this study. Suyemoto et al. (2009) suggested that despite the stereotype that Asian American students are universally academically successful, Asian American students on college campuses experience verbal and physical harassment on campus. Additionally, Suyemoto et al. (2009) reported that Asian American students experience more social isolation and less satisfaction with social support than other racial groups on campus. In the current study, the participants’ lack of connection with mainstream student organization is consistent with these findings. While the participants in this study did not explicitly discuss experiences of verbal or physical harassment, there was an implied sense that there was an important common ground that the participants acknowledged within the context of an Asian American community. As reported by the participants in this study, connecting with an Asian American community on campus was a critical way in which these students developed a sense of belonging on campus.

The idea that Asian American students are more likely to connect with Asian American organizations as opposed to mainstream organizations is consistent with research on other communities of students of color. Research on the effects of co-curricular involvement within the African American student community reflects similar themes (Flowers 2004; Harper &
Quaye, 2007; Mitchell & Dell, 1992; Taylor and Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Mitchell and Dell (1992) reported that students with a stronger racial identification were more likely to participate in racial or ethnic student organizations as opposed to mainstream organizations. Mitchell and Dell (1992) noted that there were more African American students who participated in racial and ethnic political and social action organizations as opposed to mainstream political and social action organizations. They hypothesized that this was connected to the fact that even within organizations with a specific purpose, there are a distinct set of needs that are met when students participate in a racial or ethnic organization. Other research by Harper and Quaye (2007) also affirmed the positive outcomes associated with connecting with a specific racial or ethnic community through student organizations. These findings were echoed by the participants in the current study though not in these explicit terms. The participants in the current study discussed a general lack of connection with individuals in mainstream organizations, which was juxtaposed to a stronger connection associated with racial and ethnic organizations. While the participants in this study could not always explicitly identify the needs that were met through the cultural organizations, they acknowledged that there was a difference in participating in mainstream organizations and racial and ethnic organizations. This may reflect some of the differences between the experiences of Asian American students and African American students, particularly with regards to their awareness of racism and the histories of their respective communities in the United States. The discussion among the Asian American students also reflected a lack of comfort in explicitly talking about race and racism in the Asian American community.

Across all of the participants in the current study, there was a sense that they did not belong in existing mainstream organizations on campus. Even when students had shared interests with those in mainstream student organizations, there was a perceived barrier that
prevented the participants from connecting with these organizations in the kind of ways that build community. While there was a clear lack of connection in the context of mainstream student organizations, there was also a lack of connection to communities based on the participants’ gender identities. For Asian American women, these spaces also did not create the levels of comfort that would allow for Asian American women to feel that they belonged in these spaces. Taken together, these findings suggest that the connections and relationships that are built around race and ethnicity create a stronger sense of belonging and community than connections that are built around other shared experiences. This suggests that not all communities are created equal. This is to say that in the context of higher education, there are a specific set of needs that are met when students connect with racial and ethnic-specific communities at PWIs. While literature focusing on students and building communities has focused on communities in a broad sense, this study suggests that the experiences of specific populations of students may call for a heightened sensitivity to what constitutes a community. This implies that for Asian American students at PWIs, it is important to create opportunities for these students to build communities that truly meet their specific needs. It is through building these communities that Asian American students can become fully supported and thrive on college campuses. As described by the participants in this study, one important experience that occurred within the context of these communities was the opportunity to explore their own identity.

**Exploring Identity**

As students seek to establish a sense of belonging on campus, they are simultaneously exploring their own identities. The participants in this study reflected on their own experiences exploring their gender identity and learning and reflecting on their own racial and ethnic
identities. In particular, the participants discussed a growing awareness of the specific experiences of women on college campuses, from a social, academic and professional perspective. With regards to their racial and ethnic identities, the participants shared that they learned about their identities as Asian Americans through their involvement on campus and also used these opportunities to reflect on their own social identities. Despite their awareness of both their gender and racial identities, the context of the campus created an environment where the students’ racial identities were more salient than their gender identities.

There is a limited amount of literature focusing specifically at gender and racial identity. Some literature (Cokley, 2001) has focused on gender differences in racial identity development. Cokley (2001) discussed the centrality of racial experiences for both African American men and women. In the context of PWIs, this suggests that racial identity may take on a heightened salience as opposed to gender identity. The reflections of the participants in this study are consistent with these findings. This is also consistent with the way in which Strayhorn (2012) discussed the role of sense of belonging for college students. Strayhorn suggested that sense of belonging may become more important for certain populations of students in certain contexts. Given reports of pervasive stereotyping of students of color on predominantly White campuses (Alvarez, 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Suyemoto et al., 2009), the fact that race may play a central role in students’ campus experiences is not surprising. While participants in the current study were aware of the different ways that their racial and gender identity had affected their experiences, it was their racial identity that could be seen as the motivating factor in where these students found a community and a sense of belonging. Interestingly, even for students that were explicitly involved in organizations focused on a shared gender identity, these experiences did not create a sense of connection with other students based on a shared gender identity. The fact
that students’ gender identities were not as salient suggests that there is a continued prevalence of racial stereotypes that has a profound effect on the experiences of students of color at PWIs.

