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"I'm here, I can help": Supporting Southeast Asian American Community College Students

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences of Asian American students with one community college's student services: Writing Center, Financial Aid Center, and Asian American Student Center (AASC). Data included survey responses, focus group interviews, and individual student interviews. Chi-square tests were conducted to see if there were significant differences in participants' responses based on ethnicity (Cambodian/Khmer vs. other), gender, and age (traditionally vs. non-traditionally aged). Focus group and individual interview data were analyzed thematically. Results showed that about half of the students had accessed the Writing Center and the AASC, while over 85% accessed the Financial Aid Center. There were no differences in students' accessing any of the three services based on ethnicity. Males were more likely than females to access the Writing Center, while traditionally-aged students were more likely to frequent the AASC compared to non-traditionally aged (older) students. Analysis revealed that students struggled to fully utilize the services because of cultural differences and language competence. These challenges were mediated by the help students received from AASC staff, who acted as cultural brokers and caring agents. The study points to the need to more closely monitor and tailor services for subgroups of underserved students and to hire culturally competent staff to deliver the services. The findings from this study expand the research on ethnic identity by focusing on Cambodian adolescents.

Introduction

Over 40% of Asian American undergraduates enrolled in post-secondary institutions attend community colleges (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2011). Park and Assalone (2019) found five key reasons for their enrollment in community college: cost, strategy, lack of intentionality in college planning, lack of support and

accurate information, and needing a second chance. For Southeast Asian American students and other low-income students, the costs of higher education are prohibitive, but community college provides an access point for many.

While enrollment in higher education is steadily declining (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022), the proportion of Asian American students in higher education is growing steadily. In fact, between 1976 and 2015, their numbers increased six-fold to 7% of all students (NCES, 2010). For the estimated 2.88 million Southeast Asian-identified individuals in the census, college enrollment has likewise increased (Xiong, 2021). However, researchers have found that over a third to approximately half of those who enrolled in college do not complete it (Pak et al., 2014).

Even with the increase in this population, we know very little about the higher education experiences of Asian American students in the United States due to the complexity and diversity among this student body.[1] Complicating the picture is the persistent "model minority" myth that positions all Asian American students as a success story for other racial minorities to emulate (Museus, 2017). As Yi and Museus (2015) define it,

> The model minority myth suggests that all Asian Americans achieve universal and unparalleled academic and occupational success. The model minority stereotype is a problematic construction of Asian Americans as a monolithic, homogenous group. It serves to discount the challenges of other minority groups, it masks the serious inequities within a vastly diverse population, and it renders that population invisible in discussions carried out in public policy, politics, health, education, and other arenas. (p. 1)

In higher education, this myth overlooks the financial, academic, cultural, and linguistic factors that impact Asian American students' experiences. A case in point are Southeast Asian students, who frequently come from refugee backgrounds and whose families have faced war, poverty, and a lack of educational opportunities (Uy, 2016a; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Southeast Asian American Students at the Community College Level

A growing number of studies have documented the experiences of Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) in higher education in general and in community colleges specifically (Museus, 2013, Vang, 2018; Vang & Wood, 2018; Xiong, 2021; Xiong & Wood, 2016, 2020). One important factor that impacts their academic success in post-secondary institutions is engagement with on-campus services (Lor, 2008; Wagoner & Lin, 2009, Xiong 2020). Palmer and Maramba (2015) found that on-campus engagement increased SEAA college students' matriculation to the next year. Similarly, other scholars found that it positively influenced persistence (Chhuon & Hudley, 2005) and degree completion (McClain-Ruelle & Xiong, 2005). Iannarelli (2014) and Xiong and Lee (2011) found that the lack of knowledge of academic support programs prohibited Hmong students from utilizing them. Xiong (2020) concluded that SEAA engagement at the community college level varied by service area, ethnicity, gender, and nativity. More specifically, Xiong (2020) found that males reported using career services significantly more than female students and that foreign-born students used computer labs, campus library, and tutoring services significantly more often than native-born students (pp. 51– 52).

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Through the creation of Title III funded Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) programs, colleges and the U.S. government have recently started to recognize such students' specific needs and to address them with targeted supports and student services (Nguyen, 2020). These include personnel, procedures, and places dedicated to supporting students' academic advancement, social adjustment into college life, and financial security. Yet fifteen years later, there is a paucity of empirical research on the impact of AANAPISIs on Southeast Asian American community college students.

