PATHWAYS AND EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS IN CALIFORNIA

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father whose love and sacrifice for his children are unfathomable.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the instructors who taught the 17 courses that were part of this doctoral program. Collectively, they have broadened my understanding of the issues pertinent to higher education leadership, student success, and equity. I enjoyed the rigor of academic discourse that each of them brought to the classroom.

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A special thanks to my friend, Dr. LeAnn Fong-Batkin, for her editing of the dissertation when it was still in draft form.

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Over the past three years, the 12 hours of required class attendance every other weekend at the CSU Sacramento campus, coupled with many late nights spent on writing papers, conducting research, and completing this dissertation, was taxing on my family. The numerous hours spent on school work meant an equal number of hours that I did not get to spend with my family. To my wife and two adorable children, Catherine and Ryan, I offer my deepest love and extend my regrets for not partaking in certain family events. I hope to make it up, now that this segment of my schooling is complete.
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Abstract

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This qualitative phenomenological study examined the experiences, events, and circumstances that affected the ascension of Asian Americans to the community college presidency in California. Through in-depth, conversational interviews, the researcher recaptured the rich personal, professional, and cultural stories shared by each of the seven current Asian American presidents. At the time of this writing, the seven Asian American college presidents represented only six percent of all college presidents in the California community college system. A fundamental question that guided this study is why do Asian Americans, despite their recognized success in academia, have the lowest representation of all ethnic groups at the presidential level in higher education? What discrimination, if any, did Asian Americans experience in their quest to become a college president? By exploring the pathways, experiences, and situations of the seven sitting Asian American presidents, the aim is to discover whether these Asian Americans, given their racial identity, encountered any unfair treatment in their ascension to the presidency.

The study utilized the Critical Race Theory and glass ceiling model as a lens to
examine the under-representation of Asian American educators at the top executive level. The stories, as told by these seven Asian American presidents, revealed that while they had encountered some form of racial discrimination in their personal lives and professional careers, those challenges however did not impede their attainment of the presidency. Instead, the findings revealed this select group of Asian American educators was determined to excel in their careers and managed to overcome certain racial micro-aggressions and stereotypes through persistence, hard-work, and other values imparted upon them by their bicultural identity.

Contrary to the common belief that the paths to the college presidency for Asian Americans are hindered by some degree of institutional barriers and racism, the accounts by these seven Asian American presidents suggest that personal factors, including but not limited to communication styles, leadership qualities, personal comfort, family consideration, and tolerance for failure are the reasons for the under representation of Asian Americans at the top administrative echelon in higher education. What emerged from the study is a model of the pathway to the college presidency; a model that incorporates both the glass ceiling theory and critical race theory. The study concluded with a list of recommended actions that Asian Americans aspiring to become college presidents can take to increase their representation at presidential level. The recommendations contain implications of transformational leadership and public policy.

This study contributes to the paucity of literature on Asian American leadership in higher education and highlights the values of a diversified college administrative team.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

According to statistics published by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (2012), California’s community college system enrolled approximately 2.3 million students at its 112 campuses during the 2011-2012 school year. The overarching mission of the California community college, as established by the State Legislature through the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, is to provide admission to any California student capable of benefiting from instruction. To that end, the college has set up a simple enrollment process to admit all interested students. Among the academic programs provided by the colleges are two-year Associate of Arts (AA) degrees, vocational program certificates, and a transfer curriculum to four-year universities. Collectively, students enrolled in these three programs are considered “degree seekers”, who represent about 60% of the community college student population. The remaining number of students are enrolled in non-degree courses such as remedial instruction, English as a Second Language, adult noncredit instruction, community service and workforce training.

Data pertaining to community college racial and ethnic populations show that Hispanic students constitute about 36% of community college attendees in California (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2012). This is followed by White students at 31%. Students of Asian descent, including Filipino and Pacific Islander, represent a little over 15% of the community college student population, or 351,731
students. African American students comprise about 8%. Students of multi-ethnic groups and unknown nationalities make up the remaining racial representation.