Kodama et al. (2002) also suggested that for Asian American women in particular, there may be conflicting values that are associated with identity development for women and Asian Americans. More specifically, Kodama et al. (2002) suggested that if identity as a woman on campus is connected with more with feminist values, this may create conflict between a student’s identity as a woman and their Asian American identity. In the context of these potentially conflicting values, female Asian American students must find their own way to navigate their perceptions of their own identity and values. Some participants in the current study discussed the conflicts between their family’s traditional values and values that were more representative of American culture. While the participants did not articulate a conflict between their values as women and their values as Asian Americans, it was clear from their responses that there was a more explicit focus on their experiences as Asian Americans.

Many of the reflections around identity recounted by participants in this study centered around their participation in racial and ethnic student organization on campus. Researchers such as Inkelas (2004) have pointed to the increase in Asian American student organizations as one structure which has developed to provide a community for Asian American students on college campuses. In particular, Inkelas (2004) highlighted the role of student organizations in creating opportunities for students to learn about the Asian American community. Kodama et al. (2002) pointed out that many Asian American students have not been exposed to the historical contributions and struggles of the Asian American community. Asian American student organizations, then, become critical spaces for Asian American students to gain awareness of this history, especially as it pertains to their racial identities as Asian Americans. Whether
participating in ethnic-specific student organizations or pan-ethnic Asian American student organizations, the participants in this study acknowledged that their participation in these organizations helped them become more aware of issues facing the Asian American community. As the Asian American student population on college campuses continues to grow, these opportunities will become increasingly important avenues for Asian American students to form connections and build community.

Inkelas (2004) suggested that participation in Asian American student organizations is positively correlated with an increase in understanding of Asian American issues and interests. Inkelas connected these positive outcomes directly with overall community and civic engagement. These themes were echoed by the participants in this study. They expressed that they came to learn more about their own identities through their participation in racial and ethnic student organizations on campus. Some of the participants specifically mentioned learning from the diversity of students within a particular student organization. Connecting and learning from a diverse set of peers contributed to the experience of learning about Asian American identity. This suggests that in thinking about the kinds of environments that will encourage student growth and development, it is important to create these opportunities for Asian American students. While many programs on college campuses have focused on engaging students across different identities, the experiences of these students suggests that there is an important value in building communities that promote the identity development of Asian American students.

Museus (2008) identified three main purposes for ethnic student organizations for students of color at PWIs. These were cultural familiarity, expression of racial identity and cultural validation. The sentiments expressed by students in the current study were consistent with these findings. This study extends the understanding of the experiences of these students by
shedding light on the specific ways in which participation in these ethnic student organizations contributes to the continued development of racial identity for students of color. The participants in this study can be seen as both expressing and exploring racial identity through their participation in ethnic student organizations. More specifically, the findings from this study suggest that by connecting with a set of peers in the context of a racial or ethnic student organization, students are able to gain a deeper awareness of their own racial and ethnic identity. In the context of understanding Asian American racial identity development, this makes sense as many students are first aware of their ethnic identity, and through contact with a broader community are then able to make sense of a pan-ethnic Asian American identity. As discussed by many of the participants, finding common ground in terms of values and experiences was an important part of validating their own racial identities as Asian American college students.

Some of the literature on student involvement and identity development has focused more on correlating the types of student involvement with specific racial identity attitudes (Mitchell & Dell, 1992; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). More specifically, this line of research has compared racial identity attitudes for students who participate in mainstream student organizations with the racial identity attitudes for students who participate in ethnic and cultural organizations. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) focused on African American males who participated in Afro-centric student organizations. Their findings suggested that overall participation in ethnic student organizations was correlated with more comfort with racial identity. The current research extends these findings by adding to the understanding of the ways in which participation in ethnic student organizations contributed to a greater comfort with one’s racial identity. While some of the participants in this study reported an initial discomfort with connecting with other Asian Americans, their participation in ethnic student organizations
created opportunities for learning about the Asian American community and reflecting on individual racial identity. It was through these processes that the participants grew to become more comfortable with their own racial identity. Other participants expressed an initial comfort with their racial identity but shared that they continued to reflect and become aware of their racial identity through their involvement. This suggests that participation in racial and ethnic student organizations not only reflects comfort with one’s racial identity but is also a means by which to gain a deeper understanding of one’s racial identity.

The ways in which the participants in this study discussed their identities reflected the idea that racial identity played a larger role than gender identity in shaping their experiences in college. While all of the participants articulated ways in which their gender identity affected their college experience, their Asian American identity was a crucial factor in defining how these students developed a community on campus. As a result, these students took advantage of more opportunities to engage around their racial identity as opposed to their gender identity. While none of the students expressed that they had experienced outright hostility or racial incidents, their perceptions of belonging on campus were most closely connected with their experiences as Asian American students. The participants were aware of the ways in which their gender identity had affected their experiences, but this was less connected to their experiences feeling a sense of belonging.