This paper will shed light on SEAA students' experiences with student services at one particular institution we will call "Rivertown Community College" (RCC). RCC had recently received a U.S. government grant as an AANAPISI to increase its Asian American students' graduation and retention rates. Utilizing grant funds, the college established a four-pronged support system. The first prong included the creation of an Asian American Student Center (AASC) and a peer support network to increase Asian American students' belongingness to the college. Second, RCC hired a program director and a program specialist in the AASC to provide personalized advice on academics and finances. The college also increased its support for English language development through writing tutors, English as an additional language sessions, and instructional technology. The last prong involved providing cultural training for the college's faculty and staff on Asian cultures, history, and geography. Our research team conducted a year-long study at RCC to investigate how well the AANAPISI grant-funded services met the needs of the college's Asian American students. Over the course of the calendar year 2018, we collected survey data, observation field notes, student and staff interviews, and photos to document the Asian American students' experiences with student services at RCC. In this particular article, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What student services do RCC Asian American students access at the college?
2. Are there differences in the frequency of RCC Asian American students accessing student services depending on their ethnicity, gender, and age?
3. What reasons, if any, do Asian American students report for accessing or not accessing student services at RCC?

To answer these questions, we draw on data from an online survey, two focus groups, and individual interviews with Asian American RCC students.

Supporting Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander College Students

The Mythical Asian American Student

Any discussion about research on Asian American students should begin by considering how the model minority myth about the diligent, successful Asian American student has hampered efforts to prioritize research for Asian American subpopulations (Museus & Chang, 2009). Until the early 1990's there was a lack of disaggregated data regarding Asian American subgroups on the Census and other demographic materials. Consequently, some Asian Americans chose to identify themselves as "other," which led to whole populations of Asian Americans being removed from the category (Oguntoyinbo, 2015). Additionally, until 2018 some federal funding agencies, including the National Science Foundation, did not include all Asian Americans under the "underrepresented racial/ethnic minority" category, which made it challenging for researchers to

receive funding for the study of Asian American students (Museus & Chang, 2009). In our study, we considered Asian American students' self-identified ethnicity as an important factor in their experiences. Thus, the findings will be partially discussed by disaggregating the largest ethnic group in our sample—Cambodian/Khmer students—from other Asian Americans.

The model minority myth has long positioned Asian American students as being easily able to gain admission to and graduate from elite institutions. This positioning fails to consider the 11.9 percent of Asian Americans that live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) or groups of Southeast Asian Americans who have college completion rates lower than the national average (Museus & Chang, 2009; Oguntoyinbo, 2015). For example, only 16.0% of Cambodians, 14.8% of Hmong, and 13.2% of Laotians in the United States have Bachelor's degrees compared to the national average of 28.2% (SEARAC, 2011). Many Asian Americans perceive higher education as one of their children's only means to improve social mobility, but it remains a difficult milepost to reach in a society still fraught with race-based and other barriers (Museus, 2013; Yeh, 2004–2005).

Asian Americans, particularly Southeast Asians, face additional challenges on their path to a college degree because many of their families migrated to the United States as refugees, carrying with them traumatic experiences of war, forced labor, torture, and genocide (Abueg & Chun, 1996; Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1997; Kinzie et al., 1997; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Museus, 2013). Such experiences can negatively impact families' behaviors, beliefs, emotions, and parenting styles (Fazel et al., 2012; Gonsalves, 1992). Families' educational histories often mean that parents are unaware of the many skills and knowledge needed for their children to successfully navigate college life (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). For example, children of refugees are often first-generation college students, and therefore cannot rely on their parents to provide college advice (Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2016b). Families may not be able to pass on the type of financial skills needed for the expensive process of acquiring a college degree and transitioning from a student to an adult earner (Kim & Chatterjee, 2013; Schuchardt et al., 2009). Additionally, research has shown that Asian American students are less likely to know about supports provided by colleges that could serve to bridge these gaps (Chaudhari et al., 2013). For example, Uy and colleagues (2019) found that only half of the 58 Southeast Asian American college students surveyed in their study stated they had learned about available student services and supports at their college.

Student Services for Asian American Students

It is clear that Asian American students' path to a college degree is much more complicated than the public perception would lead us to believe. Institutes of higher education must urgently respond to Asian American students' specific needs to ensure that students can successfully navigate all aspects of college life, including the academic, social, and financial adjustment characteristic of the process. Existing literature shows that colleges' current efforts have produced mixed results. Yeh (2004–2005) noted that while colleges have begun to support their ethnic minority student populations in various ways, these efforts have often targeted African American and Hispanic students, whereas Asian American students have been left out. For example, Chhuon and Hudley (2008) studied Cambodian American students' adjustment to higher education and found that students struggled academically due to their perception of having little social support from university personnel. Students in the same study reported not being adequately prepared to access student services on campus.