The demographics for community college faculty and staff, however, do not parallel with that of the students. When looking at the ethnic make-up of the California community college faculty and administration, the figure for Asian Americans is considerably low. The number of tenured and tenure-track faculty in the California community college system who are Asian American is only 9%, accordingly to the state chancellor’s office. The number for Asian American educational administrators is at 8%. But even lower is the number of Asian American chief executive officers (CEOs) who serve as college presidents or district chancellors. A tally of all college presidents who preside over the 112 individual colleges and the chancellors or superintendents who lead the 72 college districts reveals that only 7 of these CEOs are Asian American. That means within the community college system, Asian American CEOs account for only 4%.

When comparing the percentage of Asian American community college CEOs to that of Asian American students enrolled in California community colleges, there is a profound discrepancy in terms of proportional representation by this ethnic group: 4% of Asian American CEOs versus 15% Asian American students. This ethnic representation is in sharp contrast to all other major ethnic groups and reveals a level of inequity. For example, while there are only 31% of White students, CEOs who are White totals 60%. The 8% African American student population is represented by 10% CEOs who are of
the same race. The representation for Hispanics is less proportionate as the 36% Hispanic study body is represented by 16% CEOs who are Latino/a. Still, the ratio of Hispanic students and Hispanic CEOs is higher than the ratio between Asian American students and Asian American CEOs at California community colleges. These figures speak for themselves: Asian American college students in California are inequitably represented in regards to college presidents who share the language and/or culture as they do.

The California Community College system enrolls a sizable population of the total college attendees in the United States. Data published in 2011 by the National Center for Education Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education show that in 2009 there were 20.4 million students enrolled in post secondary degree granting institutions in the United States. During the same school year, the California community colleges enrolled nearly 3 million students at their 112 campuses. In other words, for every 10 college students in the U.S., more than one of them attends a community college in California. While severe budget reductions in California have forced college campuses to reduce course offerings and turn away students, thereby gradually decreasing the number of college attendees in recent years, the 2.3 million students during the 2011-12 school year still represents about one-tenth of the total student population in the U.S. With this substantial number of students, the California community college system is unquestionably the largest single higher education entity in the country, and arguably the world. The sheer magnitude of this higher learning system and the important role it plays in California’s economy and communities throughout the state deserve attention and
research. In fact, studies (Moore & Shulock 2007, 2010) conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, a non-profit research institute in California, suggest that the future of California’s economy depends heavily on the education and training provided by the California community college.

For these 112 community college campuses and 72 districts to function effectively and efficiently in providing students with successful academic programs and vocational training, they must be led by capable and competent CEOs who understand the diverse needs of its multi-cultural student body. It is believed that college CEOs with culturally diverse backgrounds can bring their multiple perspectives to the campus, thereby enabling their faculty and students to be exposed to various opinions, viewpoints, and ways of thinking. This is shown through a number of studies by researchers discussed in the following section. Through their lived experiences and cultural differences, bicultural leaders can also serve as role models to faculty, staff and students who share similar cultural values and beliefs. To better serve and respond to the communities surrounding a college campus, the institution is better served if it recruits, selects, and retains CEOs who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the students who attend the respective community college.

**Diversity in Higher Education**

The benefits that diversity brings to a learning environment can be found in the existing body of knowledge pertaining to higher education. Associations of higher learning such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American
Council on Education (ACE), and Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) have suggested that institutions with rich diversity benefit both the students and campus environment because diversity enriches the students’ educational experience and contributes to their personal growth. Specifically, ASHE’s Higher Education Report (2007) states:

Diversity promotes the importance of incorporating difference in building cohesive institutional arrangements that address structural barriers and organizational cultures that limit opportunities for members of ethnic and racial minority groups. Leadership is very important to diversity because it has the potential for developing and implementing practices in organizational culture that are inclusive of diversity (p. vii).