This perspective on the identity development of Asian American female college students is consistent with research on multiple identity development which suggests that multiple identities develop in a dynamic, non-linear, complex process (Jones & McEwan 2000). According to Jones and McEwan (2000), there was an important role played by external forces, and environmental factors on gender and racial identity development. Their dynamic model
accommodated the fact that the women in this study did not strongly identify with their gender identity as women, despite experiencing sexism. Their model did not address identity development specifically as a process, but instead offered a means by which to understand identity development at a specific point in time. What is described here contributes to a greater understanding about the process of the development of multiple identities, in this case, gender identity for women and racial identity for Asian Americans. This suggests that when supporting students and their multiple identities, it is important to understand the campus climate and how this climate impacts students based on their own social identities. At PWIs, it is critical to create meaningful opportunities for students to connect and engage around racial identity. As shared by the participants in this study, they made meaning of their engagement in very specific ways.

**Making Meaning of Student Involvement**

Understanding the meaning the students made of their involvement on campus provides a unique lens for connecting their involvement with their sense of belonging on campus. As shared by participants in this study, they viewed their involvement in student organizations on campus as contributing both to their own exploration of leadership as well as helping them define a sense of purpose on campus. Here, leadership must be understood in the context of the participants’ Asian American identities, as there are distinct differences in the ways that leadership can be embodied with in the Asian American community. Similarly, as the participants discussed their own sense of purpose on campus, this sense of purpose moved beyond simply academics and expressed the participants’ need to find community on campus. The ways in which these participants, as Asian American women on campus, made meaning of these experiences can be seen as again highlighting the salience of their racial identities over their gender identities.
For Asian American students, defining purpose on campus has primarily been discussed in the literature around themes of academic achievement (Kodama et al., 2002). As discussed by Kodama et al. (2002), this sense of purpose was firmly rooted in students’ experiences with their families. Most importantly, for many Asian American students, there was an expectation that their college education contribute to their (and their family’s) future financial success and stability. Defining purpose on campus in this way emphasized academic and economic success and left little room for personal growth. This was further complicated by the more collectivistic perspective on identity that was typical of Asian Americans (Yeh & Huang, 1996). This collectivistic identity tended to give parental expectations more weight in decision making for Asian American students (Kodama et al., 2002). These factors suggested that for Asian American students, defining their own sense of purpose on campus was a complex task that was intimately tied to their own racial identity development.

The experiences of the participants in this study reflected this divergence between academic involvement on campus and involvement in student life on campus. For the participants in this study, there was a marked distinction between their academic experiences and their co-curricular experiences. The findings in the current study thus build upon earlier research on Asian American students’ sense of purpose on college campuses. The participants in the current study expressed a desire to “do more” than just academics on campus and to truly “be a part” of something on campus. These goals were not achieved through the students’ involvement in academic organizations or even women-focused organizations on campus. For these Asian American students, their choice to become involved within the Asian American community on campus reflected a response to their overall experiences on campus and where they felt that they belonged. Not surprisingly, the participants described their involvement with
the Asian American community as the spaces where they developed the strongest relationships with their peers. This was contrasted with the participants’ experiences in academic activities where they felt less of a connection. The relationships built around a shared racial identity created opportunities for the participants to explore their racial and ethnic identities and led the participants to feel connected to a community on campus.

Interestingly, the participants in this study reflected very differently on the ways in which their identities as women on campus shaped their involvement. Despite the fact that all of the participants were aware of ways in which their gender identity had shaped their experiences, these experiences did little to impact where they chose to get involved on campus. Strayhorn (2012) suggested that sense of belonging is a fundamental need that is powerful enough to motivate action. The fact that the participants were not motivated to join women-focused organizations suggests that this need was not powerful enough in the context of the participants’ gender identity. Only two of the participants were involved in student organizations focusing on women, and their involvement in these organizations did not focus on building a community of women, or making change in the experiences of women on campus. This emphasizes the fact that for the participants in this study, connecting and contributing to the Asian American community on campus was more meaningful than connecting with a community of women on campus. As students seek to establish a sense of belonging on campus, it seemed that defining communities based on racial identity created a stronger sense of belonging for students than other shared identities. As defined by Strayhorn (2012), a sense of belonging requires a feeling of connectedness which for the participants was built around a shared racial identity.

Beyond simply connecting with a community on campus, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a leader on campus in an Asian American context. In the
broader literature on student leadership, there is limited discussion of the experiences of Asian American student leaders (Liu & Sedlacek, 1998; Yammarino & Jung, 1998). Student leadership in the United States has typically valued qualities such as assertiveness, self-confidence and public speaking (Liang, Lee & Ting, 2002). In contrast, leadership in the Asian American community may focus on values such as non-hierarchical relationships, harmony, and collaborations with depart from more traditional perspectives on leadership in the United States (Liang, Lee & Ting, 2002). Liu and Sedlacek (1998) suggested that it is necessary to broaden definitions of leadership to be more inclusive of leadership within the Asian American community. Many of the participants in the current study reported that leadership was not something that they sought to learn about in college, but was instead something that they became involved with in a more serendipitous manner. This is consistent with the ways that leadership is often viewed within the Asian American community and implies that Asian American students may not explicitly seek out leadership opportunities, but instead fall in to leadership opportunities after becoming involved and invested in a particular community.

