



# THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE AS “STEPPING STONE”

*Opportunity, Agency, and Family in Asian and Asian American Women’s Educational Histories*

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**ABSTRACT.** I present nine accounts of the educational aspirations and experiences of Asian and Asian American women students at two community colleges in Southwest Virginia in a context of migration histories. Despite their difficult tracks to and within the United States, the women express personal motivation in selecting programs of study leading to careers. They assume nontraditional gender roles in low-income families and offer stories of personal change in the opportunity that a community college offers by way of an affordable education. In this qualitative study, my participants’ stories complement existing quantitative studies on Asians in community colleges. In contextualizing their accounts within complex family dynamics, I problematize the related “myths” of universal Asian academic and economic success in the United States, and of a patriarchal and collectivist stereotype of the Asian family as the “cause” of such success.

America, it is said, is a place where one can imagine. The community college, with its low tuition, flexible schedules, online classes, and means-based federal grants, is a source of opportunity, of democratic access, across race, class, and gender, for citizens, immigrants, the children of immigrants, and refugees. An objective measure of success, admittance to an elite four-year institution, does not speak to the reality of circumstances, histories, and struggles—the journey—that can make such “success” meaningful for those who imagine and persevere but begin that journey from diverse and less privileged places. Such institutions are,



in the words of Brian Goeddes in the *New York Times*, “the unsung heroes of America’s education system.”<sup>1</sup>

In this article I present accounts of the educational aspirations and experiences of Asian and Asian American women students at two community colleges in Southwest Virginia. Despite their difficult tracks to and within the United States, the women express personal motivation, and agency in selecting programs of study leading to a career. They assume nontraditional gender roles in low-income families, and offer stories of personal change in the opportunity that a community college offers by way of an affordable education.

The American community college system has been described as “democracy’s colleges,” providing educational opportunity across immigration status, gender, age, race, and ethnicity, including for at-risk Asian students.<sup>2</sup> Factors that facilitate such opportunity include the relative proximity of such colleges to where students live, their open door admission policy, low cost, means-based federal financial aid, scholarships, and transfer options to state four-year schools.<sup>3</sup> The community college offers flexible as well as online programs of study, short semester-long certification courses, as well as two-year associate of science (AS) and advanced associate of science (AAS) degrees. In 2010, 21 million students were in higher education nationwide.<sup>4</sup> Of this number, an estimated 7.3 million students were at community colleges, of whom 57 percent (4 million) were women, mostly of color and outnumbering all men of color. Of these, 1 million were mothers.<sup>5</sup> Of the 7.3 million students, Asians constituted 6 percent.<sup>6</sup> The relatively sparse and largely quantitative research on Asians in community colleges calls for more intersectional and qualitative research on this heterogeneous demographic. There is need for disaggregated data as well as actual narratives of experiences to draw attention to widespread poverty in a diverse group and its presence at such institutions.<sup>7</sup> The literature also calls for a critique of “universal” and homogenized Asian “model minority” stereotypes.<sup>8</sup> I draw from pertinent scholarship to frame my approach to my participants’ accounts, to follow.

Several scholars call for Asian experience as expressed in narratives and life histories. In a study on Hmong refugee women in four-year schools in the United States, Lee presents the women’s “educational histories, as embedded in their life histories.”<sup>9</sup> Park calls for “educational heterogeneity” to allow for narratives of experiences that counter stereotypes of the “model minority.”<sup>10</sup> Zamani-Gallaher et al. suggest “autobiographical counter-narratives” that challenge the “deficit” perception of student experiences at community college, and offer instead the ways in which such institutions can be transformative. Recounting their own career trajectories



from college through doctoral programs, these (female) authors note the school’s lasting and positive effect on the lives of students. They claim that the “Scholarly Personal Narrative” allows for agency, counters negative notions of the community college, and centers lived, reflective testimonies.<sup>11</sup>

Louie, Lee and Zhou, and Lee offer perspectives that comment on cultural transformation through educational opportunity in the United States, linking the Asian migration experience with changes in traditional gender and cultural norms. Lee notes that “culture” is nonstatic and interactive, may markedly change across generations, and is transformative—including for the older generation where Hmong mothers encourage daughters to go to college.<sup>12</sup> Louie notes that no other group has done as well as or as quickly as Asians in the United States in the aggregate, though the disaggregate picture is more complicated. Key institutional changes in immigration law in 1965 have made this possible, she says, resulting in “a dramatic shift in the national opportunity structure, and opening up tracks for mobility in education and jobs.” Greater access, together with “values” of perseverance, obligations to family, and family resources, have resulted in a “unique experience” for poorer Asians. In a context of new opportunities, the immigrant family has redefined patriarchal and gender norms, where educational goals are utilitarian, and aspired to by a younger generation to repay the sacrifices made by parents.<sup>13</sup> Lee and Zhou also highlight the structural factors affecting educational outcomes for Asians, such as differences in access to economic, ethnic, cultural, and public resources but critique the “causal” argument that “culture” underlies Asian success. These authors argue for an “emergent” approach where culture and structure have a dialectical relationship, noting that in the second generation culture is susceptible to change and to resilience. For poorer immigrants, say Lee and Zhou, an ethnic community’s resources, as well as public state funds, provide a path ahead for the next generation.<sup>14</sup>

The research to date, in a context of education and Asians in the United States, suggests the need for studies that are qualitative and based on lived experience, address ethnic heterogeneity in a large demographic, look at change across generation as “emergent,” and critique the “model minority myth” of Asian success and Asian family “values” as a “cause” of such success. On the one hand, three of my participants refer to family expectations (and their own) of educational achievement and success as “stereotypically” Asian. However, even as my participants assert some agency in their choices, traditional gender roles and obligations especially to a poorer family allow for often contingent choices. Implicitly but sometimes explicitly, the family as “Asian” in its expectations and demands, for better or worse, is addressed in the accounts. However, different family

histories and dynamics would emerge in the telling of stories, unexpectedly for this researcher. Beyond the nine in this article, my participants' accounts are intertwined across generations, specifically mothers, grandmothers, or mothers-in-law. An older generation of women emerge as daring and risk taking, inspiring and supportive of younger women, but sometimes absent, and even constraining or exploitative. In a challenge to the patriarchal Asian family stereotype, my participants' accounts involve absent fathers, adult brothers who are dependents on the women, older sisters who serve as role models for younger brothers, single mothers, families separated by domestic violence and divorce, but also, for example, a man who sees to his disabled child while his wife goes to school.

In the first place my article offers voices, here "educational histories," in the context of life stories, of poorer Asian and Asian American women at community college, missing from the literature. However, as the accounts illustrate, my participants express agency and transformation, often supported by older women, but sometimes constrained by exigencies of complex family dynamics and financial need. By presenting their accounts, I problematize the related "myths" of universal Asian academic and economic success in the United States, and of a monolithic, collectivist, and cohesive stereotype of the Asian family as the "cause" of such success.

I conducted my research between late fall 2013 and summer 2016 at New River Community College in Dublin, Virginia (NRCC), a more rural institution, and at Virginia Western Community College in the city of Roanoke, Virginia (VWCC). While the former has around 2,900 full-time students, VWCC has around 5,000 full-time students, with Asians in both schools ranging at about 3 percent of the total student body.<sup>15</sup> Both have tracks to four-year state schools in the area, including one where some of my informants transferred, which I will call "SU."