Similarly, Nevarez and Borunda (2006) suggest that students are exposed to multiple opinions, viewpoints, and ways of thinking if the campus at which they study has a diverse array of faculty and administrators who offer varying perspectives. In a study that surveys a substantial number of community colleges on racial relations, Kee (1999) concludes that a more harmonious campus climate can be achieved if the faculty and administrative staff are diversified. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy” to suggest that students can be enabled and empowered intellectually, socially, and emotionally if educators can build a bridge that connects with the student’s shared backgrounds, experiences and knowledge.

Given these and other studies on diversity in higher education, Asian American administrators, like other ethnic groups, could greatly contribute to higher education administration through the stories, experiences, and perspectives they bring to a community college.
Statement of the Problem

Asian Americans at California community colleges are dismally underrepresented in terms of educational leaders who share the same language, culture and/or values. The current 4% Asian-American CEOs at California’s community colleges does not proportionately represent the 15% Asian-American students attending the 112 college campuses in the state. The disproportionately ethnic representation suggests a degree of inequity in the nation’s largest higher education system. Why is there such a low representation of Asian Americans in top administrative positions in the California community college system? Are there structural and racial barriers that Asian-American educators experience as they aspire to ascend to the college’s highest position? If so, what are some of the avenues they can take to overcome those obstacles? The intent of this study is to examine the career paths of Asian Americans holding chief executive positions at California’s community colleges, namely the president of a community college campus. The research will look specifically at the professional training, personal qualities, and prior positions of seven current presidents in the California community college system to understand the patterns and practices instrumental to their attainment of the top position. In addition, attempts will be made to inquire about the experiences they have had as an Asian American candidate for the college presidency and in their role as an Asian American college CEO; and whether their experiences – either positive or negative – may be a result of their racial identity. It is hoped that the qualitative data collected through personal interviews of these educational chief executives will yield rich descriptions which may be useful to those Asian American educators who hold
presidential ambitions. To that end, this study will contribute to the scant collection of research about Asian Americans in higher education administration.

**Nature of the Study**

The existing body of literature on Asian Americans in higher education is rather limited. Even more scant is the literature on California’s community college and the leadership role that Asian Americans hold. Because of the low number of Asian Americans holding chief executive positions in educational institutions, not much has been written about them. While several research studies and doctoral dissertations have attempted to explore the reasons why so few Asian American educators hold administrative positions or reach the pinnacle of higher education administration, none has looked specifically at the Asian American CEOs in the California Community College system.

One reason that may explain the limited number of Asian Americans holding senior administrative positions may be the racial discrimination that is ingrained in the American social structure, or more specifically the higher educational system in the United States, thereby impeding any lateral movement by this specific racial group. Other reasons may be that because of other cultural, linguistic, and personal factors, Asian Americans choose not to become college presidents. The college presidency entails numerous complex responsibilities, and Asian Americans may be content to be in a low-key, stable position that pays well while allowing them the time flexibility to be with their family. Whatever the reason may be, the undisputed fact that so few Asian
Americans are presidents of postsecondary learning institutions is a worthy topic to explore, particularly if equity, justice, and fairness are qualities that educators across America wish to seek.

This research project involves a qualitative inquiry which consists of one-on-one interviews with the current seven Asian American CEOs at seven different college campuses throughout California. Merriam (2002) suggests that qualitative research is appropriate to use when attempting to understand meaning through the research participants’ world experiences and that existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon. The researcher in qualitative inquiry research is the primary instrument in collecting the data, and end-products are richly descriptive (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002 and).

The process of collecting data through qualitative research, according to Creswell (2009), involves observations, interviews, and review of existing documents or audio/visual materials. Applying Creswell’s suggestion, the research interview will be conducted in the office of each individual college president. These personal interviews and intensive observations will examine the factors that have propelled them to the highest position at their respective colleges. A series of 10 open-ended questions will be posed to the each college president. The open-ended questions, including other necessary probing follow-up questions, seek to find answers to three research questions that will guide study. The three research questions are:
1. What circumstances, preparation, and strategies have helped Asian Americans to become college presidents?
2. What positive and negative experiences have Asian Americans encountered in their journey to become college presidents?
3. Why are Asian Americans underrepresented at the top executive level in higher education?