Other research focusing on leadership and students of color has explored the intersections of racial identity development and leadership development (Harper & Quaye, 2007). In looking at the experiences of African American male student leaders, Harper and Quaye (2007) suggested that their involvement in student organizations simultaneously served to be a location for students to express their racial identity as well as to develop leadership skills. Harper and Quaye (2007) also discussed the role of racism in students’ decisions to affiliate with racially based student organizations. They point to social responsibility as an additional factor that motivates African American male student leadership. These findings differ slightly from the experiences of Asian American female students. While it is clear that discomfort with racial
attitudes and underlying forms of racism also drive Asian American students to participate in Asian American student organizations, there is a different level of politicization for African American students as opposed to for Asian American students. Because of the complexities and diversity of experiences that comprise the Asian American experience, there is a need for Asian American students to first explore the Asian American community and their own racial identities before using leadership as opportunity to create meaningful change on campus (Inkelas, 2004; Kodama & Abreo, 2009). As a result, Asian American students’ experiences with leadership are more serendipitous and grounded more in connecting with an Asian American community. In the context of the literature on sense of belonging, this can be seen as fulfilling Asian American students’ primary need to belong before taking on higher order tasks in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Asian American female students and their sense of belonging on a college campus. This sense of belonging was looked at specifically with respect to the participants’ racial identities and also their involvement on campus. While traditionally, student involvement has been one measure that is correlated with a sense of belonging on campus (Johnson et al., 2000), the results from the current study suggest that for some populations of students, involvement on campus cannot be equated with feeling an overall sense of belonging on campus.

In particular, some groups of students may not feel a sense of belonging with the campus as a whole, but may instead feel a sense of belonging within a specific community. For Asian American students in particular, there are underlying forms of racism which may result in a feeling of discomfort in organizations that are comprised primarily of White students. As a
result, the communities that are formed in response to this discomfort focus instead on shared experiences as Asian American students. This lies in contrast to students’ experiences based on their gender identity as women on campus. For Asian American women on campus, there was a distinct awareness of both the racism and sexism that they faced. While there was an awareness of both of these issues, Asian American women tended to form a stronger connection to a racial and ethnic community as opposed to a community based around gender. This points to some of the ways in which students’ multiple identities may play different roles in shaping students’ experiences on campus. This is consistent with existing theories on multiple identities which suggest that identity development across multiple identities is a dynamic, non-linear process.

This study provides a unique perspective into the experiences of Asian American female students at PWIs. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, the experiences of these students are given voice through this study. This is particularly important given the overall lack of research focusing on the experiences of Asian American college students in general. The current study contributes to a richer understanding of the experiences of Asian American female college students specifically focusing on intersections of identity. For these students, understanding their experiences on campus as Asian Americans and as women can help to give light to the ways in which these various identities contribute to how students feel they belong on campus. More specifically, by exploring these students’ lived experiences of sense of belonging, there were some themes that suggest areas for the improvement of practices on college campuses.

It was clear that for the participants in this study, their experiences as Asian Americans were much more salient in their lives as compared to their experiences as women on campus. Despite this salience of their racial and ethnic identities, the participants did not talk directly
about experiences with racism on campus as a factor which shaped their involvement and connection with an Asian American community on campus. This reluctance and discomfort in discussing issues of race on campus suggests that there is a continuing need for directly addressing the experiences of Asian Americans with racism on college campuses. The participants in this study also did not bring up themes of mental health in the Asian American community. While these themes are often discussed in the literature because of the high rates of depression and suicide amongst Asian American females, it is interesting that this was not discussed by the participants. This suggests an on-going stigma around such themes and a lack of understanding of how these issues affect the Asian American community. An examination of the themes that were discussed and not discussed by the participants leads to several recommendations for practice that can help to better support Asian American female college students.

**Recommendations for Practice**

As there is a paucity of research that focuses on the lived experiences of Asian American college students, one of the goals of this study was to contribute to an understanding of the experiences of Asian American women on campus. This understanding can thus be used to inform practices on college campuses that directly affect the experiences of Asian American female college students. Presented here are recommendations for college campuses on practices that impact the experiences of this population of students. While these recommendations are relevant to college campuses in general, there are more specific ways in which these recommendations can inform the practices of student affairs professionals. Most specifically, a deeper understanding of the experiences of Asian American female college students can be used
by student affairs practitioners in the development of programs and services for this population of students.

    Much of the discussion around diversity in higher education has focused on the educational benefits of a diverse student community. In the context of PWIs in the United States, there is an underlying history of racial segregation that impacts the experiences of students of color on campus (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). While fostering environments on inclusion remains an important goal for colleges and universities, the findings discussed here suggest that there is a crucial value in creating opportunities for students to connect with smaller communities on campus. In particular, for Asian American students, the findings from this study suggest that it is important to create meaningful and intentional opportunities for Asian American students to build communities that focus on their shared experiences as Asian Americans. Connecting with and learning about a community of Asian Americans plays an important role for Asian American students, especially at PWIs (Inkelas, 2004). It is important for both student affairs administrators and other faculty and staff to understand the role of these connections for Asian American students. Rather than representing self-segregation, building these communities represents a mechanism for fostering a sense of belonging for these students.