I chose these two schools because of their relatively convenient access for me. I emailed a general survey to a list of self-identified Asian students provided to me by each of the two schools and requested an answer to only five questions to maximize the chances of a response: ethnicity, age, gender, program of study, and email address. I then emailed those who responded to the survey, with a request for an interview—which, I was to find, could take months to set up, given the hard-pressed lives of low-income students who worked long hours outside school and often had considerable family responsibilities. Relative to the numbers provided to me by the schools each semester, the response was low. Those students who did respond to my surveys yielded a self-selected sample, twenty-three female and twenty male students.



While my own (Asian) life story and educational path inspired this project, perspectives from grounded theory as well as those on the interview process informed my methodology.<sup>16</sup> My interviews with students were semistructured, open-ended, and sometimes conversational, where my questions would come up as we talked. At the end, after I switched off the recorder, I would briefly tell some informants, selectively, about my own family—that I too was first generation in the United States (but had come as a graduate student), that I had known financial hardship over a decade, and that my daughter had grown up in the United States. Where some women were intimidated by my being a professor, some connection, I think, was established between participants and myself as Asians, and as women, and the difficult path to educational achievement, especially for women.<sup>17</sup> Maria (whose story I tell later) would comment that the stories of Asians’ struggles needed to be told so “Americans would understand what we go through.”<sup>18</sup>

I recorded the interviews on tape and reflected later in a journal on my impressions of my participants. I met the students on college premises and began by providing them with a document that briefly described my project and the confidentiality of their responses. However, I would then, and with the intent of putting the students at ease, tell them that their stories would fill a gap in research on Asians and Asian Americans at community colleges. I framed my questions around the time and circumstances of exit from the home country and contexts of reception in the United States (family already here, ethnic community); educational status (of parents and siblings, grandparents); their current immigration and financial status (impacting financial aid, the need to work while in school); their programs of study, and what factors influenced their choices; the obstacles they faced (financial hardship, family responsibilities); the support they had (financial aid, family); and whether and how the community college, its faculty and its programs, facilitated their goals. The interviews generally lasted about an hour, but on some occasions the student and I would converse, often up to an hour, after the tape recorder had been turned off. Some would ask to continue the relationship and if we could meet again. I would welcome them to email me and to keep in touch, as I would, to follow up on their educational and life-trajectories. Their stories follow, separated into four sections.

My rationale for doing this is, broadly, to illustrate different circumstances of coming to and experiences within the United States, as well as related, and different, family dynamics that impact my participants’ educational choices. I begin with the accounts of Lily (twenty-one) and Catherine (eighteen), both born in the United States, whose families came

from Cambodia and Vietnam, respectively, the former the daughter of a single mother, and the latter responsible for a divorced mother, a grandmother, and older brother. The stories of two women follow, an Indian, Sarita (twenty-seven), in an arranged marriage to a naturalized Indian with a large extended family of in-laws in the United States; and a biracial woman, Jeanne (twenty-nine), with divorced parents, a white American father and South Korean mother. Both participants are mothers of young children, but Jeanne is a single parent. The following section offers four accounts of women (ages twenty-one to twenty-four) who transferred to four-year schools from community college. Two are from the Philippines (Maria, Clara), and one each from Taiwan (Anna) and South Korea (Rosa). These participants' families are more educated, but also speak of daring mothers who came to the United States first, and alone, primarily for their children's opportunities. These older women restrict daughters' dating practices and pressure them to achieve, in two cases over sons. In the fourth section a Vietnamese woman, Jennifer (twenty-four), is forced to drop out of a visual arts program at SU by her mother and return to community college to study nursing, as a more practical option for a poor family, with consequences for her mental health. Within each section I have broken up the accounts, again broadly, into subsections, by program of study at the community college, context of coming to the United States, family circumstances, and students' views on their college experience. However, I am aware that this arrangement is imperfect, given that these themes are intertwined in the accounts. I end with my conclusions and suggest further avenues of inquiry.

### **Families Escaping War, Buddhist Values**

The accounts below are those of two women, Lily and Christine,<sup>19</sup> both U.S.-born, both daughters of families who came to the United States after the war in Vietnam, Lily as the child of a refugee and single mother, and Christine as the child of now-divorced parents who came as immigrants. Their educational choices are different—one by choice, the other pressured by family expectations of future income. The families of both are poorly educated. A mother and a grandmother are the central presence in both students' lives, respectively, to whom they expressly owe a debt. Uniquely, compared to other students in this article who are variously Christian or undeclared (I didn't ask), Lily, when referring to central tenets of merit and rebirth in Buddhism, uses her degree from community college not only to provide a better life for herself and her mother in the here and now, but also, she hopes, to provide for a future life where they will not suffer, she



says, as they have in this one. Christine, interestingly, refers to Buddhist beliefs in the connectedness of all sentient beings to explain her interest in becoming a veterinarian, but also not to be judgmental about her family.

Lily, twenty years old (in fall 2014), petite, dressed in skinny jeans, T-shirt, and long boots, was completing her program online in business administration. She had already found full-time work as a bank teller in 2013. She had received the Community College Access Program (CCAP) scholarship, awarded to high school seniors in the Roanoke area who graduate in the top 25 percent of their class, that offered free tuition and costs for a two-year degree at the college. She had selected her field of study because, she said, "It spoke to me."

Lily tells me at the start that her mother's story defines her own life's path and goals, that they are "in this together," and begins with that earlier story. As a young girl in a Cambodian village, her mother, at seven years old, had to drop out of school and see to her younger siblings. After Lily's grandmother died and her grandfather was injured in war, her mother had to provide for her family by selling vegetables and by working as a servant for a rich family. She would marry and have two children, but lost this family and her two brothers to war. She then escaped to the Thai refugee camps, and from there she made her way to the United States with the help of the Red Cross in 1980. She had come first to northern Virginia, where she had a close Cambodian girlfriend and a large Cambodian Buddhist community. When Lily was born to a single parent, this girlfriend took on the role of godmother to the child. Lily and her mother see this woman and her family as their own today. Lily's mother is uneducated but learned enough English to get her citizenship and driver's license. Working as a janitor and domestic over the years, she had saved to buy a town home in Roanoke in 2005 and retired there in 2013.

Christine, eighteen, was in her second semester in spring 2016, getting her AS degree in science with the intention of studying biochemistry after transferring to SU, and entering that school's highly ranked veterinary medicine program. Bespectacled, bright, and lively, she expressed her uncertainty about what I wanted to hear and that she would like to hear a little about me once I was done interviewing her. Christine's program of study was both her choice as well as a judicious playing to her family's concept of a profession that will bring in an income. She had also seen a half sibling pressured by family to drop out of a fashion design program at a four-year school and had herself chosen this path to keep the peace, she said. (She also prefaced her comment, below, by telling me that she specially loved dogs, but was never allowed to have them in the house by her mother and grandmother, who consider them unclean): "To become a veterinar-

ian, it's some type of money. They are very money-oriented. If you make money then you are my daughter, I will claim you." Christine's household, of multiethnic antecedents (a Vietnamese-Indian maternal grandfather and a Vietnamese father), living in a home they own, is composed of an elderly widowed maternal grandmother, her mother, and her older brother, twenty. Christine has two older half siblings, also in the United States, from her mother's previous marriage in Vietnam. After the war, her mother had remarried, this time to a Vietnamese man who had the necessary papers to come to the United States. Her parents have separated, though her father, "a good man," Christine says, lives in Roanoke. Her mother and father both have a middle-school level of education, while her grandmother, despite some twenty-five years in the United States, "can't speak much English," and her mother too does not comprehend English well. Her grandmother has been working three days a week at a newspaper office, and her mother at a nail salon. They earn a total of approximately thirty thousand dollars annually. However, Christine's many duties to her family are stressful, she says: "On top of my schoolwork I now have to help them. ... It's not my life, it's their life too ... it's an obstacle, a struggle."