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Efforts to address Asian American students' academic, financial, and social needs have shown that higher education administrators should design student resources that are wide-ranging, targeted, and culturally competent. To ensure Asian American student success, the U.S. Congress expanded the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008 to create the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions program (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). Similar to other minority-serving institution programs, the AANAPISI grants provide funds to eligible institutions of higher education to help improve and expand their capacity to serve Asian American students. To qualify for designation, institutions of higher education must have an enrolment of at least 10% AANAPI undergraduate students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). In 2022, 192 AANAPISI met the Title III AANAPISI definition by the U.S. Department of Education, and currently, only 32 institutions of higher education are receiving federal funding for their AANAPISI programs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b).

We still know very little about the impact AANIPISI programs have on the students they serve. However, a handful of studies point to positive effects. A study by Nguyen, et al. (2018) of an AANAPISI in California noted that student-centered supports empowered students to become advocates for themselves and others. These supports included learning collectives focused around two core classes, participation in a community leadership program, and supplemental academic support. Other studies have focused on the importance of student engagement in social and cultural adjustment, which can be sustained through ethnicity-specific student organizations and mentoring programs. For example, both Chhuon and Hudley (2008) and Tang and colleagues (2013) reported that Cambodian college students' participation in a Cambodian Club on campus assisted in their transition into college life. The importance of personal and holistic mentoring and advising has also been established in research (Uy et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2006; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Nguyen, 2020).

Theoretical Perspective

College student achievement can be examined through the lens of intangible "capitals" (Bourdieu, 1986) students may or may not be able to leverage. More than merely the amount of money one possesses, Bourdieu argued that individuals' success in education and in society depends on the amount of social capital they have acquired. Social capital may manifest itself in many forms, including informational channels and social norms (Louie, 2004). Brown and Davis (2001) further explained that social capital is "a type of resource that is socially reproduced, such as the possession of knowledge, accomplishments, or formal and informal relations and networks" (p. 41). All individuals possess social capital; however, only certain types, often possessed by middle and upper-class families, tend to be valued in higher education. Social capital has become a widely used framework in which to understand the variation in achievement levels between and within ethnic groups (Bankston, 2004; Noguera, 2004). Further, Yosso (2005; also Yosso & Burciaga, 2016) expanded the notion of capitals to denote community cultural wealth, including familial, aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capitals, which are cultivated in communities. However, Yosso (2005, p. 69) noted that the "array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups" often goes "unrecognized and unacknowledged." While these capitals are often a disguised societal factor, they play a significant role in reproducing existing inequities and class divisions due to the privilege and status they confer upon certain individuals (Brown & Davis, 2001).

The effects of possessing or lacking social capital for education can be reflected in a student's achievement early on. Compared to their lower-income peers, K-12 students from families with middle and upper-income levels tend to possess social capital that matches that valued in schools; receive more attention from teachers, better grades, and more encouragement to pursue higher education; and are therefore more likely to attend college (Dumais & Ward, 2009). Adding to this complexity are the challenges faced by first-generation college students: students whose parents did not attend college tend to be disproportionately students of color or from low-income families (Choy, 2001).

In higher education, social capital that is more easily leveraged for college success can be defined as a better understanding of how the education system works, knowledge of supports available for academic achievement, stronger and more numerous relationships with faculty and staff, and knowledge about ways to finance schooling. Therefore, social capital assists some students to persist and graduate from college. Higher education students who are from immigrant or refugee backgrounds, are of lower socioeconomic status, speak a language other than English at home, are first-generation college attendees, or have faced other challenges, are less likely to possess types of social capital and preparedness that would help them succeed in college. We want to make it clear, however, that we see this lack of social capital as not a deficit on the part of the students or their families, but a manifestation of the many structural inequities that persist in our society. These include implicit and explicit racism, financial structures that prevent upward class mobility, and an educational system that promotes assimilationist, monocultural, and English-only approaches in the schooling of ethnic minorities. It is important that institutes of higher education help combat the effects of students' subsequent lack of "the right kind" of social capital by offering targeted supports and services so that these student populations can develop the knowledge, understandings, and networks others may already possess. Building these bridges is one of the primary goals of the AANAPISI grant-funded services at RCC. In this study, we examined how well these services reached RCC Asian American students. We note that such services are only a part of the concept of higher education institutions' "servingness" of ethnic minorities (Garcia et al., 2019), and that our discussion is therefore limited to structures put in place with the AANAPISI funds.

Study Design

We conducted a mixed-methods study to examine Asian-American students' experiences at one community college. This design was chosen because while "quantitative data may assist in providing the big picture…it is the personal story, accompanied by thoughts and feelings, that brings depth and texture to the research study" (Hodgkin, 2008, p. 296). This is especially important when examining a phenomenon through the lens of social capital, which is rooted in systemic and structural issues but manifests itself differently for each individual.

