

**Salem State University
School of Graduate Studies
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**Now You SEA Us: A Look at APIDA College
Mentorship Programs in Shaping Sense of
Belonging for Southeast Asian Students**

A Thesis in Higher

Education in

Student Affairs

by

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ABSTRACT

With a small amount of research dedicated to Southeast Asian college students in higher education institutions, the purpose of this research is to uncover how Asian Pacific Islander Desi American mentorship programs facilitate a sense of belonging amongst Southeast Asian college students. Through a semi-structured interview design, 15 participants shared their stories and experiences in participating in the APIDA mentorship program. Their stories illustrate the impact of APIDA mentorship programs, and the findings highlight how the four components of sense of belonging: identification with the university, social match, social acceptance, and cultural capital in higher education, were met. Participants shared how they were able to further connect with their cultural identity, learn more about the resources at their institution, and find their place on campus.

DEDICATIONS

To all the Southeast Asian college students out there, this one is for you. Just like our ancestors and families who crossed the seas to bring us here, we too have the power to explore the unknown and dream for the better.

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This thesis is more than a requirement to receive my master's degree in education. It is a project of love, culture, and heritage. This project was not a solo journey; I am grateful for all the support that helped me complete it.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up as a Cambodian American and raised in Lowell, Massachusetts, home to the second-largest Cambodian population in the United States, I never had to question my identity and whether I belonged. From hearing my native language at the local markets, to annual celebrations for Khmer New Year, to having a part of the city designated as Cambodia Town, my cultural heritage and identity were always present. It was not until I went away to college that I realized the privilege of being surrounded by your culture. While Salem State University was only 50 minutes away from Lowell, I could no longer hear my native language spoken regularly. While there was a sizable Cambodian population in the nearby city of Lynn, many of them were commuters and didn't remain on campus after classes. In this transition period, the homesickness I had for my Cambodian community grew. I ached for my តា's (grandpa) cooking or to hear my ម៉ែ (mom) talk with me in Khmer.

It wasn't until joining Salem State University's (SSU) Asian Student Association (ASA) that I connected with other Cambodian students at SSU. Meeting them excited me as I no longer felt the loneliness I first felt when moving to campus. I had new friends and eventually mentors in an organization that I wanted to be involved in, as the mission statement of the club was to support APIDA students, along with campus members interested in Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) culture. During my four years of undergrad, ASA remained the organization I called my home. It was the organization where I spent three of the four years on its executive board.

Through a stroke of luck and coincidence, I was also heavily involved with UMass Lowell's Cambodian American Student Association. Originally, this organization was what I

wanted to join if I chose to attend University of Massachusetts, Lowell (UML). However, as I chose to attend Salem State, this desire remained on the back burner until March 2022. In early March 2022, I stumbled upon their Instagram story, which promoted their Coconut Dance Team and announced that they were looking for one more female dancer for UMass Lowell's Asian Night. While I grew up watching Cambodian fine arts, traditional dance was something I didn't get to experience due to the high cost and limited transportation. Hoping this was my chance to get involved with this side of my culture and build cross-campus connections, I sent a message explaining my interest in performing, that it aligned with my spring break schedule, and I would give it my all if allowed to perform with them as a non-UML student. To my surprise, the members welcomed me with open arms and encouraged me to be involved with them, even though I was not a student at their institution. What I thought was a one-time deal turned into a lifelong friendship and a deeper connection with my heritage in a field that I did not think I would be able to experience.

Due to my involvement with the Asian Student Association and the Cambodian American Student Association, I began to critically examine the importance of cultural identity and how it is influenced and shaped by the environments of higher education institutions. Seeing the influence cultural organizations had on further developing my cultural identity, and now being a role model for incoming APIDA college students who were beginning to explore the intersection of culture and higher education, I focused my undergraduate honors thesis on the role of higher education in shaping Asian American and Pacific Islander College Students' college experiences and cultural identity. This thesis connected my lived experiences as an APIDA student leader, while also expanding the research about culturally engaging college campuses. Finishing that thesis, I realized how

much I enjoyed conducting research, especially when conducting research to close the educational attainment gap for Southeast Asian college students. When conducting my undergraduate honors thesis and preparing for graduate school, I realized how impactful having mentors of shared cultural and/or ethnic identity is. Almost all my participants shared how they had a staff or faculty member who understood and shared their identity as an APIDA individual made a difference to them. I chose to continue at Salem State University and enter their Higher Education Student Affairs Program (HESA) because the people who made up the department were people who shared and understood my identity. That alone made the difference in staying at Salem State for two more years.

Entering my final year of my master's program, I wanted my final cumulative assignment for the Higher Education Student Affairs program to be a research project, with the result of a published master's thesis. Building off the coursework of the HESA programs, ranging from student development theories to multicultural topics in higher education, this thesis will add to the literature regarding the college experiences of Southeast Asian college students. My goal for this thesis was to highlight the unique experiences, challenges, and barriers that Southeast Asian college students face compared to other student groups, while also sharing the importance of culturally-engaging mentorship programs.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study grew out of my lived experience as a Cambodian/Southeast Asian American and my desire to address the education gaps amongst Southeast Asian college students. Southeast Asian ethnic groups fall under the national average of 56% of Asians 25 and older who hold a Bachelor's Degree or higher (Pew Research Center, 2025). Only 22% of Cambodians, 26% of Hmong, and 18% of Laotians hold a Bachelor's Degree or

higher. In a study done in 2022 by Chao Vang, Ed.D., and Maiko Xiong, Ph.D. at Sacramento State University to disseminate data regarding Southeast Asian college students and their experiences, 70% of Southeast Asian college students indicated that academic and educational factors (lack of adequate preparation for college, lack of proper motivation, poor choice of major, etc.) hindered their ability to complete their degree. When examining support structures that assist Asian Americans in higher education spaces, there is a tendency to privilege East Asian American groups (Arriba et al., 2018; Hernandez, 2016). Similar to Parayno's study on Asian American support structures in supporting the needs of Pilipina/x/o students, my research focused on the disaggregation of Southeast Asian American college students' experiences (Parayno, 2023). To better understand Southeast Asian college students and their experiences in higher education, the following research question that informed this study: How does APIDA mentorship programs contribute to shaping a sense of belonging among Southeast Asian College Students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Composed of the 11 countries, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste (East Timor), and Vietnam, these countries make up the geographical region known as Southeast Asia. Just like the numerous waves of immigration towards the United States, these countries have experienced their own periods of immigration waves to the United States. With the first Filipinos setting foot on the coast of California in 1587, Chinese and Japanese arriving for work on the transcontinental railroads and sugar plantations of Hawaii in the mid-1800s, to refugees escaping the crises in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s, to the current waves of Burmese refugees, these wave of immigrants describe the immigration waves of Southeast Asians. However, due to the perception of the model minority myth, it overshadows the fact that there are Southeast Asian Americans who need educational support (Yu, 2006). This socialization of Asian Americans has made them overrepresented in higher education and overshadowed the barriers that Southeast Asian Americans face in higher education attainment. To better assess the readiness of Southeast Asian American college students, it is necessary to highlight the existing barriers. Barriers like the model minority myth, low educational attainment rates, and lack of necessary resources prevent them from completing their Bachelor's Degree.