The family features in complex ways in Christine's life. She notes critically how her brother, out of high school, was not "expected" to do much for the family, and was "babied" by her grandmother: "The girl has to cook. The girl has to go to school. The girl has to be something." Her older (biological) sister, twenty-three, was in community college in northern Virginia and looking to transfer to a four-year school, also to study biochemistry. Her brother was "overwhelmed" by his sisters "moving on." So, the older women turned to Christine to pay the bills, while her father had her file for unemployment benefits for him.

She herself was not working outside school but had a Pell grant to finance her studies, with some assistance from the two older women. When I asked about her experience of community college, she said that she assumed that this is "where the dumb kids go, that it would be simple." But, she said, "it was a whole different experience ... the professors are nice. The class is small, where you can interact with the teacher. It's wonderful, I think. The classes are actually hard. ... It's tough work and you have homework. The advisors are nice. I feel like I'm home."

Lily now had health insurance with her bank job and could finally pay for surgery, she said with open pride and happiness, for her mother's thirty-three-year-old injury from a bullet wound. She was determined to be successful and would go as far as she could, she declared repeatedly. She would like to go to a public four-year institution and had been accepted at "some," but could not leave her mother alone, especially now. Where



her mother’s labor over the years had meant moving “from a village hut to a two-story home,” Lily was repaying her debt to her parent not only by paying for her surgery but more. Lily’s concluding reflections, born of a maturity forged in struggle and financial hardship, moved me deeply. She dreamed, she said, of building a Buddhist temple in Roanoke for the Cambodian community, as an act of merit toward a future life where she and her mother would not suffer as they had in this one, with no father or husband and living in Section 8 housing:<sup>20</sup> “My mom’s been through this, and I really want to support her through it. Even though I know to this very day it still haunts her. I know there are times that she does break down and have her moments, but I’m the only one that she has that is her blood, so I am there for her ... she deserves her comfort.” My follow-up emails to Lily at the college have gone unanswered, possibly because she has removed herself from the college system. But she was on her way already with a job in hand when I spoke with her. She would comment that the community college had been her “stepping stone,” and had “made me who I am.”

Christine noted, in light of what it took to come to this country, her family’s struggles, “it really does motivate me. ... Because of my family, it makes me want to work harder.” She would not move far from home after she graduated because of her grandmother; “She basically took care of me my whole life. So I want to make sure she’s okay before I’m okay.” But she added the following factor that constrained her: her brother, “you can’t really depend on him.” She observed that she holds with the Buddhist rather than the Catholic affiliations of her family, explaining this as respecting her elders, the connection between all living beings, including animals, to not be judgmental.<sup>21</sup> She concluded, “In America, I can go very far. I can become a veterinarian. I can live my dream.”

However, as we ended, Christine expressed her fears that her dreams to go to SU may not be possible, given her family’s circumstances and her own responsibilities to it. Did I have setbacks on my journey, fears and doubts, she asked, after I had turned off the recorder. “Yes,” I replied, “many.” She observed that I was Asian and a woman, so it was possible to get where she wants to go. “Persevere,” I advised her. She repeated the word and declared that she would enter my words in her journal that night in which she keeps a list of all that has inspired her each day: “Your name will be there!” She asked if she would see me again, and I said I would follow up with her. As I prepared to leave, I showed her photographs on my phone of my family and my dog, and she exclaimed delightedly at the latter. However, I have had no response to my follow-up emails in 2017. I fear the exigencies of her life have not allowed her to pursue her dreams, at least for now.



### Loss, Perseverance, Aspiring to Happiness

The two accounts that follow are the stories of mothers of children, one a student in the nursing program (Sarita, twenty-seven), the other in information technology (Jeanne, twenty-nine). There are continuities with the previous accounts of poorly educated families, divorced parents, and financial struggle, but also of educational aspiration, for themselves and for family. However, where a new family of in-laws, especially a mother-in-law, unexpectedly (and against a cultural stereotype) supports the academic aspirations of a newly arrived bride to the United States (Sarita), Jeanne has at best an exploitative boyfriend's mother to see to her child (the older woman's grandchild) as she goes to school. Loss and heartbreak for daughter (here the student) and her mother are more implied than stated in the telling, for both. But Jeanne, the most alone of all the students I would speak with, works toward a better future for her daughter, while Sarita takes pride in being the first in her family of in-laws in the United States to go to college, and also be able to contribute to its income after graduation. What the two accounts share are the women's determination and perseverance to complete their education.

Sarita, a first-year nursing student (in 2014), arrived early and was eager to talk with me, as she said. Petite and soft-spoken, she had come to the United States from India in 2008 after marriage to join her (naturalized) Indian American husband. Struggling with English, in a meandering (and volunteered) preamble, she began by describing a domestic violence incident when she witnessed her mother being beaten by her father and his family, who were then jailed for three days. Her parents divorced soon after, and her mother went away leaving behind Sarita, then four, and her brother, three. She repeatedly said how her mother had not been allowed back into the house, but showed up at school during breaks to see her over the years and one last time at her wedding, though not as an invited guest. When her now-husband and his family came from the United States looking for a bride, Sarita's father, who had known them from before, described the match as a "good" one. He arranged her marriage "quickly," at the time in difficult financial straits himself because of a failed business. A dowry was paid to the bridegroom's family, swiftly facilitating the wedding (though this admission is fumbled, maybe because Sarita did not want to admit to an illegal custom). She was reluctant to marry, she said, and feared coming all the way to the United States, where she had no family.

My interview with Jeanne took months to set up until I finally met with her in summer 2015. She was tall, thin, and very tense, wearing a printed cotton shirt and slim pants (and yellow nail polish on her toes), and I was



taken aback to see her eyes fill with tears as I introduced my project. She wept quietly through the entire hour or so that we talked, even as she told me her story. Born in Seoul, South Korea, of a white father and Korean mother, Jeanne was about seven or eight when she came with her father to the United States in the early 1990s after her parents divorced. Her mother (whom she described as “spacey”), presently living in South Korea and remarried, had not kept in touch over the years. Jeanne would see her mother suddenly, and recently, on Facebook, and learn of a twelve-year-old half brother. She showed me a photograph of her mother on her phone, as well as one of her own daughter.

Without explanation, Jeanne said that she had been in and out of foster and group homes from age fourteen and had wanted to get away from home and her father. He had said she could, if she graduated high school. She did, by taking special courses over the summer, and moved out at sixteen. Her father had left for the Philippines soon after, and now ran a café there. He had left her their home in Southwest Virginia, for which she had paid the remaining mortgage amount of \$5,000, working various kinds of manual labor to do so. She has had little contact with him over the years, except his recent payment for her books at community college.