    While there is often discomfort in creating what appear to be racially exclusive organizations and spaces, the findings in this study suggest that these spaces play an important role in the identity development of Asian American students. Additionally, it is important to understand that for Asian American students, they may feel more comfortable in ethnic specific student organizations and spaces as opposed to broader racially defined student organizations and spaces (Kodama & Abreo, 2009). Based on the fact that students are seeking to establish a
sense of belonging and connect with what is culturally familiar to them, this initial point of connection represents an initial point of entry for connecting students and therefore campus life.

In regards to the development of both racial and gender identity, for Asian American female students, there is a primacy of a racialized campus experience that is more salient for students than a gendered campus experience. While clearly, students are wrestling with understanding both racial and gender identity, it is important for student affairs practitioners to understand that this process is not a linear process (Jones & McEwan, 2000). Students’ involvement may focus on a specific community, but this does not imply a lack of awareness of other experiences and issues. For Asian American women, they may be inclined to connect with an Asian American community, but they are still acutely aware of their own experiences as women on campus. Building opportunities for Asian American women to discuss these experiences can provide important opportunities for students to become aware of the intersections of their identities. This may require building collaborations and partnerships with other departments and resources on campus, including women’s studies departments and women’s centers or gender identity-related spaces. At PRU in particular, it is important to create intentional opportunities for Asian American women to discuss both their racial and gender identity. In particular, connecting with spaces that have traditionally addressed gender-related issues such as the Social Justice Resource Center and the Women’s Studies Program, may provide a meaningful context for Asian American women to explore both issues of race and gender. It is important, in creating these collaborations, that both parties are equally invested in the partnership and have a shared understanding of the goals of such collaborations. These kinds of intentional collaborations may help to create more awareness of the specific experiences of
Asian American women and help create a broader sense of inclusion for Asian American women in spaces beyond Asian American student organizations.

For Asian American students, becoming involved on campus may not be an explicit goal of for their college experiences. Asian American students may fall more serendipitously into student organizations, as they discover through trial and error which spaces feel more comfortable to them. This entry in to co-curricular involvement has implications for how these students may connect with programs focusing on leadership. When taken into consideration with the different approaches to leadership seen within the Asian American community, this finding suggests that there is a need to leadership programs specifically targeting Asian American students (Liang, Lee & Ting, 2002; Liu & Sedlacek, 1999). It is important that such programs represent the intersection of leadership programming and culturally relevant program meaningful change on campus. As expressed by Liu and Sedlacek (1999), traditional leadership programs may not always be inclusive of styles of leadership that can be found in the Asian American community. Thus, it is important that leadership programming for Asian American student leaders provide an opportunity to learn about the Asian American community and its history as well as provide a context for understanding the values that may inform what leadership looks like within this community (Liang, Lee & Ting, 2002). By creating a leadership program in the context of the Asian American Center at PRU, Asian American students will benefit from exploring both the history of the Asian American community and exploring leadership in the Asian American community. Building these kinds of programs also requires collaboration across departments that focus on multicultural student affairs and departments that focus on student leadership. At PRU for example, it would be important to align the goals of an Asian American leadership program with the goals of programs offered through the student leadership
office. By partnering with an office such as this, an Asian American leadership program could benefit from the best practices of leadership programs, as well as providing Asian American students with a culturally relevant program. A successful partnership between these types of departments must be grounded in a mutual understanding of the needs of Asian American students and the concepts of student leadership.

Asian American students are often perceived as highly successful in the context of higher education. This can often mask the challenges that these student face at PWIs. Understanding more about the impact of these students’ racial and ethnic identities on how they experience education can inform the development of meaningful programs that will truly support this population of students. More specifically, there is a need for these students to participate in programs that explicitly address the history and experiences of the Asian American community. Because of a lack of awareness of these histories and experiences, Asian American college students are often not equipped to process their own experiences understanding the racialized context of higher education in the U.S. Similarly, a lack of awareness makes it challenging for Asian American women to understand the impact of mental health issues on the Asian American community. The findings from this study suggest that for Asian American women on college campuses, there are different ways that their racial and gender identities affect the college experience. The fact that racial identities continue to be highly salient for these students suggests that there is an ongoing need to create spaces that promote understanding of race in the United States.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study focused the experiences of Asian American female students who were already involved with racial and ethnic student organizations on campus. One limitation of this
study is that it did not address the experiences of Asian American students who were not involved with Asian American student organizations on campus. This population of students may have explicit reasons for choosing not to be involved with these types of organizations, or they may have not come across these organizations. Understanding the experiences of this population of students would be an important extension to the current study. While previous research with other populations of students of color (Mitchell & Dell, 1992) suggests that this population of students may have a different set of attitudes towards their own racial identity, there is a lack of research focused on understanding the specific experiences of Asian American students. While on one hand, it may be that this population of student has a more assimilationist perspective on their own racial identity, this may have more to do with a lack of exposure to an Asian American community.