Barriers Southeast Asian American College Students Face

Model Minority Myth

The concept of model minority first appeared in a 1966 article from The New York Times, titled "Success Story, Japanese-American Style." The author Peterson (1966) coined the label "model minority" (p. 11) to describe Japanese Americans who had successfully

integrated into American society. Soon afterward, many more articles started to follow in which they praised the successful integration of Asians into American society. This soon creates the image we have grown to know about Asian Americans, that they are hard workers, constantly working or studying. Yet, this creates the belief that Asian Americans are monolithic, which is far from the truth.

The model minority myth praises the successful educational and economic achievements of Asian Americans in American society. Yet, Museus and Park's (2015) study reveals that many college students were affected by the stereotype in their social interactions at higher education institutions. An interviewee shared how other people assumed that they did not earn the grades they received due to the presumption that they were genetically predisposed to excel in math and science, thus devaluing the hard work that they put in. The assumption of the model minority myth became a barrier when Asian American students sought help. One other participant shared with Museus and Park how she felt that she wasn't fully addressed and supported in what she was experiencing.

Wallitt's (2008) research highlights that Cambodian American students had teachers who regularly assumed Cambodian students to be Chinese. This assumption created frustration for Cambodian American students as they could not receive proper support in their education, but their additional identity of being children of refugees.

Struggling with Education Attainment

Compared to Korean Americans, who have a 34% college degree-earning population, 12% or less of Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, and Laotian Americans have earned a college degree. When analyzing the percentage of Burmese Americans who have obtained a Bachelor's Degree, only 28% of Burmese Americans have completed their

Bachelor's (Trieu & Vang, 2015). Connecting to the continuing cycle of socialization towards Asian Americans fails to recognize the vast diaspora within the community, contributing to the feeling of invisibility for Asian American groups that are less known, such as Cambodian Americans (Wallitt, 2008).

First Generation

Connecting to the barrier of educational attainment, many Southeast Asian college students are first-generation college students whose parents or guardians did not attend postsecondary education (Ngo, 2006). In 2018, the Postsecondary National Policy Institute found that a majority of first-generation undergraduate students came from low-income and non-white backgrounds. They also found that 20% of first-generation students reported that English was not their first language. Because they are the first to attend college, there is a greater need for additional support, like academic, social, and mental health support. First-generation college students may not know about the campus resources dedicated to student success, as they are still navigating and learning about college culture (Stephens et al., 2012). When looking at Southeast Asian first-generation college students, barriers like lack of educational attainment, cultural and language barriers, and financial resources prevent them from asking their support system for assistance in navigating college. In a 2016 study, five themes were identified among Southeast Asian college students. These themes are (1) the journey is difficult, (2) family circumstances guided academic choices, (3) childhood community has an influence on college experience, (4) support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success, and (5) the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives (Doublestein, 2017).

Navigating College Spaces

Sense of Belonging

One of the biggest factors in determining a college student's likelihood to remain at their institution is their sense of belonging (Mowreader, 2013). Sense of belonging, defined as the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences (Allen et al. 2021). To assess college belongingness, the Social Fit scale is used to measure college belongingness (Walton & Cohen, 2007). In a study done by Maghsoodi and colleagues (2023), they determined four factors that measure a student's sense of belonging. These four factors are a student's feelings of belonging: identification with the university, social match, social acceptance, and cultural capital in higher education.

Defined by Mael and Ashforth, university identification is a specific form of social identification that focuses on students' attachment and belongingness towards their institution (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The more a student identifies with their university or college, the stronger their feelings will be in supporting and connecting with the institution as a whole. When looking at sense of belonging from the perspective of educational settings, sense of belonging is defined as when students feel welcomed, respected, included, and encouraged in their school's social environment (Goodenow, 1993). Social Match is defined as reflecting perceived similarity to others on campus (Strayhorn, 2018). Factor 3 of the Social Fit Scale was Social Acceptance, which was highlighted and defined by the acceptance of one's community or social group.

Feelings about themselves and their sense of value to the school are also key factors to a sense of belonging in the school setting (Arslan & Duru, 2017). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines cultural capital as non-financial assets that help people succeed in society,

like education, language, style, or cultural knowledge. Cultural capital provides resources for individuals to better succeed in society, eventually passing it down to their families (Bourdieu, 1986). While there was no specific question that asked if the participant gained cultural capital, many of them shared the cultural capital they gained through the program.

In finding their sense of belonging, while also navigating social, cultural, and institutional barriers at their higher education institutions, AAPI college students may need to rely on strategies. One approach is through racial uplifting (Ong 2022), wherein AAPI individuals and groups embrace and celebrate their heritage and cultural practices openly. Connecting to the Social Fit Scale's factors of social match and acceptance, there is evidence to suggest that positive ethnic identity buffers against negative psychological effects. Mossakowski (2003), for instance, found a positive correlation between Filipino Americans' involvement with their cultural practices and ethnic identity and better mental health. Another example of SFS factors of social acceptance and cultural capital is shown in a study conducted by Iwamoto and Liu (2010). The study discussed that Asian American college students who have great ethnic pride and attachment to their ethnic group endorse positive traits of well-being, such as acceptance and positive relationships with others. Iwamoto and Liu (2010) noted that college students who had a stronger sense of ethnic affirmation and belonging had a positive relationship with their psychological well-being.

First-Year College Mentorship Programs

One of the successful resources for incoming freshmen and transfer students is college mentorship programs. To increase student engagement and retention, especially from first-generation students and students of color, peer mentorship programs were established (Sanchez et al., 2006). Horton (2015) wrote that students who are considered most vulnerable

have a higher probability of not achieving higher levels of academic and social accomplishments. To increase the success amongst first-generation students, peer mentor programs have been implemented at universities and colleges, where mentees are paired with a mentor. Their mentor is an upperclassman who is knowledgeable regarding social, academic, and emotional resources of the institution. Oftentimes, the mentor is someone who previously participated in the peer mentorship program. Results of the mentorship program include improvement in their academics along with a better integration into the college campus, reaffirming the SFS model of sense of belonging.

Another type of mentorship program that may exist in college settings is Big-Little mentorship programs. College student organizations and clubs will create a program that connects current upperclassmen executive board members with first-year or transfer students interested in learning more about the executive board of the student organization. In an evaluation, data collected by Ventura (2022) demonstrate that participants in the Bio Big Sib & Little Sib program consistently report increased academic confidence, an enhanced sense of belonging, and greater identification with the Biology Department.

Because of the nature of peer mentorship and the SFS model of sense of belonging, mentorship programs based on shared ethnic, racial, or social identity have reported higher levels of success. Schez et al. (2021) found that the quality of a mentorship relationship was associated with a more positive ethnic identity, and support was found for the hypothesis that ethnic identity mediates the association between the quality of mentoring relationships and change over time in the economic values towards education among Latinx adolescents.

With a small amount of research dedicated to Southeast Asian college students in higher education institutions, the purpose of this research is to uncover how Asian Pacific

Islander Desi American mentorship programs facilitate a sense of belonging amongst Southeast Asian college students. The research focuses on the role and effectiveness of an APIDA mentorship program, particularly towards Southeast Asian students, whether the program effectively increased their sense of belonging at their institution, and raised awareness and knowledge regarding dedicated resources, social networks, and understanding of their Southeast Asian identity.