Jeanne’s ex-boyfriend, her nine-year-old daughter’s father, was serving a nine-year jail term on drug charges (he was due out in 2016). However, she wanted her daughter to know him and visited him in jail accompanied by his mother, since she (Jeanne) is not allowed to visit by herself because of her own drug charges. At school full-time, and working fifteen hours a week in a work-study job at school, she kept her child with this woman over the week, paying her \$133 a month out of her \$11,500 annual income from grants and loans. However, the child’s grandmother would not spend the money on things her daughter needed, like toiletries, and was, Jeanne said, exploiting the situation. She brought her daughter home on weekends, and bought for her what the child wanted, and what she could afford.

Sarita would find an immediate as well as large, extended family in the United States consisting of her mother-in-law’s several siblings and their families. Her parents-in-law, in their fifties, have a grade school education and work at a furniture store while “all the women [in the family] are housewives” and don’t work outside the home. Her husband’s sister had chosen to not go to community college, while her husband had dropped out after one year at the same school and now manages a gas station. Sarita herself had always been motivated to study and work, she said, and has a bachelor’s degree in business administration from India, and had been working in a marriage bureau at the time of her wedding. She had wanted to pursue an MBA in the United States but was persuaded instead

to enter the nursing program at community college by her husband. Her new family was most supportive of her educational goals and proud of her efforts, for she is the first in the family to go to college, and that in America, and for “free,” on a grant, which she said she would not have had in India.

In 2009 she took short certification courses to explore her degree options, as well as courses that she would need to enter the very competitive nursing program. She failed in her first attempt, and then succeeded (in 2012), but became pregnant and had to drop out because of a “terrible” pregnancy. Her child was born with severe hip dysplasia, and she stayed home to see to the child. She then returned to the nursing program full-time in 2013. Her husband and in-laws were seeing to her child while she attended classes.

Her family, she said, had high expectations of her, and pride that she would be a professional in a field where her skills would be in demand (in an area with two large hospital systems). “Problems,” said Sarita dismissively and with spirit, “Who doesn’t have them?” She continued, “I am lucky to have this family.” Sarita would also note her family’s participation in a large Hindu community in Roanoke, which would meet for festive occasions and for worship at a local temple, commenting, “We are a loving people.” Where her father-in-law, despite years in the United States, cannot speak English, her mother-in-law has a functional command, achieving this, Sarita said, by “going for it.” Now she herself, inspired by her mother-in-law, will also “go for it.” After the interview I briefly shared my own (very different) immigrant and educational track. Sarita observed thoughtfully that she could see me as a role model.

Jeanne’s story too is one of perseverance, but without family. There was a demand for workers in her chosen field of study, she said, and she hoped to find a job on graduation. She had simply not had the time or the money to spare for gas, hence her delay in meeting with me (“I live a lot on noodles”). In fact, she had pawned her laptop to pay for gas—difficult, she noted, for a student in her field of study. Jeanne was worried about keeping up her grades. When I asked what factors could keep her from completion, she said, “Me. Only I can stop myself from completing my studies.” Her goal was “happiness” for both herself and her daughter. She asked, as she turned to leave, if I was happy. I replied that I could not unequivocally say so. “But pure happiness is good to hope for,” Jeanne commented. Wiping her eyes, and in parting, she asked if I had heard the joke about Asians. Which one, I asked. She responded, “We’re A-sians, not B-sians.”

I followed up by email, and Jeanne thanked me for my concern, and said she had retrieved her laptop. Other emails have gone unanswered, even when I offered her a grant-related stipend of \$40 to meet with me.



Perhaps even that first time had been too painful for her to have shared her story. Nor could I guess what might have changed in her circumstances. Sarita too did not respond to my follow-up emails in 2016 or in 2017. However, a classmate in the nursing program (Mary, whom I mention later, and who had encouraged Sarita to meet with me) wrote to me when I emailed her, saying that Sarita had graduated in 2017 (a year later than she should have) and was waiting to take her board examinations to complete her AAS degree. I can only surmise that the “problems” she had talked about, not least a child with a disability, had delayed her graduation. Yet, evidently she had done so.

### **Moving On from Community College: Transfer Students**

While Lily might someday go on to a four-year school, and Christine wanted to do so, evidently this was not an option for either Sarita or Jeanne. While Sarita had already been persuaded to study nursing and not business administration by her husband (himself not college educated), Jeanne, a single mother, had immediate and financial responsibilities that a job in IT would afford. The following section of my article raises, perhaps, more questions than it answers.<sup>22</sup> What factors underlie women transferring to four-year schools? The following four accounts offer several possible and related answers: educated parents or an educated mother who came first, and alone, to the United States specifically for the children’s educational opportunities; the student’s own motivation to go beyond community college; available financial aid, often creatively put together by the student; and the role of the community college in facilitating the move. At the time that I spoke with the women below, two were green card holders (Clara and Rosa), one (Maria) was in the process of getting her green card, and Anna was U.S.-born.

Maria, eighteen, a small, compact Filipina with long, silky dark hair and wearing tights, high boots, and a fleece hoodie, reflected determination, intelligence, and maturity as she walked into the interview room. She had come to the United States in 2012 with her father and two younger siblings and was now in her first year in the college’s engineering program (fall 2015). Her mother, she said, “decided to just go to the U.S.” in 2006, soon after her youngest son was born. With a bachelor’s degree in mathematics, she had been hired on an H-1 visa to teach in a high school in Richmond, Virginia. She left the baby with her parents in the Philippines and her other children with their father. Maria described her mother’s fears in the United States as missing her family, feeling very alone, and heartbreak when her



youngest child did not recognize her (Maria's mother) when she visited the family in the Philippines.

Clara, twenty-one, had graduated from community college in May 2014 and had started that fall in the business administration program at SU with tuition paid by scholarships. The process of coming to the United States had begun before her birth, she said. Her engineer parents and three children arrived in the United States from the Philippines in 2011, sponsored by her paternal grandfather, who had been in the United States for twenty-five years. Clara, the oldest sibling, noted that her parents took the risk, despite their stable jobs at home, for their children's educational opportunities in the United States. Mary, her mother, a lively and energetic fifty (I would interview her first, in summer 2014), was in the nursing program at community college because she had not found work in engineering. An extended family of in-laws and a Filipino community affiliation with the Campus Ministry for Christ had been their support, sometimes financially after the family's arrival in the United States.

Rosa, twenty, born in South Korea, was palpably ambitious, bright, and eager to tell me her story. She had taken an AS degree in basic engineering at community college, moving from biochemistry, and was a rising junior at SU where I met her in fall 2015. It had been, she said, her mother's vision to come to the United States, for "opportunities," leaving behind a country that was "too competitive." With a master's degree in mathematics, her mother had arrived in 2006, and begun by teaching math at a high school outside Washington, D.C. Rosa spoke of the hardships her mother had confronted, including difficult teaching conditions and less-disciplined students than ones she had known in South Korea. Her father, she, and her younger brother had followed. There was a point when the family had no income (her mother had left her first job) and her grandparents in Korea helped out the family. Her mother would get her teaching certificate from a four-year state school near Washington, D.C., and now taught at a public high school in northern Virginia.