Regarding the intersections of identity for Asian American students, the current study addresses only the intersections of racial and gender identity for Asian American female students. It would be highly relevant to look at additional identities, for example Asian American male students and other categories, such as Asian American students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. Understanding the ways that these different identities intersect with an exploration of Asian American identity can help to inform the various ways that these students are supported on college campuses. It is important that the work of supporting Asian American students not be solely relegated to departments focusing on multicultural student affairs. Additional research focusing on these intersections will create a deeper understanding of the ways in which the multiple identities of students can be supported on campus.
The current study also only represents a snapshot of the experiences of Asian American female students at one particular institution. It would also be important to understand the experiences of a similar population of students at public universities, small colleges and institutions with different demographics than the current institution. While clearly, there are nuanced differences in experiences across all of these institutions, understanding the broader nature of the experiences of Asian American female students is important in the context of higher education in general. The fact that this population of students continues to grow on college campuses suggests that there is a need for continuing research on the experiences of Asian American students.

Despite the fact that Asian American college students constitute a growing population on college campuses, there remains a lack of research focusing on this population of students. The current study sought to give voice to the experiences of Asian American women on campus in hopes of contributing to a greater understanding of how these students experience a sense of belonging at PWIs. As themes of intersectionality and multiple identities grow in prevalence in the literature, this study contributes a unique perspective through the perspectives of students who identify as both Asian American and as female. The fact that for these students, their racial identity continues to be more salient than their gender identity suggests that the context of the college campus continues to be a space where it is critical to engage students in conversation and programs intentionally focusing on understanding race and racism in the United States.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Asian American female students and their sense of belonging on a predominantly White college campus. An analysis of interviews with five Asian American female college students revealed three superordinate
themes and seven subthemes that reflect the ways that these students experience sense of belonging on their campus. The three superordinate themes were 1) building community, 2) exploring identity and 3) making meaning of student involvement. The themes subsumed within these superordinate themes were: 1a) lack of connection with mainstream organizations, 1b) finding comfort in groups centered around race/ethnicity; 2a) facing challenges and stereotypes as a woman, 2b) learning from others with different experiences, 2c) reflecting on personal identity with a focus on racial identity; 3a) exploring leadership and 3b) defining purpose on campus.

The findings from the current study are consistent with existing literature about the experiences of Asian American college students and other racial minorities on campus. The existing literature on racial minorities at PWIs suggests that there is a critical role played by racial and ethnic student organizations for students of color (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Mitchell & Dell, 1992; Museus 2008). As articulated by the participants in this study, these spaces provided comfort and support for Asian American female students and thus were important to how these students developed a sense of belonging on campus. The students discussed seeking community based on common interests and experiences, but their experiences reflected that the communities they connected with centered more on their racial and ethnic identities. Consistent with other findings (Inkelas, 2004), the students shared that connecting with an Asian American community gave them an opportunity to explore their own identities and learn about the Asian American community. Overall, the experiences related by the students in the current study shed light on the ways that students make meaning of their involvement in the Asian American community.
Additionally, these findings speak to the ways in which students make meaning of their multiple and intersecting identities. For these Asian American female students, identity played a key role in defining how they built community on a predominantly White campus. These students’ racial identities were instrumental in shaping the ways that they became involved on campus. In contrast, these students’ gender identities, while made salient through their experiences on campus, were less influential in how they connected with a community on campus. These findings are consistent with the ways in which Strayhorn (2012) discusses sense of belonging. Strayhorn points to the specific context as rendering certain identities more salient as compared to others. Overall, the findings in this study support the model of sense of belonging proposed by Strayhorn (2012). The participants in this study discussed the ways in which their desire to find a sense of belonging motivated their actions, and also articulated the ways in which the specific context of a PWI affected their experiences of sense of belonging. For the participants, establishing a sense of belonging was a first step in developing a support system on campus that was a precursor for their overall success on campus.

The findings from this study provide valuable insight in to the ways that Asian American female students can best be supported at PWIs. Specifically, it is important for this population of students to find connections with other Asian American students on campus. This suggests that while other types of involvement and engagement are important, it is still critical for Asian American students to find ways to develop meaningful relationships with other Asian American students. These opportunities may be presented through student organizations, Student Affairs departments, or other programs on campus.
Additionally, it is important to be intentional about creating opportunities for students to connect across their multiple and intersecting identities. Based on the experiences shared by the participants in this study, it was challenging for these students to connect with a community based solely around their gender identity. Finding other ways for students to engage around intersecting identities may encourage community building. These types of programs may require thoughtful collaboration across various groups, for example a collaboration between a women’s center and an Asian American center on campus.