METHODOLOGY

As stated in the introduction and purpose of the study, this study aimed to explore how APIDA mentorship assists in shaping a sense of belonging for Southeast Asian College Students, utilizing the Sense of Social Fit Scale and the four components of sense of belonging: identification with the university, social match, social acceptance, and cultural capital in higher education.

Research Design

Approaching this research study, I employed a qualitative research design, specifically using a semi-structured interview approach. Through qualitative research, researchers study people, places, and specific topics in an effort to answer questions that focus on the whys and hows of the problem (Bhattacharya, 2017). Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their thoughts connected to the questions, while also sharing new information that may arise from the conversation. Also, due to semi-structured interviews being conversation style, the interview provides a more natural approach, leading the participant to be more open when sharing their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015).

Scholarly Personal Narrative:

Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) is a research method that serves as a way to integrate personal experience when collecting data. SPN allows the researchers to combine their lived experiences with existing scholarships and develop broader themes (Nash, 2004). SPN provides the foundation of my research as it bridges the lived experiences of Southeast Asian college students with the existing research regarding the barriers for educational attainment for Southeast Asian college students.

As a Southeast Asian woman, centering the voices of Southeast Asian college students were essential to my research. While I have my personal experience in finding social acceptance and community at my institution, my experiences do not represent all the Southeast Asian college student experience. I recognize the privilege I have of growing up in a city with a high concentration of Southeast Asians. Through the combination of a semi-structured interview and SPN, participants were not limited to sharing stories that pertained to the question. They were allowed to share any stories that related to their social identity and how it manifested in different settings at their college institution.

Sampling Criteria

To participate in this research study, the following criteria were expected to be met: (a) be of Southeast Asian descent, (b) enrolled in an undergraduate program in the United States, (c) currently an upperclassman (junior or senior), (d) participated in an APIDA mentorship program during your first year at your current institution, and (e) at least 18 and under the age of 25.

Participants

In total, 15 students were interviewed and participated in the research study. 12 out of the 15 participants met all the criteria of the study, while the last three met all the requirements but participated in their APIDA mentorship program post-freshman year. I chose to include their interviews as I was more focused on how the participation in these programs impacted them in their upperclassmen years, and whether they were able to experience a sense of belonging after participating in the programs. Table 1 provides demographic information about the student participants.

Table 1

Student Participants

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Year and Institution
Hua P.	Vietnamese	Junior, Oak University
PomPom T.	Vietnamese	Junior, Willow University
Niki R.	Indonesian	Senior, Sycamore University
Cory E-T.	Filipino	Senior, Clove University
Thai S.	Cambodian	Senior, Willow University
Christine T.	Chinese-Vietnamese	Junior, Birch University
Esmeralda OB.	Filipino	Senior, Juniper University
Minh D.	Vietnamese	Junior, Mulberry University
Channary L-T.	Cambodian	Senior, Gingko University
Junia P.	Teochew-Cambodian	Junior, Gingko University
Joanna S.	Filipino	Senior, Oak University
Tuong T.	Vietnamese	Senior, Oak University
James L.	Vietnamese	Senior, Oak University
Huy L.	Vietnamese	Junior, Oak University
Mara D.	Cambodian	Senior, Oak University

Procedures

To share the information regarding the study along with how to participate, I created a recruitment flyer (see in Appendix A). The recruitment flyer included information regarding the study, qualifications to participate, and a QR code to scan and fill out the initial screening form (see in Appendix B). The screening form asked them to provide their name, the institution they attended, their current enrolled year, ethnic identity, immigrant generation, the highest degree completed by their parent/caretaker(s), and whether they

participated in an APIDA mentorship program during their first year. The screening form served as an initial tool to see if the applicant met the requirements to participate in the study.

After the study and recruitment flyer were approved by Salem State University's Institutional Review Board, I began promoting the study through social media and sharing with colleagues at NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and, in particular, the Asian Pacific Islander Knowledge Community (APIKC) and Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE). I chose to reach out to members of the APIKC and APAHE as both organizations were spaces for Asian-identified higher education professionals. These Asian-identified professionals were able to share the flyer amongst the students they oversee and supervise. By promoting the recruitment flyer on Instagram and LinkedIn, the flyer was viewed by individuals who met the requirements and had some form of connection with me. Once participants filled out the screening form and met the requirements, I reached out via email to schedule their interview through Calendly and provide them with the consent form (see in Appendix C). Before each interview was conducted, the participant needed to read and sign the consent form that provided details regarding the purpose of the study, possible risks of participation, measures taken for confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. 10 out of the 15 interviews were conducted online via Zoom, while the remaining five were conducted in-person at Oak University.

For interviews conducted on Zoom, each session began with an informal check-in, checking up on the participant, while also thanking them for their time. To ensure all ethical protocols were being met, there was time dedicated to answering any questions the interviewee may have. Before the formal portion of the interview started, I would ask for

verbal confirmation to record the meeting and state that it would only be seen by me. Once consent was provided, I began with the opening questions of the interview (seen in Appendix D). For the group interview conducted at Oak University, the same beginning steps were conducted. The difference between the online and group interview was the opportunity the group interviewee had to connect and bounce their thoughts off each other.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interviews and find common themes, all but one interview was recorded. With the Zoom audio recording, I uploaded the audio file to the software Fireflies.AI. Fireflies.AI is a software that converts audio into a transcript and creates summaries with takeaways, action items, and key decisions. Once the interview audio was converted into a summary document, I began to analyze the data through the framework of the Sense of Social Fit model. The summarized points provided by Fireflies.AI were analyzed to see which points best fit the research question and the four components of sense of belonging. Topics that discussed similar themes would be summarized under a header that best matched what the points were.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure no harm would come to the participant, the study did not begin until Salem State University's Institutional Research Board approved the study. Participants were given a consent form that outlined the potential risks of the study. The consent form informed them that any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with their permission or as required by law. Their real name would not be used in any write-up. Instead, their identity and data collected will be kept confidential; a pseudonym will be used in place of your real name in any written,

disseminated works. Participants had the choice of whether their interviews were to be tape-recorded. If they consented to their interview being recorded, their audiotape was solely used for the interview. All of the recording and data would be stored in the private domains, and no one other than me will have access to the data at any time.

Limitations

One limitation of this research study is the heavy representation of certain institutions, along with the limited geographic diversity of higher education institutions. 40% of the students are students of Oak University. Due to the personal connection between the staff of the Asian American Cultural Center at Oak University, more students were encouraged to participate in the research study. Similarly, eight higher education institutions were represented, with 75% of them located in the Northeast. Only one institution was represented from the Mid-Atlantic and West Coast region. While APIDA mentorship programs across the country were contacted, only a handful of schools from regions like the Midwest, South, and Pacific Northwest responded. Without students from regions like the Midwest, South, or Pacific Northwest, it does not fully represent the experience of Southeast Asian college students or the geographic influence.

