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Panethnicity and Collective Action Among Asian American Students: A Qualitative Case Study

Robert A. Rhoads Jenny J. Lee Motoe Yamada

The authors explore collective action among Asian Americans participating in a panethnic student organization. Based on a qualitative case study, the authors note forms of discrimination faced by Asian American students along with collective action designed to challenge the campus racial climate. Additionally, the authors discuss three dimensions of panethnicity: political, cultural, and social. The findings primarily derive from formal interviews with 16 students.

The effort of diverse students to challenge campus racial climates has been an important source of change in the academy (Hurtado, 1992; Rhoads, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b). Rarely, however, has much attention been given to the role that Asian American students play in advancing multicultural campuses. Consequently, this paper seeks to explore organizing among Asian American college students at Midwestern University, a pseudonym for a large, Research I university situated in the Midwest region of the United States. More specifically, we examine how students engage in panethnic organizing for the purpose of challenging ongoing forms of discrimination.

The struggle of Asian American students is a national problem made increasingly apparent by the growing Asian American student population in higher education. Asian Americans now account for more than 6% of the overall student enrollment in U.S.

higher education (Almanac Issue, 2001). Additionally, numerous scholars have commented on the growing influence of Asian Americans on campuses around the country as their rates of participation in postsecondary education have increased dramatically over the past 2 decades (Escueta & O'Brien, 1995; Espiritu, 1992; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Liu, 1998).

With increased visibility has come the need to better understand their experiences as well as to combat multiple forms of discrimination faced by Asian American students (Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). For the most part, however, social scientific exploration of the educational experiences unique to Asian American college students is relatively recent, with the early work of Sue and Sue notable exceptions (Sue & Frank, 1973; Sue & Kirk, 1973; Sue & Sue, 1974). Liu (1998) stated the problem succinctly:

The proliferation of Asian Americans enrolled in colleges and universities, coupled with the common misconception that Asian Americans are problem-free and the extant research suggesting otherwise, gives rise to the urgency of more research to better understand this group. (p. 577)

From the extant research, there is much evidence that Asian American students face persistent discrimination and stereotyping (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995). For example, Chan and Wang (1991) argued that racism

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confronting Asian Americans in higher education is evident in two major areas: the obstacles to building Asian American studies programs and the attempts by some of the nation's elite universities to limit the enrollment of Asian American students. Similarly, Chang (1999b) pointed out that universities tend to offer marginal support to Asian American studies programs. And Takagi (1992) provided extensive evidence and commentary regarding the efforts of institutions to limit Asian American student enrollment. In particular, Takagi noted that institutions have sought to criticize Asian American candidates as "not well rounded" as a strategy for countering their strong performance on standardized indicators of academic achievement.

Asian American students also have had to deal with stereotypes rooted in the mythology of the "model minority" and "whiz kid" (Bagasao, 1989; Chan & Wang, 1991; Lee, 1996; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997; Suzuki, 1989). Along these lines, a whole host of generalizations have sprung up around Asian American students (Chan & Wang; Lee; Park & Harrison, 1995). Many of these generalizations have failed to acknowledge the malleability of identity within particular social contexts, and thereby undervalued the conditions of discrimination that may influence identity development (Yeh & Huang, 1996). For example, when some Asian American students shy away from "people-oriented" majors and careers, there has been a tendency to link such behavior to aptitude characteristics associated with various Asian cultures, when in fact, such patterns are more likely related to "a low level of perceived control in the interpersonal sphere" (Park & Harrison, p. 1199).

Another example of the misconceptions

surrounding Asian Americans in general and Asian American college students in particular relates to issues of assimilation and activism. Here, again, the "model minority" discourse surfaces as Asian American students are portrayed as "disengaged" (in terms of activism) and "fully assimilated" into mainstream U.S. and campus culture. As Omatsu (1994) pointed out, the model minority mythology effectively pits Asian Americans against African Americans and fails to capture the major barriers they face to educational and economic advancement. In moving beyond the model minority mythology, sound social science research on Asian American students needs to provide a more complex portrait of their experiences in higher education. One area worthy of exploration is the role that Asian American students play in challenging their own marginality.