The experiences related by the students in this study contribute to a greater understanding of the experiences of Asian American female students at PWIs. Their experiences are critical to understand in light of the dearth of knowledge about Asian American students in general and their growing presence on college campuses (Alvarez, 2002; Suyemoto et al., 2009). As shared by the students in this study, their experiences on college campuses are complex and dynamic as these students continue to learn and explore their own social identities.
References


Appendix A

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: June 11, 2014
IRB #: CPS14-05-10

Principal Investigator(s): Kimberly Nolan
Delia Cheung Horn

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Understanding Asian American Female College Students
and their Sense of Belonging

Participating Sites: Department permission in file

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JUNE 10, 2015

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B

Understanding Asian American Female College Students and their Sense of Belonging

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Delia Cheung Hom, and I am currently working on dissertation for my doctoral program in Education under the guidance of Dr. Kimberly Nolan at Northeastern University. My dissertation topic focuses on understanding the experiences of Asian American female college students and their sense of belonging on college campuses. I hope that through this research we will gain insight into how colleges can better support Asian American students.

I am using maximum variation sampling to recruit participants for interviews for my study. I am recruiting Asian American women who are currently in the third year or above at Northeastern University or recent graduates and who are involved in co-curricular activities on campus.

My study consists of one interview session lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes and a brief follow-up interview. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary and all interviews will be kept confidential. Please fill out the short survey to see if you meet the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research project. After reviewing the survey, I will contact you to let you know if you have been selected for this study. Please feel free to contact me at hom.de@husky.neu.edu with any questions or concerns you may have about this study.

The pre-study screening survey can be taken by clicking on the following link:

http://tinyurl.com/asianamwomen

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Delia Cheung Hom
Appendix C

Pre-interview questionnaire

Understanding Asian American Female College Students

I am interested in understanding the experiences of Asian American female college students and their sense of belonging on college campuses. I hope that through this research I will gain insight into how colleges can better support Asian American women on campus.

I am using maximum variation sampling to recruit participants for interviews for our study. I am recruiting Asian American women who are currently in the third year or above at Northeastern University or who are recent graduates, and who are involved in co-curricular activities on campus.

My study consists of one interview session lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes and a brief follow up interview. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary and all interviews will be kept confidential. Please fill out the short survey to see if you meet the criteria to participate in the study. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research project. After reviewing the survey, I will contact you to let you know if you have been selected for this study. Please feel free to contact me at hom.de@husky.neu.edu with any questions or concerns you may have about this study.

* Required

1. Name *
   .................................................................

2. Preferred email address *
   .................................................................

3. Telephone number
   .................................................................

4. What year will you be in the Fall of 2014? *
   Mark only one oval.
   - First year
   - Second year
   - Third year
   - Fourth year
   - Fifth year
   - I graduated in 2014.
   - Other: ............................................................

5. How would you describe your ethnicity? *
   ........................................................................
6. How would you describe your gender? *

7. Please describe how you are involved at Northeastern *

8. Are you a first generation college student? *
   First generation refers to students whose parents never attended college.
   Mark only one oval.
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

9. Are you an international student? *
   Mark only one oval.
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

10. Where do you live? *
    Where do you live while in school at Northeastern?
    Mark only one oval.
    ☐ On-campus housing (residence halls or leased properties)
    ☐ Off campus apartment
    ☐ Off campus with family

11. What college are you currently in? *
    Mark only one oval.
    ☐ College of Art, Media & Design
    ☐ D’Amore-McKim School of Business
    ☐ College of Computer and Information Science
    ☐ College of Engineering
    ☐ Bouve College of Health Sciences
    ☐ College of Science
    ☐ College of Social Sciences and Humanities
    ☐ Other: __________________________________________
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University

Title: Understanding Asian American College Students and their Sense of Belonging

Principle Investigator (PI): Kim Nolan, Northeastern University

Co-Investigator: Delia Cheung Hom, Northeastern University

Purpose: We are inviting you to participate in a research study. This study will examine student involvement and experiences of sense of belonging for Asian American female college students. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are: an Asian American college student, at least a third year student at Northeastern, and you are involved on campus. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Participating in this study will consist of a pre-interview questionnaire, an individual interview lasting approximately 90 minutes, and a brief follow-up interview. Each interview will be recorded (audio only) for transcription and analysis purposes only.

Procedure: If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an individual interview. The interview will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. All interview sessions will be recorded and the audio files will be transcribed into writing. Your name will not appear on the transcription and pseudonyms will be used. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your interview approximately 3 weeks after your interview. At this point, I will contact you to follow up with you to see if you have any additional questions. I will have some follow up questions clarifying your responses in your interview and getting your feedback on some of the themes discovered in your interview.

Risks and Benefits: The possible risk is the sensitive nature of the topic and by participating in this study; it may bring up some emotional feelings. The researcher will provide resources for the participants including local, national, or university counseling or other organizations that support the experiences of Asian American college students. There is no direct benefit to you but the researchers hope to gain insight on the ways that Asian American students experience sense of belonging in college. Our hope is that this information will inform the practices of faculty and staff at the university in order to better serve Asian American college students.