Role of Researcher:

As a Cambodian American higher education practitioner, this research topic aligns with many personal and professional interests. This research bridges my personal lived experiences and professional experience, while also highlighting the different roles my environment has had in shaping my interest in serving Southeast Asian college students. As someone who has participated in various APIDA spaces in the last several years, I have gotten to analyze and explore whether spaces designated for APIDA communities

reflectively serve all that fall under the umbrella term. Oftentimes, the label only reflects one or two specific communities under the umbrella. When talking to peers or colleagues who identify as Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian, they've shared that a majority of the time, they're not represented under that label. Those conversations have impacted the way I use umbrella terms like APIDA and whether I am truly inclusive. That perspective influenced my positionality in researching APIDA mentorship programs and whether they support the needs of Southeast Asian college students.

RESULTS

As this study uses a qualitative design, specifically the semi-structured interview design, this chapter presents the findings from the 15 interviews I conducted. Each interview provided the participant with the opportunity to share their experience, their takeaways from the program, and share their opinion on why mentorship programs designed for APIDA college students were important, specifically for incoming Southeast Asian college students. This section will examine how various APIDA-g geared mentorship programs foster a sense of belonging among Southeast Asian college students, utilizing the Sense of Social Fit Scale and the four components of sense of belonging: identification with the university, social match, social acceptance, and cultural capital in higher education.

Identification with the University

One of the common themes discovered was the way APIDA mentorship programs acted as a bridge in connecting students with the various resources and opportunities on their campus. Niki, an Indonesian senior at Sycamore University, shared how much easier it was to navigate the campus through participation in the Sycamore Asian American Center's Peer Mentorship program. Her mentee connected her to resources on campus, like other student centers, and where to locate health services. Similarly, Channary and Junia, both students at Gingko University, who participated in the United Khmer Students' intern program, echoed sentiments regarding how beneficial the program and their mentors were. Junia, a junior, talks about how the mentorship program introduced participants to Gingko's campus culture and peer networks. Because of her role as an intern, she found it easier to access opportunities around campus, as her mentors would share new opportunities with the interns.

Another example of the importance of connecting and identifying with a university is through the experience of Esmeralda, a senior at Juniper University. When discussing the importance of APIDA-g geared mentorship programs, she shares the role her mentorship program played in her remaining at Brandeis. Unlike other schools that she toured and considered transferring to, almost all of them lacked the same connection and cultural ties as the Southeast Asian Club (SEAC). As a freshman intern for the Southeast Asian Club at Juniper, she was exposed to the social and cultural connections of the organization. Esmeralda shared how connected she felt to the executive board at the time, but also to the alumni of SEAC. All these factors changed her mind about transferring, and at the end of the interview, she expressed her gratitude for staying at Juniper. Esmeralda says, “Does it make it sad that graduation is approaching? Yes, but it makes me treasure the events we have this semester, like Ayala. It is a full circle moment for me”.

When conducting a group interview with five students from Oak University, many of them expressed the same sentiments about the role of the APIDA mentorship program in assisting them with connecting with the university. As the flagship institution for the state of Connecticut and with a student population of 21,042 (as of fall 2025), all five of the students voiced that the mentorship program made it easier to navigate Oak University. James, a senior and out-of-state student, revealed that they considered transferring to an institution in their home state, but chose to stay as their mentorship program through Oak’s Asian American Cultural Center (AsaCC) created opportunities to fully engage with everything that UConn had to offer. He shares, “Yeah, being President of our Chinese Student Association means a lot to me. Makes me think where I would be if I left Oak University.”

Tuong and Joanna, both seniors as well, agreed with James' experience and are now looking at opportunities to pursue graduate degrees at Oak University. Huy, a junior and transfer student, talked about his unique experience of being a transfer student at the institution. As a transfer student from a local community college, Huy sought a program to help him adjust to the new environment. Participating in Oak's Asian American Cultural Center mentorship program geared towards first-year and transfer students, he gained the confidence to get involved with the university. He says, "Going to events with my mentor has helped me a lot. Sometimes the number of people makes me nervous, but when I have someone I know, I feel better."

Social Match

In all fifteen interviews, all participants described the greater connection they had to their specific ethnic and cultural identities after participating in their mentorship program. Cory, a senior at Clove, talked about the connections she discovered through Clove's Asian American Cultural Center's (AACC) first-year mentorship program and their first-year peer liaisons. During her freshman year, Cory got to connect with Kasmasa, Clove's Filipino student organization, and check out the different cultural programming at the Asian American Cultural Center. When I asked her about the organizations she's participated in throughout her five years at Clove, she said,

"There is so much I have gotten to be a part of. Obviously, there's Kasama, but I've been a part of Queer & Asian, Asian-ish, Students and Alumni of Yale (Board Member), Pitches and Tones A cappella, and I'm pretty sure I've attended events by almost all the clubs affiliated with AACC."

Four of the fifteen participants who identified as Cambodian all had shared sentiments on being able to connect with the Cambodian/Cambodian-American identity. Mara, a senior at UConn, Thai, a senior at Willow University, Junia, a junior at Ginkgo University, and Channary, a senior at Ginkgo University, echoed themes of honoring the history of survival and resilience of their families and how it motivated them for academic and personal success. Common themes also included the ability to connect and reconnect with Khmer heritage through cultural activities, food, language, and traditional customs. Thai shares his experience as a 1.5-generation Cambodian-American, “Sometimes I do see the difference between myself and the kids that were born here. But being with AACEE, I’m able to share the importance of keeping our Cambodian culture alive. I want them to keep practicing their Khmer.”

Additional stories of shared backgrounds and identities paint the greater image of social match mentorship programs fostered amongst Southeast Asian college students. PomPom, a junior at Willow, happily reflects on the social bonds she has had since freshman year. She states that many of the meaningful relationships with the staff members of Willow’s Asian American Center for Excellence and Engagement (AACEE) and other APIDA college students at Willow University are because of her exposure to them during her freshman year. She’s able to connect more with her Vietnamese heritage because of the encouragement to participate in the Vietnamese Student Association.

It was kind of a no-brainer; I would go join VSA. Almost all my coworkers were Vietnamese and a part of the club. But I’m glad I did, as I get to serve on the executive board now. Plus, my Vietnamese has gotten better!

Joanna shared that Oak's AsACC increased her knowledge of the different student organizations that fall under the center and participate in a couple of organizations that align with her social and ethnic identities. All the other participants from UConn agreed with Joanna's statement and shared how they've been able to explore clubs that connect to their identities, too.

Social Acceptance

At the core of a sense of belonging is the ability to be accepted for who the individual is and all their other social identities. All participants shared how influential the mentorship program was in easing their anxiety about college and providing spaces where they were accepted. Below are each participant's thoughts and quotes on the sense of belonging they were able to feel because of the program.

Hua P. | Vietnamese, Junior at Oak University

Hua shares that even though I didn't get to connect with everyone, he still knew that he had the safety net of the AsACC. He shares that it makes him happy knowing that there's at least one person who supports him.

Sometimes when I see people who were in the cohort with me, we'll say hi and catch up. I always appreciate that we have that shared bond together. When I stop by the AsACC to do work, I see the staff who mentored me. It reminds me that I still have a place at AsACC, even if I'm not involved a lot.

PomPom T. | Vietnamese, Junior at Willow University

PomPom shares that she found solidarity in mutual goals and challenges, fostering emotional support and cultural pride between her peers at VSA and the mentorship program.

She noted that cross-cultural dialogue was encouraged, helping those with mixed cultural backgrounds feel included and welcomed.