Anna was twenty-four when I met her first (in 2014) at community college. She told me her parents had immigrated to the United States from Taiwan in the early 1990s when her mother was pregnant, "so she [Anna] could be born here." Both parents had high school diplomas from Taiwan. Her father had acquired an AS degree in business in the United States and was working as a quality assurance technician. She was enthusiastic when I talked with her first, bubbling over with pride in her accomplishments and with dreams of dental school in the future, but she was far more subdued when I spoke with her the second time (spring 2017) after she had transferred to SU.



Maria mentioned taunting comments from schoolmates in her rural Virginia high school (calling her a Mexican), her troubles comprehending American English, and her loneliness and depression, about which she could not talk with her mother, who was “stressed enough.” She was herself also stressed when she spoke to me because her white boyfriend’s family feared she was a “gold-digger,” and whether she would use pregnancy as a ploy. Her father, with an engineering degree from the Philippines (after initially dropping out), could not work with his H-4 dependent visa, but saw to the children and dropped off Maria at community college. He is not, said Maria, “a hard-working kind of guy,” and she continued, “My mom is the one who has a higher standard compared to my dad. Because she was very good in school when she was younger, she expects me to do the same. ... They [her mother’s family] were basically [living in] the slums. People looked down on them because they didn’t have money and she had to work for it. Dad was wealthier, mom’s side had alcoholics, [Mom] has been through a lot.” On a dependent visa herself, Maria not only did not get financial aid at community college, but also could not work or take out loans for school, as the family was waiting for their green cards. Her mother’s income was keeping the family together and paying for school. Her strength is math, Maria said, and after talking with her mother, she decided to study computer engineering: “I wanted to be able to do something that a lot of girls don’t do, [because they] are stereotyped into feminine kind of jobs ... forgetting the power of [our] brains.”

Maria graduated from community college in May 2017 and responded in desperation to my follow-up email. A low grade in one course had resulted in a rejection from SU, when she applied to transfer. She had two years left on her visa and needed to be enrolled to stay in the country. I emailed a listserv of Indian Americans in the area, many of whom are faculty at SU, and sent their suggestions and contacts to Maria. The school did not revoke its decision, and Maria applied to the engineering program at another lesser ranked four-year state school in Virginia, at some distance from her home. She was accepted and responded happily to me that things were now “easier.” She thanked me for “having done more than I needed to” for her. In an unsolicited email (August 2017) Maria wrote to say that their green card was now imminent, and she was happy that she would be able to work (while in school and after, to stay on in the United States), and that she would stay in touch with me. In response to my inquiry, she responded on March 20, 2018, saying that her college experience is “fantastic,” and that she is involved in various engineering organizations, like Engineers Without Borders. Her father is working and the family is “breathing easy,” but still short on money. However, with the green card imminent, she has applied for federal student loans. She concluded by asking about me.



Clara's story also highlights her mother's role in her life and aspirations. She would also be more forthcoming than Mary about her now-low-income family in the United States. Her engineer father was working for a modest income in an auto parts store. Clara herself had worked thirty hours a week at a supermarket during her two years at community college. She went into some detail describing how she had been especially inspired by what her mother could not achieve in the Philippines. She would see her mother dress in "business casual," and accompany her to the office. Mary would manage people and write her reports, and Clara thought "that's the job I want to do because I want to dress up every day like that" (a "shallow reason" she admitted). In accounting class in high school she discovered her talent for spotting errors, and made her career decision, one not influenced by her parents (when I asked): "It was my choice. ... That's what I really want, to do something in business." She went on to describe how her mother had been valedictorian in high school. She had really wanted to study accounting, but with a not highly educated mother herself, had had no one to guide her. So Clara's uncle, Mary's engineer brother, had "forced" her to study chemical engineering—"she just followed what her brother said."

But, Clara said, knowing that her mother had wanted to do accounting "made me want to do it too!" and Mary had been excited. Clara wanted to challenge herself, encouraged by her mother who did not want her to "settle." Both parents have said that such a track would result in a well-paid job, but also one that fits her personality. As "typical Asian parents," Clara observed, they wanted her to get As, to not date or "get distracted" from her goals. However, if she should move away (but not far), Mary reminded her that she should "always have room for them (her parents)," and that Clara and her brother (in SU in 2015) would also be responsible for their youngest sibling's college expenses.

Clara had had reservations about entering community college. Forty percent of her high school classmates in the United States had described community college as an extension of high school, but many had told her that it was practical to go there, and that she could boost her GPA while saving on costs and then transfer. She had been accepted at four-year schools in Virginia but would need to take out loans if she were to accept. Given her family's financial constraints, she chose community college. With a Pell grant, her job at the supermarket, and other scholarships, including a Philippine Family Scholarship, she had studied at community college for free. Clara had found her classes challenging and had "no regrets ... I would recommend [community college] to other people." She noted that recruiters from four-year schools liked community college transfer students because they could efficiently deal with both school and work.



Clara graduated from SU in May 2017, and started that fall in an accounting job in Washington, D.C. Both mother and daughter informed me of this in happy and proud emails when I inquired. Mary, however, had put off her nursing degree for a year as she had gone to work in quality control to supplement the family’s income, and also to see to the many extracurricular programs for a daughter in middle school, including in music.

Rosa found her basic engineering classes preferable at community college because they were small and her professors were more accessible, which facilitated her transfer to SU. She observed that her chances as a “female engineer” were better than being “Asian” in the job market, and she was making every use of her opportunities at SU to further her ambitions. She was, she said, “a snake head” at this larger institution, a Korean expression for a small and tough person, she explained. She is much brighter than her younger brother, and always has been, she said frankly, and her parents see her as the more capable child. When I first met her she had said that she intended to study for a year at an engineering school in Germany (over 2016–17), paid for by her tuition at SU, thus getting two engineering degrees, and would graduate in 2018. She intended to learn German in preparation for this plan. However, in response to my follow-up email in spring 2016, she replied that her parents had discouraged her from going to Germany. She was at the time doing her summer internship with a major American automaker. She had declared, many times, eyes shining, that she was, after her SU degree, going for a master’s degree at MIT, her “dream school!” In response to my follow-up query, Rosa graduated in 2017, and has a job at the firm where she had interned.

At our first meeting at the community college, Anna, a bright, driven young woman, had spoken proudly of her many achievements: valedictorian in high school, with a 4.18 GPA; the Advanced Placement and then dual enrollment classes at community college she had taken; and graduating from high school with twenty college credits. She had been admitted to a research institution in Roanoke as well as to SU, but decided on community college for financial reasons. She received the CCAP scholarship but missed the application deadlines. She did, however, qualify for the Pell grant and six other scholarships, which gave her fifteen thousand dollars for school. In community college she managed the boys’ tennis team (her family disapproved), was a member of the German Club, was vice president of her college chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (a national honor society for community colleges), participated in the scholastic bowl team, and served as college ambassador.