Confidentiality: Your part in this study will be confidential and only Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Principal Investigator and Delia Cheung Hom, co-investigator, will see the information and have access to it. Pseudonyms will be used to identify the participants and your name and identity will not be disclosed. All information from the research will be kept with the co-investigators in a locked drawer. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you or any
individual. Any electronic information stored on a computer will be protected by a password that only the co-investigators have access into. The data gathered will be used to complete this research study, dissertation, conference presentations, and publications in the future. Background information of each participant will be used which may include the following information: gender, family background, year in school, and additional information that will help the reader in understanding the experiences of each participant. The audio files will be stored for two years for quality assurance but will be destroyed after.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to participate in the study or decide to change your mind about participating later on. You may also withdraw from the study at any time. At any point in the interview you may choose to skip any questions.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
This study is completely voluntary so you will incur any traveling costs to the interview site.

**Contact Person:** Please contact Delia Cheung Hom at (617) 383-9823 or via email at hom.de@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Kimberly Nolan at (617) 390-3622 or via email at k.nolan@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: 617-373-4588, email: . You may call anonymously if you wish. Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, College of Professional Studies, telephone: 617-390-3450, email: k.skophammer@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>
</tbody>
</table>

Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Principal Investigator  
Delia Cheung Hom, Co-Investigator  
Northeastern University  
IRB#CPS14-05-10
Appendix E

Understanding Asian American Female College Students
Participant Resource List

Thank you for participating in my research study focusing on Asian American female college students. Below is a list of resources that you may be of use to you.

Northeastern University Resources

The Asian American Center
Northeastern University
109 Hemenway St.
www.northeastern.edu/aac
asianam@neu.edu
(617) 373-8852

University Health and Counseling Services
Northeastern University
104 Forsyth St.
www.northeastern.edu/uhs
uhs@neu.edu
(617) 373-2772

We Care
Northeastern University
104 Ell Hall
www.northeastern.edu/wecare
wecare@neu.edu
(617) 373-4384

Community Resources

The Asian American Resource Workshop
42 Seavers Avenue
Boston, MA 02130
www.aarw.org
info@aarw.org
(617) 942-8178

National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association
www.naapimha.org

Asian Sisters Participating in Reaching Excellence
http://www.girlsaspire.org
Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone with a great deal to share about the experiences of Asian American women at Northeastern. My research project focuses on how Asian American female students experience a sense of belonging at Northeastern. Through this study, I hope to gain insight into the experiences of Asian American women on campus. My hope is that these insights will help identify ways in which colleges can better support Asian American women on campus.

Your responses are important and I would like to make sure that I capture everything that you say. At this point, I am going to start the audio recording. [Start recording here.] Thank you.

I will also be taking some written notes. All of your responses will be confidential, and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings which will eventually be destroyed after they have been transcribed.

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the consent form that I have with me [provide the form]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

I have planned for this interview to last approximately 1 hour. I have prepared a series of questions that I would like to ask you. Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Interview questions

1. Please tell me about yourself and describe a key experience that you have had at Northeastern.

I’d like to learn more about your experiences being involved at Northeastern.
2. Tell me about how you first got involved at Northeastern. This could be any way that you are involved on campus, outside of classes.
   Possible follow-up questions:
   a. Why did you choose to get involved?
   b. What else are you involved in now?
   c. How has this contributed to your experience at Northeastern?

3. Tell me about a time when you felt connected to Northeastern?
   a. What kinds of feelings did this bring up?
   b. What does it mean to you to be connected to Northeastern?
   c. How does your involvement affect your connection to Northeastern?

Next, I’d like to hear about your identity.

4. Tell me about how you would describe yourself in terms of your race and/or ethnicity.
   Possible follow-up questions
   a. How do you identify yourself?
   b. What does this mean to you?
   c. Can you describe a time when you felt especially (x)?

5. What does it mean to you to be Asian American and a student at Northeastern?
   a. How has being Asian American affected your Northeastern experience?
   b. How has this affected your connection to Northeastern?
6. What does it mean to you to be a woman and a student at Northeastern?
   a. What are the ways that you think that being a woman has affected your experience at Northeastern?
   b. How has being a woman affected your decisions at Northeastern? (ie your choices to be involved on campus?)

7. What does it mean to you to be both a woman and Asian American (or how you identify yourself)?
   a. What are some of the unique experiences of being an Asian American woman? (In college? In your family? In society as a whole?)

8. As an Asian American woman, how would you describe the campus climate at Northeastern? (Ask for elaboration or examples?)
   a. How has this affected your connections with Northeastern?

9. Tell me about a time when you felt supported at Northeastern.
   Possible follow-up questions:
   a. Who are the people that you turn to for support at Northeastern?
   b. What does it mean for you to feel supported at Northeastern?
10. Can you describe a time when you felt a sense of belonging at Northeastern?
   a. What kinds of feelings did this elicit?
   b. How would you describe your sense of belonging at Northeastern?

11. Is there anything that you would like to share that we haven’t talked about yet?

That concludes our interview. Do you have any questions for me?

In order to protect your anonymity, we will be giving you a pseudonym if we quote anything that you have said today. Is there a particular pseudonym that you would like us to use for you?

As a reminder, you will receive an email with the transcript of your interview approximately 3 weeks from now. At that point, I will contact you again to see if you have any additional questions or comments about the transcript. I may have some brief follow up questions for you clarifying things that you said in your interview.

Thank you very much for your participation.