It's fun being a part of the executive board. Like when we were prepping for Night Market, we spent so much time together prepping. We went shopping, cooked, and even crashed out a little bit together, but it's okay. Our stall at the Night Market went well, and we worked together through the issues.

Niki R. | Indonesian, Senior at Sycamore University

Niki recalls that she felt comfortable on campus and less like an outsider compared to high school, as she was no longer one of the few Asians on the campus. She states that having more Asian friends allowed her to better navigate challenges, whether it was microaggressions or internal conflict.

Cory E.T. | Filipina, Senior at Clove University

Cory discusses that she has been able to make the most of her five years at Yale because of the role of the first-year mentorship programs and her first-year peer liaisons. Due to her mixed heritage as a Half-Filipina and White, she experienced insecurities, discrimination, and wondered if she belonged in APIDA spaces. Being a part of the program has helped other multiracial mentees, including her, overcome insecurities about their heritage.

I never had to prove myself or that I was Asian enough. I know I'm white-passing, but the peer liaisons created a space where I do not need to prove anything. I'm qualified to exist in this space. Being a peer liaison, I'm able to continue creating space for other mixed Asians.

Thai S. | Cambodian, Senior at Willow University

Thai shares how he's able to be a better mentor due to his experience in the program. He enjoys that spaces like AACEE and the STAARS program promote friendships outside the classroom. Despite the challenges that arise in college, he's grateful that the large Southeast Asian community provides a safety net, in comparison to some of his friends' schools that lack a strong Southeast Asian population.

Yeah, we'll all joke that Lowell is ghetto or not as bougie as other cities, but that doesn't matter. Lowell is our home. Where else are we going to find a bunch of Cambodian shops and people? I think that's why I went to Willow, because I wanted to be surrounded by this community.

Christine T. | Chinese-Vietnamese, Junior at Birch University

Christine positively reflects on the bonds she's created at the Asian American Resource Office (AARO) at Birch University. She's created lasting friendships and connections with staff and peers, as many of them have common backgrounds. She sees these bonds as meaningful forms of personal support and wants to continue her role as a peer mentor in her senior year to give back.

I know I can always go to the staff at AARO to help me. People like the AARO staff understand my background and some of the problems I may need help with. Without them, college would have been so much harder. They've prepared me to take on the role of peer mentor, and I hope to continue that next year.

Esmeralda O.B. | Filipina, Senior at Juniper University

Esmeralda thanks the role of SEAC's freshman liaison programs for bringing her closest friends. Because of all the time they spent together as freshman representatives, they've developed an unbreakable bond that continues to stand to this day. Her mentors were

able to provide advice for navigating college life, while also encouraging them to be proud of the rich cultural diversity of Southeast Asia.

My best friends are the friends I made through SEAC. We've gotten to do so much, both in the club and outside the organization. Even those who graduated in my freshman year are still people I can rely on. I'm so excited to invite them back for Ayala and show them everything I've done as senior advisor.

Minh D. | Vietnamese, Junior at Mulberry University

Minh's biggest takeaways as an intern for the Southeast Asians of Mulberry University club were the bonds and growth she experienced. As an international student from Vietnam, interacting with peers from similar and varied backgrounds enriched her understanding of diverse immigrant and international student experiences. She's grateful to have connected with other Southeast Asian international students and formed a supportive network.

I feel like I've learned so much because I shadowed as an intern for the organization. It's so cool seeing all the traditions and holidays that are celebrated in Southeast Asia and then being able to bring them to campus. I didn't get to see all of this in Vietnam, but now I get to and hope other people can enjoy it too.

Channary L.T. | Cambodian, Senior at Gingko University

Channary discusses how her friendships founded through UKS' internship program have helped her navigate the challenges of college life and beyond. She has been able to connect with more Cambodian peers, but has also expanded her social circle to include the Southeast Asian communities at Gingko University.

I love UKS because it's one of the reasons I'm still at the university. Being an intern my sophomore year was the best decision I made. I love the friends I made, like Junia. I love being able to be the KORE (Khmer Outreach, Retention, & Education) Director and mentor high school students.

Junia P. | Techow-Cambodian, Junior at Ginkgo University

As a Techow-Cambodian, Junia states that being accepted of this cultural identity has made her more comfortable with who she is. Her peers have also provided the support and acceptance to grow as an individual. Their encouragement was what pushed her to run for a leadership role in the annual UKS' Culture Night. Just like her friend and fellow interviewee, Channary, she has also found community with other Southeast Asian student organizations like Southeast Asian Campus Learning Education and Retention (SEA CLEAR) and the Filipino student organization.

Not a lot of people know about Techow or Techow Cambodians. When I got to direct the culture night last spring, it was a chance to teach people what Teochew-Khmer heritage is. It meant so much to me to co-direct and perform in the show.

Joanna S. | Senior at Oak University

Joanna expresses how confident she has grown since her freshman year. Because of the peers she's made through the AsACC and the Filipino American Student Association, she doesn't question her place at Oak. She aims to continue creating positive spaces for other freshman Filipinx students.

Yeah, sorry, the reason I have to leave this interview early is to go to an event that FASA (Filipino American Student Association) is hosting. Though it kind of does

connect to your research. Their events are what got me involved, and I'm still attending as a senior, so it shows how much I enjoy being a part of FASA.

Tuong T. | Vietnamese, Senior at Oak University

Tuong is happy that she chose to transfer out of her original institution before first-year orientation, as she's been able to grow so much at Oak University. Just like her peers during the group interview, the mentorship has equipped them to handle challenges that come from attending a predominantly white institution. She's found a home away from home, despite the challenges.

Yeah, I didn't finish orientation before I decided to transfer. It worked out as I chose Oak and got news about their programs in the mail. I learned so much, both from the mentorship program but being able to attend events. This place is a place I can always visit.

James L. | Vietnamese, Senior at Oak University

While James joked that it would have been nice to transfer to a university in a warmer state, he's glad to have remained at UConn. He talks about all the memories he's made at Oak University and the ability to grow as a student leader. He feels accepted for his Chinese-Vietnamese heritage and does not have to choose one specific organization to participate in.

Yeah, I'm actually from Texas, and I did consider transferring to somewhere closer to home, but I'm glad I stayed. I feel like I was able to find my footing as a student leader and be connected to this campus. The staff at AsACC really care about us and make this campus inclusive.

Huy L. | Vietnamese, Junior at Oak University

Huy's grateful for how Oak University has already become a home for him, even as a transfer student. He states that his mentor and the AsACC community allowed him to be accepted for his identity as a transfer student and for participating in transfer-specific events.

AsACC has helped me a lot as a transfer student. There's still a lot that I don't know about the campus, but I'd probably be more lost if I didn't get involved with AMP.

Some of the friends I've made are fellow transfer students.

Mara D. | Cambodian, Senior at Oak University

Mara speaks about how the intersectionality between the cultural and identity centers is important to her as a Cambodian trans woman. Being able to create programming between the two identity centers provides space for other LGBTQ+ APIDA college students. She's grateful for the chance to showcase cultural activities for the Thai, Lao, and Cambodian New Year that have brought so many people to the event. She said, "I'm glad I don't have to choose between the centers. Both centers encourage me to be a part of both, and that's great. I'm able to do programming that focuses on intersectionality, like being Asian and Queer."