In 2014 Anna’s ambitions were to go to dental school, though she had really wanted to study art, she said. However, her parents wanted her to have an income, and now she “really likes STEM.” Her parents told her

that money is important for recent immigrants, and that she should get a “good-paying job.” Her mother emphatically wanted her, the oldest child and a girl, to not move far from home. There was less pressure, Anna said, on her younger brother. Her own stress, she admitted, also came from needing to live up to the Asian stereotype of high academic achievement. At that first interview Anna told me about her “not close” family and her own responsibilities to it (though she is close with her brother). She was learning to write Mandarin, which she spoke at home, and to cook the foods her family eats, or “you lose part of that when you come here.” Her duties included seeing to her grandparents, who lived at the time with the family. Anna realized that she would one day need to see to her parents, whom, “as Asians,” she cannot put in a home. Speaking English is a problem for her family, and she acted as translator for them. Anna admitted to having led a sheltered life, and feared the outside world. Her dating was restricted, and she was not allowed to especially date an African American.

In 2017, at our second meeting, and when I asked, she said that her mother was the driving force behind her own achievements, while her father wanted her to do well, but mostly be happy. Her mother brooked no failure, and held her to higher standards than her younger brother: “You have to come home with As. But with my brother, he is getting Bs and Cs and they are just, like, do better next time.”

Anna was the most critical of the students I talked with about community college administration, with regard to having missed out on the CCAP scholarship. Immigrant students, she said, could not be expected to navigate the system without adequate information. (I heard this from many students.) Nevertheless, she was the 2016 commencement speaker at college, and was described in the regional newspaper as a student who “exudes” energy, someone who had made the most of her opportunity.

In May 2017, Anna was in her second year at SU and informed me that her first semester (fall 2016) had not gone well, and that community college had not prepared her for SU. The classes were much larger and harder: “I was caught off guard ... not understanding how much I would have to change and learn and grow in this community. ... I had to adjust to moving out, to a new apartment, from home ... to new roommates ... to a new campus, especially one as big as this one. ... How do I fit in to this junior level course where everyone already knows each other?”

While also faulting SU for falling short in its orientation programs, she had done much better in the spring semester and was again involved in various extracurricular activities while also working two jobs on campus, including one as a lab assistant. But, holding back her tears, she said she would need a third year to graduate and would need to take out a loan.

Here she again faulted the community college for poor advising about a course she should have taken prior to transferring to SU.

Anna “definitely” wanted to complete her bachelor’s degree, despite her financial situation. Dental school continues to be her goal, for interesting reasons that emerged in this second meeting, such as the aesthetic aspects of this work, as well as for the service she could provide for those who could not afford it. However, she said, she might go into another health care field, but after a year off to work, and perhaps she would shadow professionals in the area’s hospitals in the interim. She would, preferably, stay close to home in case her parents needed her. But, all things considered, she missed the personal contact she had had at community college with her professors, where both teacher and student were “humans,” and she could ask for help.

### **A Mother’s Demands, Dropping Out, Starting Over at Community College**

Where the preceding accounts have, despite constraints, expressed agency and even enthusiasm in choosing a program of study, Jennifer’s account was unique. Expressly fatalistic, accepting of a mother’s pressure to drop out of SU, and submitting to family demands as the oldest child, Jennifer spoke of creative interests suppressed in order to pursue a more remunerative field of study at community college. At SU, and for a year after, such pressure would impact her mental health.

I met Jennifer, twenty-two, in fall 2014, after making several requests. She said that she had been nervous, not knowing what a professor would want to talk about with her, as she had no story to tell. But, I assured her, she did. Born in South Korea, she began her story with her college-educated father (working as a golf instructor) who came to the United States for “opportunity” on a tourist visa in 1999. He worked with her maternal uncle, who ran a newspaper store in the Bronx. Her mother and the three children arrived later in the United States, when Jennifer was about eight years old. The family lived in poverty, and her mother too worked in the store. Presently the family, all U.S. citizens, rents an apartment in Roanoke, where her mother runs a laundry. Her older brother operates a chain of laundries in Boston. The brother younger to her has enlisted with the U.S. Air Force. The youngest brother was in high school when I met Jennifer.

Jennifer had been admitted to SU in the visual arts program, which she had loved, being “more arts-centered,” but her mother wanted her to take chemistry, so she could be a pharmacist. She could not keep up her grades at SU or deal with the social pressures. She met her first boyfriend there. However, very stressed and halfway into her sophomore year, she



was “not connecting with her family at all,” and had to be sent back home, where she was hospitalized for depression for four days. Jennifer noted that all this was because of pressure from her family, in addition to pressures at a large four-year school like SU. She herself, as the oldest child, also felt the pressure of not disappointing her mother, “given the trouble they had taken to come here,” and that she needed to be a good role model for her younger brothers. She took a year off after she left SU, to recuperate.

When I met her in 2014 Jennifer was in her second year in the nursing program. This had been a difficult transition, she said, both by way of the community college being a different school and the program itself. In school full-time, she was also working twenty hours a week at the public library—she had SU’s bills to pay off. Jennifer felt especially pressured by her mother, and attributed this to the latter’s lack of a college education. On her own part, she admitted to “an unspoken need to please the family. . . . I don’t blame mom. It’s just how it is . . . it’s how I was raised.”

But she missed talking about art, which she had done at SU, and where she had been “exposed” to a larger and “surreal” world compared to her sheltered one at home. She kept her experience of dating from her parents, who wanted her to “just focus on being a good student.” But she was stressed and unmotivated to pursue a “practical degree” like nursing. Her parents’ view of success was not her own, she observed. She wanted to be happy, not rich: “While education is important, I also think you should do what you want to do. . . . I want a life for myself but it won’t happen. . . . I still hold my family’s values higher than what I want. It’s always going to be like that.”

As we ended, Jennifer commented how it had felt good to share her story with me. To a follow-up email (early 2016), she replied that she was more settled now, and more accepting of the choice she had had to make. In response to my email (spring 2017), she said that she had completed her degree in nursing and would be working in the hospital system in Roanoke.

## Conclusion

My article offers a snapshot of different paths to the United States at different points in time, and different educational histories for a diverse group of nine Asian women in community college. Their accounts address the need, noted in prior scholarship, for qualitative research across Asian heterogeneity at such institutions. Their stories speak of complex family dynamics and histories, across gender and generation, make reference to stereotypes of Asians as high achievers, and speak of changes in traditional roles in a context of migration and financial need as they aspire



to educational opportunity and to economic mobility.<sup>23</sup> The accounts are also ones of personal transformation, facilitated in this context by the U.S. community college.<sup>24</sup>

Anna and Jeanne expressly “explain” their drive in light of Asian stereotypes of high achievers. Maria, in both a feminist assertion (her choice to study a male-dominated field, engineering, and her ability to do so) and a pragmatic one (her advantages as a minority female engineer), transfers to a four-year institution to achieve her goal. Rosa, the “snake head” at SU, achieves her goal and now works as an engineer. Clara finds her calling in accounting, while for Lily, a program in business administration “spoke to her” and she had found work in her discipline of choice. Anna aspires at SU toward her goal of studying dental medicine, for reasons both aesthetic and philanthropic, both close to her heart. Sarita surmounts her problems (a disabled child) and graduates from community college in nursing, as does Jennifer (despite her forced choice). Both are now set to work in that field. Whether by active choice or family pressure, the women’s choices of programs are ultimately ones that will lead to a career and an income.