Setting

Rivertown Community College (RCC) is located in Rivertown, a previously wealthy, post-industrial city in the Northeastern United States. The area has experienced several waves of migration from Asia in the late 1970's and 1980's especially from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Currently, people of Asian origin comprise over half of the city's foreign-born population. RCC is an affordable and accessible gateway to higher education for many of Rivertown's Asian

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American students. The college has 12,000 enrolled students of whom 12% identify as Asian American and 46% as first-generation college students. With such a large population of Asian American students, the college recently received a U.S. Department of Education grant as an AANAPISI, which at the time of data collection was in its fourth year of the five-year grant period.

This study investigated three student services offered at RCC that had each either been created or redesigned specifically to meet the needs of Asian American students with help from the AANAPISI grant funds. These resources include The Writing Center, the Asian American Student Center (AASC), and the Financial Aid Center. The Writing Center is part of the college's larger Center for Academic Advancement. The space consisted of several small tables with a reception desk where students can make appointments, check in, and meet their tutors. The tutors are other RCC students recommended by composition professors and interviewed and trained by the Writing Center staff. They included several Asian American students. The same space hosts small group lessons for anyone wanting to improve their English, taught by the English Language Specialist. The Asian American Student Center is a small room adjacent to the cafeteria on the first floor of the college, adorned by wall hangings and photos from Asian countries. Students often sat at tables eating their lunch and socializing, used desktop computers to complete assignments, or chatted about their academics, finances, and life in general with the Asian American program director and program specialist whose desks are located in the room. The AASC also hosted several cultural events for Asian American students and families throughout the year. Upstairs, the Financial Aid Center is a crowded office with a tall service desk facing the door, in front of which students often line up to wait for their turn. The Financial Aid Center organized several yearly workshops for students wanting to learn more about managing their finances or applying for scholarships and financial aid.

Data Sources

To examine RCC's Asian American students' experiences with student supports we conducted an online survey, two focus groups, and a series of individual interviews. Data were collected from the spring semester of 2018 to the fall semester of 2018. All data collection measures underwent an ethics review by our university's Internal Review Board.

The survey contained three sections. The first section contained questions about student engagement activities at the college including the AASC; the second focused on supports offered in the college's Writing Center; and the third set of questions focused on financial support systems at the college such as the Financial Aid Center. Because we had a very specific population in mind (i.e., Asian American students who utilized AASC), we began with a purposive sampling of approximately 50 Asian American RCC students who frequented the AASC. We increased the number of participants through snowball sampling as students spread the word about our survey. Because of this recruitment method, the survey did not adhere to strict respondent eligibility criteria. Using such criteria would have removed the need to exclude students from the ensuing quantitative analysis. However, only two students were removed, for reasons that will be explained in the next section. Interested students were sent a link to the survey, administered electronically using Qualtrics. We sought student consent with a form embedded in the survey and enabled the 'anonymize response' function in the survey to remove any identifying information. We sent the survey to approximately 160 students and received 103 responses (i.e., a 64% response rate).

Two focus groups were conducted with 15 Asian American students. Six students participated in the first focus group and nine students participated in the second. The focus group

interviews were semi-structured and designed to expand our understanding about students' experiences with the three student services included in the survey: the Writing Center, the Asian American Student Center, and the Financial Aid Center. The focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. We also conducted 15 individual interviews with Asian American students to further investigate students' access to each service. Sample questions that were asked are: What programs or resources does RCC provide that make you feel connected? Have you sought help at the writing center at RCC? Why or why not? What's the biggest outside financial pressure you have to deal with, and how do you do that? Have you visited the Financial Aid center and if so, what is your experience with the support staff at the Financial Aid center?

Data Analysis

In total, 103 survey responses were received via Qualtrics. Of these, 21 cases contained large amounts of missing data. Of the remaining 82 valid cases, one student reported being under 18 and one student identified as gender fluid. The under-eighteen case was removed for ethical reasons, as we would have needed parental permission for that student. The second case was removed from the analysis for statistical convenience in order to eliminate an outlier when investigating gender as a variable. These removals resulted in 80 participants. We conducted descriptive statistics across three demographic variables: ethnicity, gender, and age. We also conducted several chi-square tests on participants' access to the three student services to investigate if there were differences in students' access to these services based on their ethnicity, gender, or age. Cramer's V is reported where statistically significant. Because a large portion (40%) of the students identified as Cambodian/Khmer, ethnicity was recoded into a binary variable Cambodian/Khmer or Not. Gender was coded into a binary variable Male/Female. Including age as a factor was important because community colleges historically have more nontraditional (i.e., older) students. Age was therefore coded into two groups: traditionally-aged college students (ages 18-22) and students 23 and older.

To further investigate students' access to each of the three student services, we coded the focus group and interview transcripts to find patterns that would explain the reasons for students' accessing (or not accessing) the three services. Therefore, each mention of a service was coded with the label of that service and then coded as either a catalyst or an impediment for the student's access to the service. These were further coded with child codes such as "impediment—language ability" We illustrate our qualitative findings with selected excerpts from these data.