Cultural Capital

Students like Huy, Niki, and Cory talked about the inclusivity of diverse Asian identities beyond dominant East Asian narratives. The three shared that they are able to advocate for broadening the representation to South, Southeast, and Pacific Islander cultures. Beyond social opportunities and growth, participants talked about the professional skills and experience they gained from their specific organization. Channary discusses some of UKS' general body meetings and events centered on professional growth and career readiness. Events like resumes and mock interviews help bridge the gaps in knowledge around the professional workplace. Minh echoed parallel thoughts around professionalism and career

readiness. Her time as an intern sharpened her soft skills around active listening, independence, work ethic, and communication, and would translate into her academic and career. PomPom describes that she felt more ready in her role as a student coordinator at AACEE because the mentorship program prepared her with the necessary skills to succeed in the role.

One of the other common themes connected to cultural capital is a greater understanding and connection to the APIDA communities and history in their neighborhood. Christine talks about how she has been learning more about Boston's local businesses through AARO. AARO showcases local AAPI businesses, which allows for the visibility of different businesses in the area. PomPom talks about the different field trips sponsored by the center that students can sign up for. Field trips like visiting Boston's Chinatown or Little Saigon increase cultural learning amongst individuals who may not have been exposed to it before.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research study was to explore, expand, and discuss what the college experience looked like for Southeast Asian college students. Specifically, what does sense of belonging look like in Southeast Asian college students? How do programs like APIDA mentorship initiatives, cultural student organizations, and Asian American cultural centers offer the chance for Southeast Asian college students to find their home away from home? By incorporating a semi-structured interview method, participants shared about the impact of participating in APIDA-g geared mentorship initiatives. This section focuses on discussing the common themes that arose from the interviews, as well as suggestions for future research and practice. The primary research question that this study explored was, " How does APIDA mentorship assist in shaping a sense of belonging for Southeast Asian College Students, utilizing the Sense of Social Fit Scale and the four components of sense of belonging: identification with the university, social match, social acceptance, and cultural capital in higher education?

A Resource for Transition to College

Schlossberg's Transition Theory notes four components that serve as major influences on how people cope with transitions (Schlossberg, 1989). She states that depending on how the individual factors of the situation, personal resources, coping skills, and strategies, and the understanding of the transition, they will either cope positively or negatively to change (Schlossberg, 1989). All the mentorship programs that were discussed are commonly rooted in the theme of easing the transition period, whether it be for incoming freshmen or transfer students.

Each mentorship program, whether it is ran through the Asian American Cultural Center or internship programs run through student organizations like the United Khmer Students or Southeast Asians of Rutgers University, their goal to provide intentional support, culturally relevant resources, and programming that is reflected across the board. When sharing about her experience during her first year at Yale, Cory talks about the impact it had on her freshman year. Cory said, “These events from (Yale’s) AACC gave me the chance to bond with other first-years in a safe environment. Without them, I don’t think I would have found out about student clubs like Kasama.”

Impact on First-Generation Southeast Asian Students

One of the questions in the initial screening form asked the participant to share the highest level of education their parents or guardians received. While there was no qualification connected to parents’ level of educational attainment, the question was posed to see if the interviewee’s response was influenced by the people in their life. For those who identified as first-generation college students, they placed a higher emphasis on the importance of APIDA mentorship programs and the impact they’ve had on their college years. In a 2018 study conducted by Fruiht and Chen, they researched the impact mentorship has on first-generation college students. One of the results states that the importance of mentors for students who may not have other people in their lives who have gone through the college experience (Fruiht & Chen, 2018).

Channary, who is a first-generation Cambodian-American college student, discusses the influence of succeeding in college to honor her grandma. She shares, “It means so much to me to be at a school like UCLA and to know that I will be graduating this May. My grandma survived the genocide and continues to provide so much to me. This degree is a way

for me to honor her sacrifice, but also the Cambodian community overall.” Niki also speaks about the impact Tuft’s Asian American Mentorship Program has had on her college experience. Niki says:

Yeah, I know I still have my qualms about not being selected as a peer leader, but that doesn’t discredit the impact it’s had on me, especially as a first-gen student. I feel more confident and comfortable in who I am and can say that I’m able to actively engage with the Tufts community because of what I learned from the program.”

These narrative from first-generation college students like Niki and Channary illustrates the influence of sense of belonging in college success seen through a model and interpretations created by Ruihua Li, Norlizah Che Hassan, Norzihani Saharuddin, and Ouyang Sha (Li, Che Hassan, Saharuddin, & Sha, O. 2024).

Further Connection to One’s Cultural Identity and Community

Originally, the goal of the thesis was to examine both the development of a sense of belonging and the cultural identity of Southeast Asians in APIDA mentorship programs. In interviewing the participants, the stories of further connecting with their cultural identity and community arose. They were stories of love, acceptance, and community. Each participant talked about how much they were able to further connect or reconnect with their culture. In Minh’s story, she shared the ability to learn more about what Southeast Asian culture in America was like and being able to explore more than the monolithic culture she grew up with. Minh shares, “Growing up in Vietnam, all I ever saw was Vietnamese culture. Now, as an international student at Rutgers, I have gotten to see so much because of SEARU. It means a lot to share my experience as a student from Vietnam, but see how diverse the Southeast Asian culture is.” Christine reflects on the chance to connect more with her

Vietnamese identity through her involvement with the Asian American Resource Office at UMass Boston and UMB's Vietnamese Student Association. She says, "Being Chinese-Vietnamese or Hoa has always been unique. I only speak Cantonese, but my family still honors both our roots. I feel a bit closer to my Vietnamese side as I've gotten to see it represented in the organizations I'm in. Esmeralda discusses how meaningful it's been to connect with her Filipino heritage. Esmeralda tells me, "Activities like participating in Filipino dances or wearing traditional clothes connect me more to my heritage. I don't have to question if I'm Filipino enough. In SEAC, I'm enough, and that's all that matters to me."

For students like Channary, Junia, Thai, and PomPom who attend universities with greater diversity amongst Southeast Asian students, they experience more opportunities to connect with other Southeast Asian college students and faculty. At Gingko University, there are over 15 organizations dedicated to Southeast Asian culture, including dance groups, retention programs, and a specific Welcome Weekend program for admitted Southeast Asian college students. Similarly, both institutions, Willow and Gingko, have academic programs focused on Southeast Asian studies. Gingko University offers minors in Southeast Asian Studies and Philippines studies, while Willow University offers language courses in Cambodian and Vietnamese and employs a visiting Southeast Asian Studies professor. The greater resources and organization dedicated to serving Southeast Asian college students, the more students will participate in utilizing resources geared towards them.

Implications and Further Research Suggestions

The findings have shown how APIDA mentorship programs play a significant role in how Southeast Asian college students experience a sense of belonging and the impact it has on them in their upperclassmen years. Through involvement in their underclassmen years, the

benefits and outcomes continue to influence the interviewee's success and feelings of acceptance. While sense of belonging may be defined as one definition or framework, it incorporates the four components of sense of belonging: identification with the university, social match, social acceptance, and cultural capital in higher education. The stories and memories shared demonstrate that all four components interact with each other and are not siloed. All four components contribute to the holistic well-being and sense of belonging of all college students, not just specifically Southeast Asians.