It is noteworthy that most of the women stay on track and graduate on time.<sup>25</sup> Sarita graduates a year late, I can only assume because of her child. Jeanne, given her determination not to be stopped (and her dire financial situation), will, I assume, have graduated. I cannot speak for Christine, given her own doubts, and despite her hopes. Clara’s astute observation bears thinking on: students “here,” she said, take much longer to complete their programs because they were expected to be self-supporting by eighteen—and Asians were not. Without a family, Jeanne is the most unsupported and alone of the students, and would observe that where other students could go to their families if they needed help, she had nowhere to turn—even as she was exploited by her child’s grandmother.

We see agency again in older women. Mothers, two with college degrees, migrate first in a leap of courage, and for their children’s opportunities, in one case leaving young children behind in the Philippines. They go to work in the United States, alone, poor, and afraid (Maria, Rosa). Clara notes that her once middle-class family of engineer parents is now low-income: “[My mom, Mary] loved her life back home [in the Philippines]. ... That was a good life there. But for the kids really [why they came] ... that’s what she told us.” Mary makes another difficult choice in the United States. Unable to find work in engineering, she enters, at fifty, the nursing program at the same community college as Clara, aspiring to a second career. Clara would comment on how this is possible only in the United States that mother and daughter were in school at the same time! But in 2017 Mary informed me that she had dropped out and was working in quality control to help the family.



The accounts also speak of constraints and setbacks where a mother or parents may obstruct individualistic aspirations and free choices while also holding the women to high standards of educational success. The uncertainty of an arts-focused discipline is actively discouraged (Anna, Jennifer, and Christine). Several women lead sheltered lives and are advised not to be distracted from their educational and career goals. To this end, they are discouraged from dating. Jennifer keeps her first boyfriend at SU a secret. While Clara is encouraged to hold off and focus on her studies,<sup>26</sup> dating restrictions may surface as racism, where Anna may not date an African American. Maria's relationship has ended since I spoke with her, she informed me in May 2017, and she is dating again, this time happily. She provided no other details.

A sense of obligation to an older generation's sacrifice and hard work emerges in a context of more individualistic "American" values for the younger women.<sup>27</sup> Jennifer is constrained to select nursing by a poorly educated mother. It's a course of study she is unhappy with and notes that her views of happiness and success are not those of her mother. She does comply, at a cost to her mental health, because she owes her parents, and because that is how she was raised. Anna, Clara, Lily, and Christine expressly owe a debt to their families, or specifically to a mother or grandmother. All are constrained by such obligations, and don't move far from home, choosing community college despite acceptance at four-year schools. Clara is advised against moving far, even after she graduates from SU, and is reminded of her obligations to pay for her younger sibling's college costs.

The accounts question traditional norms of patriarchy in Asian cultures, and a complex picture emerges of men in the family. Christine's older brother is "babied" by her grandmother, and sees no need to either go to school or help out a financially struggling family of older women or his sister. Rosa declares that her parents invest their hopes in her, the smarter child, and not in her brother. Jennifer and Anna are role models for younger brothers, while Christine's older brother is intimidated by her drive. However, Clara's father, an engineer, works at a low-wage job, while Maria's father, also an engineer, helps out as a "house husband" with the children though he is not otherwise motivated to find work (but does as of 2018). Anna's father, with a college degree from Taiwan, gets an AS degree at community college and goes to work. Sarita's husband, a community college dropout, runs the gas station and sees to their disabled child, as she goes to school and eventually graduates.

In response to my question about their experiences at community college, the women were largely positive in their experiences and perceptions. Such institutions, in the accounts, facilitate the women's aspirations,



including a transfer to a four-year school and to future careers. They contribute to an enhanced sense of self, in the effort and in the achievement, hence Lily's comment that the college had served as a “stepping stone” and “made me who I am.” For Anna, despite her criticism, the college was “home,” where she had “human” relationships with her professors and where she began to explore and discover her potential. It was here that she was recognized in her achievement and was chosen as valedictorian and commencement speaker at graduation. Jeanne gets her life together again at school after a drug charge, while Sarita is (proudly) the first in her American family to complete college—made possible by federal funding. Rosa, now an engineer, points to the advantage of learning in smaller classes. The women spoke of excellent instructors, and the demanding classes that prepared students who transferred to four-year schools. Overall, the women's accounts speak to the significant role played by the community college in facilitating their goals, and thus also contributing to the future economic well-being of their families. Where only Maria (reluctantly, she tells me) moves some distance from home to transfer to a four-year school, the college provides educational opportunity to women who, for financial reasons, lack of transportation, and responsibilities to family, cannot move far from home. SU, close enough to both community colleges, is the preferred transfer option to more distant schools.

Themes such as financial hardship and families seeking opportunity in the United States through education apply to the lives of immigrants from other parts of the world. My participants are variously “Asian” in their nations of origin, their contexts of exit, the languages they speak at home, their foods, their understanding of family obligations, and their religious affiliations. However, their accounts also challenge unique stereotypes attributed homogeneously to a diverse peoples, and complicate and question a simplistic understanding of the myths of the “model minority” and the “collectivist” and cohesive Asian family. I suggest more qualitative, experience-based studies of specific Asian ethnicities in the context of education at U.S. community colleges. Life stories speak to people's humanity, their strivings, their achievements, but also their setbacks. Personal histories, by definition, speak of trajectories and of change. It is in accounts of real lives that we can add dimension to the Asian story in the United States. Where especially minority women's voices are so often unheard, and their courage unrecognized, my article, in presenting the lives and educational aspirations of a few Asian women, has given them voice and visibility. Their stories, as Maria said, need to be told.





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## Notes

1. Brian Goeddes, "Talk to Us, Mr. President," *New York Times*, May 13, 2016. See also "More Bang for Your Buck," *Roanoke Times*, December 28, 2015; Esther Cepeda, "Free Tuition Misses the Point," *Roanoke Times*, January 19, 2015; Suchitra Samanta, "In Pursuit of Happiness: Bhutanese Refugees in Roanoke," *Roanoke Times*, September 25, 2016; Suchitra Samanta, "Community Colleges Are Democratic Access to Opportunity," *Roanoke Times*, January 21, 2015.
2. Berta Vigil Laden, "Serving Emerging Majority Students," *New Directions for Institutional Research* 127 (2004): 5–19, 12; Jonathan W. Lew, June C. Chang, and Winnie W. Wang, "UCLA Community College Review: The Overlooked Minority: Asian Pacific American Students at Community Colleges," *Community College Review* 33, no. 2 (2005): 64–84.
3. Low-cost tuition is one-third the cost for in-state students at state schools.
4. Between the years 1976 and 2011, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) college students overall in the United States grew from 2 percent to 6 percent. Enrollment of AAPIs at the college level is the highest of all races in ratio to their population. Anneliese A. Singh, Michael J. Cuyjet, and Diane L. Cooper, "Asian American and Pacific Islander College Students," in *Multiculturalism on Campus: Theory, Models, and Practices for Understanding Diversity and Creating Inclusion*, ed. Michael J. Cuyjet, Mary F. Howard-Hamilton, and Diane L. Cooper (Sterling, Va.: Stylus, 2011), 117–41, 119. Asian American women complete their bachelor's degrees at 32.5 percent, higher than the completion rates for white women. Marylu McEwan, Corrine M. Kodama, Alvin N. Alvarez, Sunny Lee, and Christopher T. H. Liang, eds., *Working with Asian American College Students. New Directions for Student Services*, no. 97 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 15.
5. Adresse St. Rose and Christine Hill, *Women in Community Colleges: Access to Success* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women, 2013), 1. This report focuses on the lack of child care and women's minimal representation in STEM fields at community colleges. It notes that students





in community colleges are generally overlooked but that female students are especially invisible. This results in a lack of adequate data in national databases like IPEDS and BPS and a consequent lack of awareness at the federal level and therefore in policy, legislation, funding, and improved services.