Findings

Descriptive statistics from the survey are presented in Table 1. Of the 80 participants, 32 (40%) identify as Cambodian/Khmer, which mirrors the large Cambodian community of Rivertown. The next most frequent ethnicities were multiethnic/other, Indian, and Vietnamese, which also reflect the population of Rivertown. However, the small number of respondents from these groups meant we could not disaggregate our statistical results by ethnicity other than Cambodian/Khmer. Overall, non-Cambodian Asian American students comprised 48 (60%) of the sample. There were slightly more females (48, or 60%) than males (32, or 40%) who responded to the survey. Forty-four (55%) of the students in this sample were traditionally aged (18 to 22) and 36 (45%) were non-traditionally aged (23 or older). Most students fell into either the 18-20 age range (35%) or the over 27 category (27.5%).

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics on Demographics (N = 80)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Ethnicity		
Cambodian/Khmer	32	40.0
Multiethnic/Other	15	18.8
Indian	9	11.3
Vietnamese	8	10.0
Laotian	4	5.0
Filipino	4	5.0
Chinese	3	3.8
Japanese	2	2.5
Korean	2	2.5
Nepali	1	1.3
Gender		
Female	48	60.0
Male	32	40.0
Age		
18-22	44	55.0
23 and older	36	45.0

Accessing the Writing Center

Of the 74 valid responses, 38 students (51.4%) stated that they had visited the Writing Center. As can be seen from Table 2, there was no statistical difference across ethnicity in visiting the Writing Center, X^2 (1, N = 74) = .037, p = .848. Males, when compared to females, were more likely to visit the Writing Center, X^2 (1, N = 74) = 4.737, p = .030. The strength of this relationship is moderate, with a Cramer's V of .253. There was no statistical difference across age groups in visiting the Writing Center, X^2 (1, N = 74) = 3.425, p = .064.

In the focus group and interviews, students indicated several different reasons for either visiting or not visiting the Writing Center. The qualitative data offered little in explanation for either the lack of differences between ethnic or age groups, or the greater likelihood of males accessing this student service. Responses from students varied from personal skill set and interpersonal barriers to accessibility of services. For example, Ron and Bob, both Cambodian students, said they do not visit the Writing Center because both relied instead on older siblings' help.[2] Ron also said he was not organized enough with his time management in order to visit the Writing Center, where students needed to schedule a time to see a tutor. Wisteria told the group that the length of a tutoring appointment was an issue for her. "The first thing I notice is they only give us 30 minutes to go through everything. I went there with like five or six pages and we can only go through like one page." Bank added that some of the tutors were not welcoming. He said, "I would recommend the Writing Center change [some of the] tutors' attitudes. I think it would be better if the tutor be more friendly and try to understand what [students] want."

Table 2
Visiting the Writing Center by Ethnicity, Gender, and Age

Characteristic	Has visited the Writing Center (%)	Has not visited the Writing Center (%)	Chi-square test of independence
Ethnicity			
Cambodian	50.0	50.0	X^2 (1) = .037
Other Asian American	52.3	47.7	p = .848
			n = 74
Gender			X^2 (1) = 4.737
Male	66.7	33.3	p = .030
Female	40.9	59.1	φ_c = .253
			n = 74
Age			X^2 (1) = 3.425
18-22	61.5	38.5	p = .064
23 and over	40.0	60.0	n = 74

While some students had trouble accessing the Writing Center, some indicated they had a specific impetus to visit the Writing Center. Sim, an Indian student, indicated that he had first visited the Writing Center at the recommendation of a professor in his composition class. He told the interviewer, "That's why I'm confident now, because of that experience [of visiting the Writing Center]." Sim's comment echoed a few other focus group students who indicated that their first visit to the Writing Center was based on a faculty recommendation.

Cultivating a relationship with a tutor was mentioned by several students as a factor in motivating them to *continue* seeking help in the Writing Center. For example, Jacqueline, a Cambodian student, explained,

> I recommend Kate [a writing tutor]. I was horrible with grammar and using correct quoting. She helped me and helped me with telling me that essays shouldn't have questions. I would only make appointment with her, twice or three times...I felt comfortable after seeing Kate a second time.

Katt, Sim, and Spence had similar experiences and had all visited the Writing Center for writing help at various points during the semester.