Post interviews, I decided to look at the mission statement and goals of the mentorship programs that were introduced to me. Language around college transition, community, and sense of belonging were common in the goals of the program. For example, UConn's AsACC mentorship program mission states, "To provide students in their first year on campus with support and resources to successfully adapt to the academic, co-curricular, personal, and social rigors of college, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to persist during the remainder of their college experience." Similarly, UCLA's United Khmer Students intern program highlights its goals of providing the chance for individuals to learn more about the organization, its history, and to engage in various social, cultural, and professional programming and development.

When framing this thesis and its research questions, I wanted to specifically address the gaps in resources for Southeast Asian college students. Drawing back to the literature review that discusses the low educational attainment rates amongst Southeast Asian ethnic groups, there is an apparent need for analyzing and disaggregating the impact of college resources, and whether they fully address the needs of Southeast Asian college students. Some of the participants shared the impact of the East Asian hegemony, particularly when

navigating resources as Southeast Asian college students. Developed by Antonio Gramsci, cultural hegemony refers to the dominance of a social or ethnic group in which their values, norms, and cultural views influence the larger panethnic group (Gramsci 1916, Espiritu, 1992). While no questions directly asked about cultural hegemony or, in this case, East Asian hegemony, students were asked what they would want to see improved in the mentorship program. When talking with Hua, he shares about the lack of visibility of representation beyond East Asia. He goes on and shares, “While the center does its best in providing representation of the different ethnic groups, there’s still an unsaid narrative of how dominant East Asian culture is. People aren’t jumping to consume Vietnamese culture compared to Korean culture.” Similarly, Niki reflects on the contrasting experience as one of the few Indonesian-Americans on Tufts’ campus. Her positionality as an Indonesian-American is apparent in her time at Tufts. Niki states, “Sometimes I’m still in awe at how different my experience is from those of Chinese-Americans or international students from Indonesia. I see the differences in our socioeconomic realities, which makes me feel not seen.”

Contrary to the experience of Hua and Niki, when provided the chance to engage in resources geared towards their specific ethnicity or towards Southeast Asian students, it gives the chance to succeed and utilize resources that best align with cultural and ethnic values. In the narrative of Junia, her participation in UKS’ internship program allowed her the chance to grow and better understand her identity as a Teochew-Cambodian American. Through the support of the organization, she was able to hold the role of Co-Culture Night Director and produce a show that honors both the cultural roots of Cambodian and Teochew-Cambodian identity.

Through this research, stories of acceptance and community amongst Southeast Asian college students have illuminated the importance of APIDA mentorship programs. Their stories bridge college theories into practice. Going back to the initial brainstorming stage of the thesis and drawing from conversations with my interviewees, I suggest two further research topics to further the research regarding Southeast Asian college students and the Southeast Asian Diaspora.

The first suggestion is to analyze specific ethnic groups amongst the Southeast Asian diaspora. While four different ethnic groups were represented, there are still seven remaining countries of Southeast Asia not represented, along with the hundreds of ethnic groups located in the region. Students with backgrounds from countries like Singapore, Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia are not represented in the demographic of students I interviewed. Similar to East Asian hegemony, Southeast Asian hegemony can be applied if research focuses on a few countries, rather than the overall panethnicity of Southeast Asia. Conducting and presenting research that focuses on the experiences of specific ethnic groups amongst the Southeast Asian diaspora will present a counter-narrative to the model minority myth, as it will provide more data disaggregation amongst the Southeast Asian diaspora.

When comparing common themes, interviewees with the same ethnic background expressed shared feelings, motivation, and factors for succeeding in their institution. Channary shares, “We Khmer people come from a background of resilience and survival. We have to honor that.” Interviewing Mara, she reiterates the same message that Channary shared, despite these two students attending institutions on opposite coasts. This shared feeling and common motivation factor illustrate the influence of specific ethnic group feelings and motivational factors, especially amongst second and third generation groups.

Therefore, further research can explore how specific ethnic groups like Cambodian, Filipino, or Lu-Mien navigate and experience a sense of belonging to their specific ethnicity.

The second recommended study for further research examines the role of staff and faculty in shaping a sense of belonging amongst Southeast Asian college students. Originally, one of the potential topics to explore within this thesis was analyzing the role of staff and faculty who interact with the APIDA community and identify as APIDA. When asked if the interviewees formed strong relationships with members of their institution, a few students talked about the relationships they had formed with staff members. In the case of all six participants from UConn, the bonds they formed with the AsACC staff were highlighted. Exploring how meaningful connections with staff and faculty allow further research on the importance of mentorship from staff and faculty of shared ethnic and/or racial background.

When planning and designing programming and events for APIDA mentorship programs, it's important to consider whether the framing of the program or event allows for all the groups under the APIDA diaspora to be included. One of the biggest pieces of feedback interviewees provided was creating a program that is inclusive of the various ethnic groups under the APIDA label, but also connected with other social identities, like first-generation low-income, LGBTQ+, or of multiracial heritage. Creating programs that highlight the intersectionality of various social identities creates space for students to be accepted historically, not just for their ethnicity or racial groups.

CONCLUSION

In the solemn times when my father would talk about his journey in surviving the Cambodian Genocide, he would always end it with the same message. He would tell me, “កាកា (Kaka), education will always be the key to success. You must never forget how far education will take you.” Finishing up a graduate degree in education and a thesis focused on the educational experiences of Southeast Asian college students, it leaves me with an intense feeling of honor. Fifty-one years ago, the Khmer Rouge took power and targeted those who were educated. People like my grandfather, who was a high school professor, lost their lives because they were educated. Now, I have the privilege and honor of continuing in the field of education and honoring the millions of Cambodians who lost their lives for reasons like being simply educated.

The feeling of honor and legacy were not feelings I just felt; they were feelings all my participants shared. We all shared the joy and honor of being able to be in spaces that were not originally intended for us. As we continue to see the headlines that call for the end of DEI and resources geared towards marginalized students, it's imperative to keep believing in the good that will follow. Drawing from the East Coast Asian American Student Union's 2024 conference theme, Resistance is Joy, we must continue to be joyful. Our refusal to have moments of joy stripped from us in the face of both internal and external challenges for the Asian American and Pasifika communities is an act of resistance.

I look back at all the moments of joy that I've gotten to experience because of culturally affirming spaces. Memories of laughing with my college friends in our club's office, dancing the Coconut Dance in front of people across the country at Sabaidee Fest, and simply listening to people share how they intentionally make space to share Southeast Asian

culture, whether it be through culture nights or general body meetings, are all acts of joy. They remind us that we are all capable of resisting through the act of joy and honoring our cultures. As I finish writing this thesis and reflecting on what's to come next, I think back to what many of our parents dreamed about when coming to America. The dreams of a better future and to continue to be proud of their culture. Whatever may come next, I hope that the feelings of honor, joy, and legacy will continue to be with us.

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APPENDIX A:

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Re: Research Study Participation: Southeast Asian College Students' Participation in APIDA-College Mentorship Programs

Hello, my name is Erika K. Pen (she/they). I am a master's student in the Higher Education in Student Affairs Program at Salem State University. My faculty advisor is Dr. Vu Tran. I am a graduate assistant for the Center for Justice and Liberation at Salem State and the Program Assistant for UMass Lowell's Asian American Center for Excellence and Engagement.