Within the context of their growing visibility and persistent discrimination, we examined the efforts of a group of Asian American students to advance a panethnic identity. Lopez and Espiritu (1990) defined *panethnicity* as "the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among subgroups of ethnic collectivities" (p. 198). By "Asian American panethnic identity," or "Asian American panethnicity," we refer to a collective identity organized around broad commonalities rooted in a variety of particular ethnicities traceable to points in Asia (i.e., Chinese American, Japanese American, Indian American, Taiwanese American, Vietnamese American, etc.).

With the preceding in mind, our intent was to explore the dimensions of panethnicity evidenced among Asian American students participating in a trans-ethnic student organization at Midwestern University. "Dimensions of panethnicity" refers

to levels (or qualities) of consciousness associated with panethnicity. Relatedly, we examined the role that the student organization played in challenging the campus climate for diversity. This latter concern calls to mind the social movement element that has been seen as a key component of panethnicity (Espiritu, 1992; Lopez & Espiritu, 1990).

In this study, our perspective was that collective struggle among groups of diverse students is a key component of the overall effort to create more inclusive, multicultural campuses (Rhoads, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b). A related assumption was that student identification with ethnic or racial identity contributes positively to the construction of diverse cultural settings in which democratic forms of higher education are most likely to take root. This assumption has been supported in higher education literature that has consistently demonstrated the positive influence of campus and student diversity initiatives on student learning (Astin, 1993; Chang, 1999a; Hurtado, 1992), as well as the developmental advantages of membership in student organizations organized around diverse ethnicities (Liu, 1998; Wang, Sedlacek, & Westbrook, 1992). In placing value on the development and enhancement of diverse, student cultural groups, our perspective generally falls within the philosophical realm of "multiculturalism" or "multicultural education" (Banks, 1997; Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1991; McEwen & Roper, 1994; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Tierney, 1993).

The theoretical perspective brought to this study was grounded in the relatively recent work on panethnicity (Espiritu, 1992; Padilla, 1997). We explored panethnicity with an eye toward understanding key aspects of group identity and the related

construct—collective consciousness. Panethnicity and collective consciousness are not two entirely separate constructs, but instead they represent somewhat similar phenomena linked to identity and social change.

The literature on panethnicity casts two major dimensions: the political and the cultural. The political dimension relates to those aspects of panethnicity seeking to challenge dominant institutional and societal norms that contribute to the marginality of Asian American individuals and groups (Espiritu, 1992). Much of the writing on Asian American panethnicity addresses its political potential for uniting a variety of Asian American ethnic groups around a collective identity (and arguably a collective consciousness) for the purpose of advancing social change. For example, Espiritu noted that, "One possible explanation for the development of panethnicity in modern states is the competitive advantage of large-scale identities" (1992, p. 10). Omi (1993) affirmed this political dimension in his discussion of Asian American panethnicity and its emergence in the late 1960s:

In spite of enormous diversity, Asian American activists found this new political label [Asian American] a crucial rallying point for raising political consciousness about the problems of Asian ethnic communities and for asserting demands on state institutions. (p. 204)

In addition to the political component, panethnicity also involves a cultural dimension. Through ongoing interaction, be it for political or other reasons, various ethnic groups come to share aspects of their culture (Ortiz, 1997). As Espiritu (1992) suggested, "Once established, the panethnic group—as a result of increasing interaction and commu-

nication among its members—can produce and transform panethnic culture and consciousness” (pp. 11-12). Additionally, in geographic locations where members of particular ethnic groups do not exist in significant numbers, panethnicity serves as a cultural bridge. This is often the case on college or university campuses wherein a variety of Asian American groups (i.e., Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, etc.) may exist, but in such small numbers that meaningful social groups are difficult to maintain. Under these circumstances, panethnicity takes on a strong cultural dimension as individuals find outlets among other Asian Americans for sharing their own culture and learning about others’ cultural backgrounds. Additionally, as Lopez and Espiritu (1990) pointed out, particular aspects of ethnic cultures may recede into the background with succeeding generations, thus fostering greater potential for a panethnic identity.

The literature on Latino/a panethnicity, both in collegiate and noncollegiate environments, supports some of the political and cultural elements discussed within the Asian American literature (Calderon, 1992; Padilla, 1985, 1997). For example, bridging the diverse ethnicities within Latino/a communities is at the heart of the panethnic movement. As Padilla (1985) explained,

The Latino or Hispanic ethnic boundary and cleavage represents a specific case of situational ethnic identity. This means that the multiethnic unit is fabricated and becomes most appropriate or salient for social actions during those particular situations or moments when two or more Spanish-speaking ethnic groups are affected by the structural forces noted above [education and employment] and mobilize themselves as one to overcome this impact. (p. 4)

And Calderon (1992) argued that “where Latinos were distinguished from other groups along the lines of power or class, they responded panethnically” (p. 41).