Conversely, one bad experience in the Writing Center was enough to make some students not want to return there. Tony, a recent immigrant student, explained why he stopped using the Writing Center services: "I think it's just [the tutor] needs to know how to teach better because she didn't know what to do. She just fixed [my] grammar wrong and then just made me read [the essay]." Tony's frustration may have stemmed from a mismatch of expectations between Tony and his tutor. The common prevailing writing center philosophy in the United States has long framed tutoring as needing to stay focused on ideas rather than language and help students become better writers rather than produce better writing (Denny et al., 2018: Moussu, 2013; Thonus, 2013). However, tutoring efforts based on such philosophy may not meet the needs of students looking to improve specific language patterns in their writing. Two other focus group students, John and Ball, expressed similar frustrations about the tutor's role and how it should be defined. Ball stated,

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"What I was told was that usually [they do the] content and not really trying to try and fix their grammar issues and such—that's what [the tutor] mainly would focus on."

Asian American RCC students generally regarded the use of peer writing tutors as a mixed blessing: while fellow students were seen as easier to approach than faculty, sometimes their expertise did not meet the needs of the student seeking help. Sim visited the same peer writing tutor each time because he "knows my patterns," yet Wisteria encountered a peer tutor who asked *her* about proper grammar. Peer tutoring is crucial because collaborative learning builds shared knowledge (Kasper & Weiss, 2005) but some of RCC's Asian American students found that peer tutors lacked an understanding of their cultural differences or language development needs. To increase the effectiveness of writing center tutoring, AANAPISI should train peer tutors to examine how cultural differences between them and their tutors may impact their instruction (Nan, 2012), help tutees become versed in the metalanguage and patterns of tutoring, and focus on direct instruction when implicit, minimalistic guidance fails to meet students' needs (Thonus, 2013).

Accessing the Asian American Student Center

Of the 74 valid responses, 38 students (51.4%) stated that they had visited the Asian American Student Center. As can be seen from Table 3, there was no statistical difference across ethnicity, X^2 (1, N = 74) = .079, p = .778, or gender, X^2 (1, N = 74) = 2.900, p = .089, in visiting the AASC; however, traditionally-aged students (ages 18-22) were more likely to visit the AASC than those who were 23 or older, X^2 (1, N = 74) = 7.742, p = .005. The strength of this relationship is strong, with a Cramer's V of .323.

Table 3
Visiting the Asian American Student Center by Ethnicity, Gender, and Age

Characteristic	Has visited the AASC (%)	Has not visited the AASC (%)	Chi-square test of independence
Ethnicity			X^2 (1) = .079
Cambodian	53.3	46.7	p = .778
Other Asian American	50.0	50.0	*n* = 74
Gender			X^2 (1) = 2.900
Male	63.3	36.7	p = .089
Female	43.2	56.8	*n* = 74
Age			X^2 (1) = 7.742
18-22	66.7	33.3	p = .005
23 and over	34.3	65.7	φ_c = .323
			n = 74

For many of the students who did frequent the AASC, it was a safe and comfortable place to hang out, ask for help from the AASC staff or their peers, and complete homework. Almost all students who mentioned the AASC also noted the positive interactions they experience with the two staff members (i.e., Smith, an Asian American program director who identified as a Khmer male, and Sarah, the program specialist, a Cambodian Chinese female). These qualitative findings support the results of the chi-square test, which indicated no significant differences between ethnic groups in accessing the AASC. Katt, a Cambodian student explained:

> I feel like there isn't like a place here [on campus other than the AASC] where I can go and hang out. I mean besides the caf[eteria], but that just gets too crowded most of the time. So I just needed like a smaller space to interact with people and do my homework.… The role of the Asian Center is like, I feel like I'm at home sometimes, because I like how there's couches in there, and I could just relax. And there's Smith and Sarah, who are always there to help with anything. It doesn't have to be school, it could be relationship problems, just other stuff…. I think one of the main goals is to encourage students to, like especially like Asian American students to come and hang out with us because there are a lot of other students out there that just go to school and then they would just go home right afterwards. Like they don't really have a place to hang out. And I think that the [AASC] is kind of like a community type of thing.

Katt describes the "home-like" feel of the couches and relaxed atmosphere in AASC and how welcoming it is for Asian students to socialize and build a peer community.

Part of the community building occurred around foods and holidays that were familiar to SEAA students as a group, even when they were not directly from their ethnic-specific culture. For example, Vivian, a Vietnamese American student described feeling at home celebrating the Khmer New Year and sharing stories and foods from Southeast Asia during the celebrations. For some Southeast Asian students being able to share their foods, talk about their stories and hang out with each other provided a sense of belonging for them that did not exist before the AASC was created. The AASC staff also created programming to attract students into their space. They hosted local Khmer artists and alumni to talk to students about their craft and careers, organized film screenings like *First They Killed My Father* followed by a panel of Khmer community members, and invited RCC faculty and staff members to talk to the students about their classes, programs, or services.