I am conducting a research study examining the impacts of APIDA college mentorship programs on Southeast Asian students. For this study, I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

1. Be of Southeast Asian descent
2. Enrolled in an undergraduate program in the United States
3. Currently an upperclassman (junior or senior).
4. Participated in an APIDA mentorship program during your first year at your current institution.
5. At least 18 and under the age of 25.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and includes:

1. An interview on Zoom that will take approximately one-half hour to one hour.
2. In addition, you will be asked for permission to record the interview on Zoom. You may still participate in the interview if you decline to be audiotaped.
3. Signing a consent form to participate in the research study.

If you meet the eligibility criteria and this study interests you, please email me at e_pen@salemstate.edu. Participants will hear back regarding their status in the study within one week, and they will be sent the consent form and booking link. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at e_pen@salemstate.edu.

Thank You!

Best,

Erika K. Pen

APPENDIX B

STUDENT PARTICIPANT SCREENING FORM

- First Name/ Preferred Name:
- Last Name:
- Pronouns:
- What college do you currently attend?
- Current Enrolled Year:
 - [] 3rd Year/ Junior
 - [] 4th Year/ Senior
 - [] 5th Year
- E-Mail Address:
- Ethnic Identity/ies:
- Immigration Generation:
 - [] 1.5 Generation (you immigrated to the United States at a young age)
 - [] 2nd Generation (you were born in the United States, your parents/family/caretakers immigrated to the United States.
 - [] 3rd Generation (your parents/family/caretakers were born in the United States, and your grandparents immigrated to the United States)
 - [] 4th Generation (your parents and grandparents were both in the United States, and your great-grandparents immigrated to the United States)
- What is the highest degree completed by your first parent/caretaker?
 - 12th Grade or lower
 - High School Diploma/GED
 - Some college but no degree
 - Associate Degree
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Graduate/Professional Degree (ex, master's, doctorate, MD, JD, etc.)
- What is the highest degree completed by your second parent/caretaker? (optional)
 - 12th Grade or lower
 - High School Diploma/GED

- Some college but no degree
- Associate Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate/Professional Degree (ex, master's, doctorate, MD, JD, etc.)
- Did you participate in an APIDA-g geared college mentorship program in your first year at your current institution (either as an incoming freshman or first-year transfer student)?
 - Yes
 - No

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF STUDY: *Now You SEA Us: A Look at APIDA College Mentorship Programs in Shaping Sense of Belonging for Southeast Asian Students*

You are asked to participate in a research study by Erika K. Pen, a graduate student at Salem State University. You were selected as a participant in this project because you are of Southeast Asian descent, are between 18 and 25 years old, currently enrolled at a college/university in the United States as an undergraduate student in your upperclassmen year (junior or senior), and have participated in an APIDA-g geared mentorship program in your first year at your current institution.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study assesses how APIDA mentorship programs assist in the development of a sense of belonging at an institution for Southeast Asian college students.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this research project, you will be asked to complete an initial screening form to provide demographic and contact information. After completing the initial screening form, the principal investigator will reach out to schedule an interview and send over the consent form.

Interviews will be semi-structured, face-to-face, and one-on-one, and will occur over Zoom. The interviews will take approximately one hour.

The choice to proceed will be entirely yours, and your participation always remains voluntary.

In addition, you will be asked for permission to record the interview on Zoom. You may still participate in the interview if you decline to be audiotaped.

v. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The researcher does not foresee that persons who participate in this study will experience any risks, harm, or discomfort beyond those minimal risks encountered in day-to-day life. Should you, the participant, feel uncomfortable with any of the questions asked during the interview, or the feelings raised by those questions, you may, of course, decline to answer them. You may also terminate the interview or your involvement in the study at any time.

vi. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

No direct benefits will be accrued to the research subjects. However, data from the study may shed light on the benefits of an APIDA-oriented mentorship program. In highlighting these challenges, colleges and universities may be better informed in terms of developing resources to help Southeast Asian college students.

vii. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Your real name will not be used in any write-up. Your identity and data collected will be kept confidential; a pseudonym (false name) will be used in place of your real name in any written, disseminated works. If you choose, you may edit all the material of your interview.

AUDIO-TAPE RECORDING AND DATA STORAGE: The choice of whether the interview is tape-recorded is yours alone. If an audiotape is used for the interview, it will be kept in a private file, accessed only by the investigator, and the tape will be erased or destroyed upon transcription. The data will be stored in the private domains of the principal investigator indefinitely, and no one other than the research investigator will have access to the data at any time.

viii. **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATOR**

At any time, if you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Erika Pen, at (978) 954-4322, or by e-mail: e_pen@salemstate.edu. You may also contact the faculty supervisor, Dr. Vu Tran, at vtran@salemstate.edu.

ix. **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You also may refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise that warrant doing so.

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because you participate in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Institutional Review Board, Sponsored Programs and Research Administration, Salem State University, 352 Lafayette Street, Administration Building, Second Floor, Room 202, Salem, MA 01970, (978) 542-7556 or (978) 542-2480.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT

Please check the appropriate box below and initial:

x. I agree to be recorded during my interview.

xi. I do not agree to be during my interview.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I have explained the research to the subject and answered their questions. They understand the information described in this document and freely consent to participate.

Name of Investigator

Signature of Investigator

Date *(must be the same as the research subject's)*

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions Regarding Mentorship Program

1. What is the name of the mentorship program you participated in?
2. How did you discover the mentorship program?
3. What made you want to participate in the mentorship program?

Questions Regarding an Individual's Experience with the Mentorship Program: Sense of Belonging

4. Describe yourself before participating in this APIDA mentorship program. What were your thoughts and feelings entering college?
5. To what extent has participation in the APIDA mentorship program helped you feel more connected to your campus community?
6. To what extent has participation in the mentorship program helped you feel more connected with other Southeast Asian college students?
7. In what ways did participating in this program connect your identity and heritage as a Southeast Asian individual?
8. Through this program, were you able to connect with other Southeast Asian geared resources (ex, faculty, student organizations, external resources)?
9. Are there any programs or initiatives you participate in now that you were introduced to during your time with the mentorship program?
 - a. If so, what are those programs or initiatives?
10. What were some meaningful relationships you made in this program? Were they with your mentor, other participants in the program, staff, or other campus partners?

11. Do you feel that participating in an APIDA-oriented mentorship program has created a safe space at your institution?
 - a. If so, how so?
12. Compared to earlier years in college, do you feel more confident navigating campus spaces as a Southeast Asian student? How did the mentorship program contribute to this?
13. Do you feel better equipped to navigate cultural challenges (e.g., microaggressions, identity conflicts, stereotypes) because you participated in the program?
14. What aspects of the mentorship program were most influential in supporting your continuation at the university?

Wrap Up Questions

15. As an upperclassman now, what is the most valuable takeaway from your experience in the APIDA mentorship program?
16. Why do you think APIDA-oriented mentorship programs are important as a resource for incoming Southeast Asian first-year and transfer students?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to share or discuss that wasn't talked about prior?