6. Of the 7.3 million students, 53 percent were white, 17 percent Hispanic/Latino, 14 percent African American, 1 percent Native Hawaiian/Alaska native, and 9 percent other. St. Rose and Hill, *Women in Community Colleges*, 8, figure 3.
7. Lew, Chang, and Wang, “UCLA Community College Review,” 77.
8. Laden, “Serving Emerging Majority Students,” 11, 18; L. S. Hagedorn, “The Role of Urban Community Colleges in Educating Diverse Populations,” in *Serving Minority Populations: New Directions for Community Colleges*, vol. 127, ed. Berta Vigil Laden (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 21–34; L. S. Hagedorn and W. G. Tierney, eds., *Increasing Access to College* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002); W. B. Harvey, *Minorities in Higher Education: Annual Status Report, 2002–2003* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2003); Frankie Santos Laanan and S. S. Starobin, “Defining Asian American and Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions,” in *Serving Minority Populations. New Directions for Community Colleges*, vol. 127, ed. Berta Vigil Laden (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 49–59; Lew, Chang, and Wang, “UCLA Community College Review”; Karen L. Suyemoto, Grace S. Kim, Miwa Tanabe, John Tawa, and Stephanie C. Day, “Challenging the Model Minority Myth: Engaging Asian American Studies in Research on Asian American College Student Experiences,” *New Directions for Institutional Research* 142 (2009): 41–55; W. Wang, J. Chang, and J. Lew, “Reasons for Attending, Expected Obstacles, and Degree Aspirations of Asian Pacific American Community College Students” (paper, Association for Institutional Research, San Diego, June 2009).
9. Stacy J. Lee, “The Road to College: Hmong American Women’s Pursuit of Higher Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 67, no. 4 (1997): 803–27, 807.
10. Julie J. Park, “Over 40 Percent: Asian Americans and the Road(s) to Community Colleges” (paper, American Educational Research Association, Denver, 2010), 2, 4. The “myth” has been criticized by several scholars for contrasting Asian success with that of other minorities who fail to measure up because they lack “cultural” traits such as a value on education, family cohesiveness, and hard work. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015); Vivian S. Louie, *Compelled to Excel: Immigration, Education, and Opportunity among Chinese Americans* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), xvii–xviii; Bic Ngo and Stacey J. Lee, “Complicating the Image of Model Minority Success: A Review of Southeast Asian American Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 4 (2007): 415; B. H. Suzuki, “Revisit-



ing the Minority Stereotype: Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Higher Education," *New Directions for Student Services* 92 (2002): 21–32; R. T. Teranishi, *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Facts, Not Fiction: Setting the Record Straight* (New York: Asian/Pacific/American Institute and the Steinhardt Institute for Higher Education at New York University, 2008). Teranishi, in a College Board study on AAPI students, provides "facts" to counter "fictions." Where fiction 2 proposes that AAPIs are in selective four-year schools, fact A notes that in 2000 more than three times the number were enrolled in community colleges, followed by public four-year schools (9, figure 3). Under fact C for the same "fiction," this study notes the much faster rate of AAPI enrollment in community colleges between 1990–2000, 73.3 percent, compared to 53.4 percent at public four-year schools, and 42.2 percent at private ones (13, figure 7).

11. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, Francena Turner, Karie Brown-Tess, and Chauntee Thrill, "Autobiographical Counternarratives from the Community College to the PhD," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 41, nos. 4–5 (2017): 326–28, 326; see also Park, "Over 40 Percent," 5.
12. Lee, "Road to College," 815–16.
13. Louie, *Compelled to Excel*, xiii, xix, 63, 132.
14. Lee and Zhou, *Asian American Achievement Paradox*, 3, 12, 16.
15. Statistics for recent years at VWCC show Asian students overall as having higher rates of retention and graduation than black, white, and Latino/a students, and Asian female students with higher rates of retention and graduation rates for most years than Asian males. The percentage of male students has been increasing over the years, I was informed (email from Office of Institutional Effectiveness, August 14, 2014). However, it needs to be noted that the student body at a community college is a fluid one, especially where low income may determine retention, graduation, and transfer to a four-year school; the state of the economy impacts enrollment.
16. Kathy Carmaz, "Grounded Theory in the 21st Century: Applications for Advancing Social Justice Studies," 507–35, and Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement," 695–727, both in *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2005).
17. Fontana and Frey, "The Interview," comment on the nonneutral quality of human interaction in "interviews" in social science research, as historically and politically contextualized (695), and that the researcher brings "new empathetic approaches" to the project at hand (696), where female researchers "work together" with participants to create a narrative (697).
18. Zamani-Gallaher et al., "Autobiographical Counternarratives," 328, critique scholarship that removes personal voice and context, "thereby devaluing and decoupling student voice from researcher voice."



19. All names and specific college affiliations have been changed to protect privacy.
20. See chapter 4, “The Buddhist Tradition,” of Willard G. Oxtoby, *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 216, on concepts of rebirth.
21. See Oxtoby, *World Religions*, 221, on the first Buddhist precept, abstaining from destroying the life of living creatures.
22. See Frankie Santos Laanan, “Introduction to Special Issue,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 40, no. 12 (2016): 981, on the need for more research on Asian women transferring to four-year schools.
23. See Lee, “Road to College”; Lee and Zhou, *Asian American Achievement Paradox*; Louie, *Compelled to Excel*.
24. See Zamani-Gallaher et al., “Autobiographical Counternarratives.”
25. In statistics for 2014, provided to me by one of the colleges, Asian women aged nineteen or younger returned in spring or graduated at a rate of 83.3 percent of total female students, Asian males at 78.9 percent. Of those over nineteen, the rate for Asian women was 53.3 percent, and for men, 31.25 percent, of total students in the cohort.
26. See Yen Le Espiritu, “We Don’t Sleep Around Like White Girls Do,” in *Women. Images and Realities. A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. Suzanne Kelly, Gowri Parameswaran, and Nancy Schniedewind (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 143–48, on Filipino communities policing young women’s dating practices.
27. See Douglas A. Giuffrida, Judy Marquez Kiyama, Stephanie J. Waterman, and Samuel D. Museus, “Moving from Cultures of Individualism to Cultures of Collectivism in Support of Students of Color,” in *Creating Campus Cultures. Fostering Success among Racially Diverse Student Populations*, ed. Samuel D. Museus and Uma M. Jayakumar (New York: Routledge, 2012), 83, on collectivist cultural orientations for students as inconsistent with Western, more individualist ones at institutions of higher education and the need for initiatives, including educating parents, to facilitate student success.



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