Students who said they did not visit the AASC as much cited study and work schedule conflicts and other college activities as reasons for not visiting. For example, Lotus, a Cambodian student said, "I'm more in the Multicultural Center because I work there ... but I do like it [in the AASC]." The challenge for all student support programs and clubs at a community college is the timing and scheduling. Many RCC students, like Lotus, have to juggle their work schedule along with caretaking duties and studying, which may prevent them from taking advantage of student services. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that older students were less likely to frequent the AASC, as evidenced by the statistical analysis.

Accessing the Financial Aid Center

The majority of RCC's students need financial assistance to afford a college degree and many students have to work part-time or full-time. Of the 74 valid responses, 63 students (85.1%) stated that they had visited the Financial Aid Center. There was no statistical difference across ethnicity, X^2 (1, N = 74) = 944, p = .331; gender, X^2 (1, N = 74) = 1.051, p = .305; or age groupings, X^2 (1, N = 74) = .620, p = .431 in visiting the Financial Aid Center (see Table 4). The lack of significant differences may reflect the fact that an increasing number of community college students as a whole, regardless of other background factors, tend to be from families in poverty, and are in need of financial assistance to complete their studies (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019).

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Table 4
Visiting the Financial Aid Center by Ethnicity, Gender, and Age

Characteristic	Has visited the Financial Aid Center (%)	Has not visited the Financial Aid Center (%)	Chi-square test of independence
Ethnicity			X^2 (1) = .944
Cambodian	90.0	10.0	p = .331
Other Asian American	81.8	18.2	*n* = 74
Gender			X^2 (1) = 1.051
Male	80.0	20.0	p = .305
Female	88.6	11.4	*n* = 74
Age			X^2 (1) = .620
18-22	82.1	88.6	p = .431
23 and over	17.9	11.4	*n* = 74

Based on the focus group results about three quarters of students reported visiting the Financial Aid Center mainly when they had a specific question in mind. For example, Ron, a Cambodian student, mentioned that he had heard about work study programs from his sister and went to ask about it in the Financial Aid Center. He said the staff there were helpful and quickly assisted him with understanding the paperwork. However, during the first focus group interviews some students reported that while they did visit the Financial Aid Center, they felt more comfortable discussing financial issues with Sarah in the AASC. For example, Ball explained that he ended up visiting the Financial Aid Center because Sarah could not help him with a question about financial aid.

Ball: I was like, "Okay, now I have to actually go upstairs and figure out what's going on."
First Author: But you first went to Sarah?
Ball: Yes.
First Author: Okay. Why was that?
Ball: Because it was just more convenient to go to Sarah.
First Author: Okay.
Ball: Because I'm usually in the [AASC] more often than I am upstairs.
First Author: Okay. Anybody else?
Katt: I also get help from Sarah sometimes as well when I have some more personal questions about financial aid. Like I just feel more comfortable going to Sarah and she helped me with whatever, anything that I need help with.
First Author: What makes you feel more comfortable going to her versus somebody in the financial-
Katt: I think just because I come in here [to the AASC] a lot and I feel like I've gotten to know Sarah quite a bit more than I was during my first semester, so I feel like, oh, she's just like a friend, kind of.
Wisteria: Yeah, Sarah is more approachable, because I never went to Sarah until I saw her here, [instead] I went to financial aid directly, but somehow I feel a little bit like distant between persons [in the Financial Aid Center].

On numerous occasions, students described Sarah as personable and more friendly than the "distant" Financial Aid staff. The importance of Sarah's rapport with the students who frequented the AASC was likely heightened in cases where they needed to discuss sensitive matters such as finances. The students further explained that they felt rushed in the Financial Aid Center, especially those whose speech was made more halting due to their developing English skills. Wisteria elaborated that Sarah helped her think of the exact questions to ask financial aid counselors so that she would not feel like the people in line behind her were getting frustrated. For these students in particular Sarah acted as a bridge and cultural broker in ways other RCC staff members could not. The AASC staff also facilitated direct contact between students and the staff at the Financial Aid Center by inviting the latter to speak at the AASC.

Discussion and Conclusions

What was perhaps surprising about our data was that only about half of the students in our study had accessed the Writing Center's services, considering that not only the writing tutors but also English language specialist services and academic tutoring were all physically located in the Writing Center. Additionally, we found it interesting that there appeared to be a moderately significant gender difference; a greater percentage of male students visited the Writing Center compared to female students. As noted above, our qualitative data did not clearly account for this difference; however, existing literature may offer some conjecture.