The sociological literature suggests that Asian American panethnicity may be understood as a social movement organized around political and cultural dimensions (Espiritu, 1992). Along these lines, panethnic organizing may be seen as part of the “new social movements,” whereby issues of identity become salient to organizing and collective action aimed at challenging marginality (Calhoun, 1994; Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 1994; Rhoads 1997b, 1998a, 1998b). Individual campus initiatives organized around panethnic identity may then be understood as “specific” movements within a broader general movement (Turner, 1994). As a specific social movement organized around complex panethnic issues, the efforts of Asian American students at Midwestern were perhaps best understood through a flexible research strategy.

METHOD

The central research question undergirding our study may be stated as follows: How is panethnicity evidenced among students participating in an Asian American student organization at Midwestern University? Other key questions derive from the broader research question and include the following: Are political and cultural dimensions of panethnicity evident and distinguishable in the collegiate experiences of Asian Pacific American Student Organization (APASO) members? Are additional dimensions of panethnicity reflected in the students’ experiences? What role does APASO play in fostering panethnicity and in challenging marginality?

Studying panethnicity within the context

of a particular student group makes sense given that the phenomenon is clearly "social" in character (it involves a collective identity and exhibits social movement characteristics). Furthermore, given the organizational embeddedness of panethnic identity (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990), a case study approach that draws upon the tools of qualitative research is appropriate.

In employing a case study design, we followed Yin's (1989) methodological recommendations, describing case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, [particularly] when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 23). Additionally, we relied upon the research tools typically associated with naturalistic inquiry, specifically employing formal structured interviews, key informants, participant observation, and document analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996). The use of multiple data collection tools amounted to what Denzin (1989) described as "triangulation" and provides for greater corroboration of evidence.

Case Study Site

We situated our exploration of panethnicity within the context of a student organization—the Asian Pacific American Student Organization (APASO) at Midwestern University. Midwestern is a Research I university with a student enrollment of approximately 42,000, with undergraduates accounting for more than 75% of the overall enrollment. The student organization, APASO, was founded in 1982 and at the time of the study had about 200 members (out of 1,700 Asian American students on campus). The purpose of APASO, as described in its constitution (ratified March 30, 1998), included the following objectives:

To program for Asian Pacific American (APA) students in social, cultural, academic, and political areas; to secure representation for APA students; to establish a communication and support network between APA faculty, staff, students, and the community; to voice APA nation- and campus-wide needs and concerns to the university; to sensitize and educate the university community on APA issues; and to serve as a resource for other APA student organizations.

The core of APASO is 11 officers, 14 minority aides (who work in the residence halls), and the presidents of 8 different branch organizations: Alpha Kappa Delta Phi (an Asian American sorority), Association of Japanese American College Students, Chinese Student Coalition, Coalition of Indian Undergraduate Students, Hmong American Student Association, Korean Students United, Philippine American Student Association, and Vietnamese Student Association. On average, 50 to 60 students attend the biweekly general meetings and most are actively involved in one or more branch organizations.

Data Gathering and Sampling

The study was conducted in the Fall of 1999. The primary data collection tool was the formal structured interview. In all, 16 students participated in formal interviews that lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Additionally, 2 key informants participated in informal interviews. Key informants included the organization's faculty advisor and a graduate student with extensive experience working with APASO members. Participant observation included attendance at biweekly APASO meetings, the 1999 Asian Pacific American (APA) Conference held at Midwestern, and a

variety of APASO-sponsored programs and events, including an educational program focused on identity. During the latter program, students were asked to complete the following statements on a piece of paper (the written comments were given to us at the end of the program): "My parents think of me as . . ." and "I think of myself as . . ." The statements about identity were part of a body of documents and artifacts analyzed, including APASO's constitution, the organization's Web page, various flyers advertising APASO activities, and campus newspaper coverage of APASO events.

In regard to sampling, we employed a mixed-sampling approach. On the one hand, we announced at APASO meetings a desire to interview students as part of our project. We were willing to interview any student interested in participating in the study. Maxwell (1996) described this kind of sampling as "convenience sampling," and it is quite common in qualitative studies in which prediction is not a goal. On the other hand, we wanted to ensure that we interviewed students from a range of Asian ethnicities. Thus, when our initial interview volunteers failed to meet this desired objective, we actively sought out students from particular ethnic groups. This latter form of sampling is often described as "purposeful sampling" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Additionally, we recruited several members of APASO's executive board, because we believed their insight was likely to enhance our understanding of the overall organization (this is another example of a purposeful sampling technique).

Participants

The ethnic breakdown of the 16 interview participants was 3 Chinese Americans, 4 Hmong Americans, 3 Filipino Americans, 2

Japanese Americans, 1 Indian American, 1 Nepal American, 1 Thai American, and 1 Chinese-Japanese American. The broad selection of interview participants fairly represents the range of Asian ethnic diversity within APASO. The gender breakdown was 11 females and 5 males. The average age of students in our sample was 20.75 years, with a range from 18 to 29. The class standing was as follows: 2 graduate students, 3 seniors, 4 juniors, 6 sophomores, and 1 first-year student. Finally, the following majors were represented within the sample of students: business (2), chemistry, child development (2), computer science and engineering, counseling, health studies (2), international relations, nursing, packaging, political economy, studio art and history, and telecommunications. One student had not selected a major at the time of the interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two ways. First, based on the theoretical perspective brought to the study, we sought to uncover the manner in which students' experiences were identifiable (if in fact they were at all) with the political and cultural dimensions of panethnicity. The findings in this case clearly reflected the questions and assumptions we brought to our inquiry based on a review of the salient literature. This may be seen as the more deductive component of our data analysis. Additionally, we actively sought to explore other possible dimensions of panethnicity by way of a more inductive, data-driven approach. Here, we employed content analysis as we sought to identify other key findings. For example, although the literature we reviewed on panethnicity led us to delineate two possible dimensions—the political and cultural—early analyses of our data introduced a third dimension—the

social dimension. The emergence of the social dimension fell in line with Patton's (1980) contention that data analysis ought to include inductively derived strategies whereby salient patterns emerge from the data.

Finally, as part of an effort to strengthen the authenticity of our data, we employed what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as "member checks." Authenticity essentially concerns whether or not a study captures the essence of a particular phenomenon or context in an accurate and trustworthy manner. Issues of authenticity are relevant because traditional notions of validity and reliability tend to derive from positivist views of social science inquiry and fail to capture the concerns qualitative studies need to address in seeking soundness (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). In the case of our study, we asked several students and key informants to review a preliminary draft of our paper (one type of member check). Although the reviewers agreed strongly with our findings, their input suggested a few minor points that we integrated into subsequent rewrites.

Role Management

In qualitative research, role management refers to how researchers manage their interactions and relationships with research participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Unlike more traditional quantitative approaches, qualitative research tends to involve a great deal of personal interaction as the researchers often become embedded within the particular sociocultural context under study. In this regard, the identities and subjectivities brought to a study are factors researchers must consider throughout the duration of the project.

In the case of this project, the racial or ethnic identities of the researchers and the

degree of their interactions and relationships with Asian American students seems particularly noteworthy. The principal investigator for this project, a Caucasian, male professor, has significant experience interacting with members of the broader Asian American community through his partner (an Asian American woman). His primary role was to supervise the project (including the writing phase) and participate in data gathering by conducting several formal interviews with APASO students. The second investigator, an Asian American Postdoctoral Research Fellow, primarily assisted with the data analysis and writing. She has extensive knowledge of the challenges Asian American students face in college and university settings. Finally, the third researcher, a Japanese international with several years of experience as a student living and working in the United States (culturally, a Japanese American, although without U.S. citizenship), was a graduate student and an active member in APASO and conducted much of the participant observation.

One of the strengths of this study was that we were able to take advantage of a team approach that employed both insider and outsider investigators. For example, the lead author was somewhat of an outsider to the broad Asian American community and was definitely an outsider to APASO. The second author was an insider to the Asian American community but an outsider to APASO. And the third author was a quasi-insider to the Asian American community and an insider to APASO. Such a mixture of insider and outsider statuses was a clear advantage in that as a team we had the benefit of studying Asian American student panethnicity from within and from without (Aguilar, 1981). Our insider-outsider mixed status was useful

in identifying the internal complexity of the students' experiences (as an insider is able to do), and yet we also were able to situate the Asian American student group within the larger context (as a consequence of our location as outsiders).