Most of the students indicated that their initial appointment to the Writing Center was made at the suggestion of a composition professor, which may reflect male students' greater need to develop their college writing skills. If that is the case, the situation for the SEAA student sample in our study would mirror an existing gender gap in students' writing (Scheiber et al., 2015), which is likely due to several factors including formative and schooling experiences with literacy (Tock & Ericsson, 2019). It may also be true that male students were for some reason more willing to seek help in the Writing Center, perhaps reflecting a cultural gender difference in the way students leverage their social capital to access particular student support. Further research that would investigate this gender gap as well as students' overall low rates of accessing the Writing Center services is warranted. Based on our findings, however, we recommend that community colleges pay special attention to how gender and culture may influence students' access to student services and conduct additional outreach with specific subpopulations of their underserved students.

The portion of students who had accessed the AASC services was similar to those who had visited the Writing Center: just over half. Here, the data revealed a strong statistical difference between the age groups: students belonging to the traditional college-age group visited the AASC in greater numbers compared to the older students. This may reflect the realities of the work and family commitments that may demand more of the older students' time. Older students may also not feel the need for the type of social or cultural community the AASC offers because they had previous work, educational, or life experiences that helped them build the needed networks and connections that younger students may yet lack. Two structural changes that RCC could implement would be to provide students with time management workshops and to provide more training to Writing Center staff and peer tutors on how to work with Asian American students.

The most accessed student support for RCC's Asian American students was the Financial Aid Center. The fact that over 85% of all Asian American students and 90% of the Cambodian American students in our study had visited the center is encouraging, as is the fact that there were no ethnic, gender, or age differences in access. The high rates of access to the Financial Aid Center

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may reflect not just the center's reach but also the students' need for financial assistance. Given the large number of students in need of financial assistance, cultural competence training for financial aid staff members would be crucial. These staff members play a key role in helping students bridge the gap in their skills and knowledge for managing financial aid, scholarships, work-study employment, and other new and complex financial issues that crop up as students enter college. It is encouraging that even with challenges such as not quite knowing how to ask questions in English about these types of complicated financial matters, students were willing to seek help in the Financial Aid Center. Facilitating this process were the AASC staff members who acted as intermediaries by inviting Financial Aid Center staff to the spaces already frequented by SEAA students and by preparing students for their personal visits to the Financial Aid Center.

Katt summed up the benefits of such scaffolding when she said she would rather talk to Smith and Sarah in the AASC because they were readily available and easily approachable: "I don't want to go upstairs [to the academic or financial service offices] because like it's a little overwhelming, so [in the AASC it's] just like … 'Okay, well, I'm here, I can help you'." This corroborates the findings of previous studies that have pointed to the importance of trusted adults and peers, or "caring agents" (Palmer & Maramba, 2015, p. 50) at colleges as helpful for Asian American students' college adjustment. The sheer number and complexity of services and supports may be too "overwhelming" as Katt described the services, and can act as barriers preventing students from seeking help. In the absence of parental support, Asian American college students—whether they be of refugee backgrounds, first-generation college students, English learners, or low-income students—need readily available higher education adult mentors to help them navigate the myriad of services, supports, and procedures that are ostensibly in place to assist students (Uy et al., 2019).

The findings of this study about RCC and its students are limited to a small sample of mostly SEAA college students at one particular community college and therefore are not directly applicable to other contexts or other types of Asian American college student populations. However, the study has important implications for the expenditure of both monetary and human effort in supporting Asian American students in higher education institutions. Our study examined Cambodian/Khmer students as their own group because we felt that the especially difficult refugee history of this group was an important factor in their experiences.

It is encouraging to note that with AANAPISI grant-funded student services in place, the Cambodian student population was equally likely to access RCC's services as were other Asian Americans. Some credit for this scenario may be given to Sarah and Smith, key personnel in the Asian American student support network. Being of Cambodian origin, they could relate to the students' experiences as well as act as cultural brokers (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983) not only between Cambodian and American culture, but between the culture of college life and the life outside of college. Indeed, some researchers have called for more ethnic-specific services and the hiring of faculty and staff who match the students' ethnicities (Yeh, 2004–2005). Even without such considerations, any support targeting specific ethnic populations should be delivered by culturally competent and empathetic college personnel who understand the students' specific needs and strengths and are committed to ensuring their success. More studies need to be conducted to examine the impact of culturally competent college personnel on the retention and attrition of SEAA and other Asian American students in higher education.

Lastly, we encourage institutions of higher education to begin uncovering ways the hidden demands for the "right kind" of social capital may be derailing the college going efforts of immigrant, ethnic minority, low income, first-generation, and other underrepresented groups. As

Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth shows, all students come to educational institutions with rich community and home resources, connections, knowledge, and skills. To truly offer equal opportunities and paths into and through higher education, we need to transform education to respond to and leverage these capitals.

About the Authors

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Notes

1. We acknowledge the problems inherent in affixing any one particular label to a group this large and diverse. We chose to use the term "Asian American" when denoting all Asian-identifying students in our study, including 1st, 1.5, and later generations of immigrants; children of refugees; and international students.
2. All student and staff names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

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