FINDINGS

Although our findings on collective action are presented before the results associated with panethnic identity, this is not to suggest in any way that collective action precedes group identity formation. Indeed, collective action and panethnic identity formation are interactive and variable. For some students, a sense of being part of the collective Asian American panethnic group may lead to action on behalf of the group. For others, involvement in collective endeavors may actually fuel the formation of a sense of group allegiance and identity. The point here is that these processes are highly interactive and cyclical.

The Context of Discrimination

Although issues of discrimination were not initially central to this project, the pervasiveness of racism establishes in part why Asian American students continue to pursue the benefits of a panethnic identity. Over the course of our interviews, students shared a variety of examples of discrimination, many of which were rooted in stereotypes that other students have about Asian Americans, especially reflective of the "model minority" stereotype. But students also noted more overt racial slurs and harassment directed their way in a variety of on-campus and off-campus settings.

As examples of discrimination, several students talked about overhearing crude epithets directed at Asians and Asian Americans. One male student described

being called a "Chink" by two minority women as he walked passed them in the student union. He was shocked:

I felt bad to hear it from them—from minorities. . . . That really made me feel bad because we have to struggle together to survive.

Other students described being inundated with stereotypes linked to overachieving, possessing outstanding mathematical and science ability, and leading antisocial lives. They also faced sexual harassment and stereotyping: Asian American women often experienced suggestive labels such as "exotic" and "hypersexual," whereas men faced ridicule as "asexual" and "anti-romanticized."

Additionally, students spoke of being verbally harassed as "outsiders" within the larger university community; many were assumed to be Asian international students despite having lived much or all of their lives within the United States. One man witnessed an Asian American woman in an argument with her boyfriend. The boyfriend yelled at the woman to go back to East Asia where she came from, despite her having been born in the Midwest. Other students born and raised in the United States noted how surprised many Midwestern students generally are by their ability to speak English.

Continual discrimination against Asian Americans reinforces the ongoing need for such students to organize around their multiple ethnic identities. Relatedly, organizational activity coordinated by APASO clearly has as one of its central goals combating racism and discrimination at Midwestern.

Collective Action: Challenging the Climate for Diversity

A central role of APASO is to challenge forms of discrimination faced by members

of the Asian American student community. Although such challenges are likely to be political, the initial step often takes place at a consciousness-raising level. For example, one student noted that a key goal of pan-ethnic organizations such as APASO "is to educate people about stereotypes and discrimination." A second student added,

I never understood the term 'model minority' until I got here. Asian Studies was introduced to me here also. I learned about stereotypes too—like Asian American women being seen as exotic; that was new to me. I said, "Wow, people really think that about us?"

A third student alluded to consciousness-raising efforts:

I never really knew how many issues we had to deal with until I joined APASO. I didn't recognize what the stereotypes were, and that in many ways we were being oppressed. I just didn't know all the issues that affected us. Getting involved in APASO opened my eyes a lot more. Like in high school when somebody did something to me, I would just ignore it, accommodate everybody's wishes. I would just say, "Call me [my nickname]," instead of giving them my whole name. Nowadays, I just give everybody my whole name. They can still call me [my nickname], but now they at least know my full name. I'm less accommodating of people's narrow-mindedness.

Other students also mentioned specific APASO educational activities and events that had a significant impact on their emerging Asian American consciousness. For example, one student talked about an educational program dealing with discrimination and stereotypes:

This past week we had a program where we wrote down different groups like gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals; Asian

women, Black men, etc. And we just listed things that come to mind when you think of these groups, like Asian women are supposed to be exotic. So, if stereotypes are the first things that come up then what does that say?

Panethnic collective action at Midwestern also targets non-Asian Americans as part of a challenge to the overall campus climate for diversity. One female student noted the educational efforts of APASO to combat stereotypes about Asian Americans held by others:

We want to challenge beliefs that we are quiet, don't speak up when we are being oppressed, and that we're nonactivists.

She went on to state,

That's one of the biggest things that the leaders of APASO are trying to get out to everyone, that, "Wait a minute, we have a say in this society, and that we have rights just like everyone else has." We need to change the assumption that everyone has about us, that we are nonactivists.

Another student also talked about educational opportunities aimed at challenging the campus climate:

People learn a lot from APASO. For example, there are things that I didn't notice in the past. I used to think that discrimination was only a face-to-face thing, which isn't true. Because of APASO, people get to learn about Asian Pacific American history. Those are things that are not taught by the university. . . . The university does little in preparing people to confront discrimination. But in APASO we have discussions about what to do if discrimination happens.

One student talked about a major Asian American conference organized by APASO students and hosted at Midwestern. He noted that the conference had an impact on the

wider community, explaining that many of his Caucasian friends approached him in subsequent weeks and asked questions about being Asian American. Another student addressed the multidimensional quality of this same conference:

We start out with the political, with a rally known as the Power Rally and March. We walk around campus and then have pizza and socialize. Then there are workshops that include anything from academics to cultural issues. They touch on every aspect of our identity.

The three key dimensions of panethnic Asian American identity are not mutually exclusive, but instead are interactive levels of a broad panethnic phenomenon. Clearly, some of the experiences students described span two or even three dimensions. Despite the overlap in these three areas, a dimensional analysis could nonetheless be helpful in understanding the complex experiences and concerns associated with panethnic student organizations such as APASO.

Political Dimension of Panethnicity

The political dimension of panethnic organizing among APASO members is perhaps the most powerful of the three dimensions, and in many ways is the *raison d'être* of the organization itself. As one student explained:

Unity is needed for our voices to be heard and for the larger society to know that we have issues. Asian American identity is a way to have an impact. The struggle is to get people together, because there are major differences across the Asian groups.

Another student alluded to the organizational "umbrella" role that APASO plays: "APASO is more general. We promote ourselves as an umbrella group, with many

groups under it. And so if I help out APASO, it will hopefully affect in a good way the other groups." Similarly, a third student spoke of the solidarity aspect of APASO and the challenge of bridging particular Asian American ethnic identities:

I think APASO encompasses many of the other issues the particular groups focus on. APASO encourages Asian Americans to find similar issues, whereas a group like CIUS (Coalition of Indian Undergraduate Students) focuses much more on the unique things to being Indian.

Another student spoke to the role of Asian American groups such as APASO in combating model minority mythology:

I think [my involvement in APASO] has made me a little more aware of the issues as a whole. And that we are seen as a more silent group, and how we are brushed off, "Oh they are fine. They are doing so well." And so our issues aren't necessarily seen by other groups. Or just the fact that we are stereotyped as, "You get good grades," "You come from wealthy families," things like that.

This student went on to conclude,

Joining APASO has heightened my awareness of how more similar we are to minorities than to the majority group. I think we kind of oppose the model minority stereotype.

Another student alluded to the connection to other minorities as an aspect of Asian American identity:

We try to unify with other minority groups on campus. I like the fact that we try to unify with the other groups.

The most important political issue APASO faced during the academic year 1999-2000 was an effort on the part of politically conservative students to eliminate

seats on Midwestern's student government association reserved for multicultural student groups. One student described the significance of this political battle, as well as his sense of the role of APASO in confronting such concerns:

When our court seat was about to be taken from our student government, we were quite upset. That was a very deep issue, and it was entering dangerous ground. It kind of gave us a peek as to how White America thinks of us, outside of campus too. That was one of the times when we were all able to speak about why APASO is needed. The activity we planned might have just seemed like a socializing event, but it was very much political. We are on this campus for a reason, and we are not going to be pushed aside. That seat is me and represents me to the college. That whole thing really brought into focus the political issues.

The preceding student hinted at the issues of voice inherent in the role of panethnic organizations. A second student offered insight here as well:

I guess Asian Americans want a voice on campus. They understand very much that as individual groups they cannot go very far. When they come together, they have a bigger voice and a better chance of influencing the rest of the campus. So coming together is important.

There is strength in numbers and one of the primary reasons that panethnic organizations emerge is the result of the limited size of particular Asian American ethnic groups. A student summarized this point when he alluded to the ongoing challenge that Asian American groups such as APASO face in building a strong constituency:

There's always involvement, but we can always use more members. There's so

many hundreds of Asian American students and only a couple hundred get involved in APASO. It would give us a stronger voice. If we do anything political, people can just say that there's only 200 of you. The more people who come together, the more powerful we'll be.

One of the most important contributions by APASO has been the creation of a multicultural student center. APASO was one of the key student groups pushing for the newly constructed center. But, without student organizations willing to take up political battles, multicultural campus change is unlikely to take place. As one student explained:

If people don't show up for our meetings, or if people don't care about what our issues are, then we are never going to get anything done. They fought for the multicultural center for the longest time, and without people who were committed to it, it would never of happened.

Cultural Dimension of Panethnicity

The cultural dimension speaks to the efforts of students involved in a panethnic organization to build common connections across diverse ethnic and cultural lines. One student spoke to the importance of building cultural ties: "I think being an Asian American is important because there is no similar community that encompasses so many of the diverse cultures from Asia, and yet we all have some common concerns that need to be addressed." The preceding student's juxtaposition of "diverse cultures" and "common concerns" underscores the intersection between the cultural and political dimensions. A second student also addressed the importance of bridging cultural differences among Asian Americans, as well

as the difficulty that such a project entails: "I think people are trying to understand each other's cultures, but like I said, sometimes students tend to stick with their own groups."

Students often talked about greater cultural awareness as a result of increased contact with other Asian American ethnicities (here the cultural and social dimensions come together). One student contrasted her high school and college years in terms of the increased diversity of her collegiate experience:

During high school I wasn't involved in any Asian clubs or groups. But in college, I have been, and I feel like I'm having a better experience. It helps me be more open about my views. Before, I used to think of certain groups as not really Asian—Chinese, Korean, Japanese are Asians, but now I learned that Filipinos and Malaysians are Asians too. Before I didn't accept that, or I didn't think that they were. I've just gained a better understanding of other cultures.

Another student discussed a program that APASO developed known as Cultural Vogue, which involved particular ethnic groups creating skits reflective of their cultures:

Last year Cultural Vogue was really neat to see. All the different ethnicities and all the affiliated groups put on their own skits as part of a show to represent the many cultures. It was really cool to see everyone come together like that.

The experiences of students in panethnic organizations provides significant learning opportunities around issues of cultural diversity. As one student explained, "APASO has helped to open my eyes to other cultures and [to] the way other people grow up." This student also pointed out that she grew up in a predominantly Caucasian American com-

munity, and thus had little opportunity to pursue her ethnic identity among peers. Her high school was almost entirely composed of the majority culture, and so it was not until she arrived at Midwestern University that she was exposed to Asian Americans as peers. She maintained that the cultural diversity within APASO has helped her to confront a variety of personal identity issues.

Social Dimension of Panethnicity

The social dimension speaks to the support that students experience as part of their involvement in APASO. Social support is key to building interpersonal relations and creating extended opportunities for the development of a common identity. The social dimension, although it includes the support function of panethnicity, also contributes to the development of a collective consciousness through ongoing and evolving interpersonal relations. A student leader in APASO succinctly summarized why the social dimension and creating a fun experience for students was so crucial to the organization: "More people is more power." The following participants' comments also address the social support role of APASO as well the role that such support plays in fostering a collective sense of identity:

Having relationships with people with similar issues provides a comfort area. A lot of politics go into it, but it starts out as a close-knit group, because of what they have in common. It's got to be fun at the start, so that it brings people together. But then from that the political issues can come up and be dealt with.

Most of my friends are Asian American. Only because that's where I've clicked, at APASO. I never had that in high school. [In college] I've met people with the same issues that I want

to fight for, and there [are] not enough Thai Americans so it made sense for me to connect with Asian Americans in general.

I made my best friends through APASO. And I'm able to meet new people [at] every single meeting. Different people come straggling in and I'm able to meet them. And different presenters come in all the time. . . . The organization offers me a sense of belonging. There [are] only a few groups where you can fit in, where everybody is like you.

We share a common connection. I mean we all know that we have differences, different Asian traditions and cultures. But it's like we are all linked somehow. It's truly nice to know people with common backgrounds. It makes the environment a lot more comfortable.

Finding a comfort zone during their collegiate experience is important, especially when so many Asian American students still experience mainstream institutions as cultural outsiders. One student described the anxiety of standing out as an Asian American and the social support that APASO provided:

I think you need a place where you are comfortable. You look around the room [during an APASO meeting] and you are more likely to see faces that you're not going to see in the classrooms. I guarantee that. You are not going to walk into a classroom and see many Asian Americans. . . . Every single time I walk into a classroom, especially the first day of classes, I look around to see if there are any minorities. It's hard on a campus like this. APASO is a place where you don't have to worry about a lot. You can just relax and be comfortable.

Other students reinforced the importance of finding a comfort zone on campus. One explained,

I guess APASO provides a sense of

belonging. OK, I belong to a group where there are some people who look like me. There is no pressure because hopefully they understand where I come from.

And a second added,

It's more like a family away from your family. APASO gives me a sense of belonging. At a huge campus like this it's important. I feel like everybody is going through the same things that I'm going through, so I can relate to them.

The social support role of panethnic student organizations may lend increased confidence to students who lack cultural knowledge or language skills (such as Asian American students who are not born and raised in the U.S., and for whom English is not their first language). One student addressed this point when he stated:

Actually it's kind of funny because one of my friends told someone that I only spoke five words my freshman year and now I speak five words in a sentence. I didn't use to present my opinions much at all. And now, I get to be a minority aide. . . . My involvement in APASO helps make me stronger, especially with my speaking.

DISCUSSION

An underlying fear among many faculty, student affairs practitioners, and administrators is that a heightened sense of ethnicity among culturally diverse students ultimately will limit interaction with other groups, including Caucasian American students. And yet, the research clearly reveals that although diverse students may identify first and foremost with a particular ethnic group, such participation does not necessarily limit interactions with Caucasian students (Hurtado & Carter, 1994; Hurtado, Dey, & Treviño, 1994). As Antonio's (1999) research re-

vealed, students may in fact define their campuses as "balkanized," but they then go on to point to a variety of interactions and friendships cutting across racial lines. Such research challenges the higher education community to look past charges of the "vexatious balkanization of America," and begin, as Takaki (1993) argued, to respond "to our diversity as an opportunity to open American minds" (p. 3).

Opening minds to forms of discrimination and stereotyping is at the center of what brings Asian American students at Midwestern University together through APASO. Their efforts to forge a panethnic identity may in fact be seen as part of the struggle to advance a more democratic, multicultural campus community (Rhoads, 1997a; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Tierney, 1993). The importance of collective action as a goal of this panethnic student organization cannot be overstated. In many ways, it is the primary reason for the organization's existence.

Collective action at times serves an important pedagogical function as APASO student leaders seek to raise awareness about Asian American issues as part of a challenge to the campus climate. The collective endeavors of APASO are quite important. Time and time again, students pointed out how their understanding of what it means to be Asian American at Midwestern University was transformed by the educational activities undertaken by APASO.

Furthermore, panethnicity and collective action should be understood as highly interactive phenomena. Collective action is necessary to a large degree because of the ongoing discrimination confronting diverse Asian American groups. A sense of shared experience motivates student organizations such as APASO to engage in a variety of

activities aimed at challenging campus and societal structures that may limit the experiences and opportunities of Asian Americans. In the process of sharing their lives, their cultures, they advance collective understandings of their location in the broader society and the political issues that they face as a group, both on campus and off. Through this shared experience, their social identity as Asian Americans is reinforced and strengthened.

The political dimension of panethnicity describes the heart of APASO's vitality. This supports Lopez and Espiritu's (1990) point that panethnicity ultimately serves a political purpose, a notion reinforced by regional conference proceedings held by APA students (Kwon, 2000). The cultural and social dimensions of APASO reinforce the political potential of the organization. These dimensions reflect the ongoing interactions and connections that develop among APASO members. In turn, ongoing interactions offer much potential for strengthening group identity and the collective consciousness necessary for successful collective action.

In regard to practical implications, colleges and universities can play a key role in supporting groups such as APASO through a range of activities. One form of assistance simply involves expanding the institution's demographic information by adding more precise ethnic categories on application forms. Accurate knowledge of students' ethnic background is helpful to panethnic organizations in devising strategies to increase their numbers. For example, Pacific Islanders are often left out of Asian American organizations, despite strong cultural and historic connections to Asia. If these students are more readily identifiable through a campus database, groups such as APASO can more easily reach them.

Also, panethnic organizations need the space and resources appropriate for key student organizations. Resources may include faculty or staff assistance in the form of advising, as well as funding through offices of minority student affairs. Funds for Asian American student groups to host regional and national conferences on important issues provide meaningful opportunities for students to educate themselves and the larger community. In the end, panethnic organizations have the potential to play a

major role in educating campuses about ethnic and racial differences. Such organizations can play a critical role in reducing campus racism and discrimination, while promoting the creation of multicultural academic communities.

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Collective Action Among Students

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