Descriptions on the research methodology and how data will be collected from the research participants will be discussed in Chapter Three.

**Theoretical Framework**

The under-representation of Asian Americans leaders in education is a phenomenon that has been examined through a number of theoretical lenses and conceptual frameworks. Chief among them is the Critical Race Theory (CRT). As noted by Derrick Bell, Maria Matuda, Patricia Williams, and other legal scholars who first championed the idea of CRT, racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society. Those who embrace CRT theorize that the American society’s power structures are based on white privileges and white supremacy. This position of dominance by the white population, argues CRT theorists, is what perpetuates the marginalization of people of color (UCLA 2012). Richard Delgado, a legal scholar from Seattle University School of Law and considered one of the founders of CRT, co-authored a primer on critical race theory along with his wife Jean Stefancic. In their book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define CRT as a
movement by activists and scholars who study and transform the relationship between race and power. A unique dimension of critical race theory, unlike other academic disciplines, is that it contains an activist dimensions. As such, CRT not only tries to understand our social organization and the racial lines and hierarchies that exist, but it seeks to transform them for the better. In this context, CRT can be considered a social movement, similar to the civil rights movement that existed in the United States half a century ago.

Originally a movement in the law, CRT has spread to include other disciplines. Within education, CRT helps to frame and understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, controversies over curriculum, IQ and achievement test (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Furthering the discourse of critical race theory in education are the works by Gloria J. Ladson-Billings of the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education, Danny Solórzano of UC Los Angeles, and Tara Yosso of UC Santa Barbara. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory (CRT) to education and explained CRT can be a conceptual framework to understand the educational inequity in the U.S. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) posit that the subordinate and dominant racial positions inside and outside of the classroom can be understood through the critical race lens.

Initially a theoretical lens that distinguishes racial discrimination into a black and white binary focus, CRT has since evolved to cover other ethnic minority groups, such as Latino, Native American, and Asians. Thus, the acronyms LatCrit, TribalCrit, and
AsianCrit refer to Latino/a critical race studies, Tribal American critical race studies, and Asian critical races studies, respectively.

A number of Asian American scholars have expanded CRT to address the racial discrimination faced specifically by Asian Americans. Thus, an offshoot of CRT that applies to Asian Americans is the Asian American critical race studies, or AsianCrit as it is often referenced. Legal scholar Robert Chang (1993) finds that within the critical race context, Asian Americans are perpetually considered “foreigner” because of their Asian physical appearance and because they are subject to some form of nativistic racism in their lifetime. Teranishi (2002) finds that Asian minorities, specifically Filipinos and Chinese, are victims of overt and covert racial stereotyping. Because Asian Americans consist of 21 different nationalities, scholars (Escueta and O’Brien, 1995; and Siu, 1996; Liu, 2009) have urged us to separate this racial population into individual subgroups when discussing the triumphs and misfortunes of each ethnic group. They contend that when one or two Asian American nationalities (e.g. Chinese or Japanese) excel in academics and/or the work place, they are considered a “model minority”. But that stereotype cannot be applied to all Asian American groups, because in reality not all Americans of Asian descent have the same capacity to excel. Such a generalization only does injustice to the Asian American population.

The glass ceiling theory is another conceptual framework that scholars have used to examine the under-representation of Asian Americans in leadership positions. The glass ceiling, as defined by The U.S. Department of Labor (1991), is the artificial barriers
based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals, including those who are non-White, from ascending to management positions. Primarily relevant to explaining the under-representation of females in senior administrative positions, the theory has recently been applied to understand the shortage of Asian Americans in leadership levels in organizations across America, including higher education. The glass ceiling, when referring to Asian Americans, is often used synonymously with “bamboo ceiling”. The two terms are often used interchangeably to refer to the same idea. In 1997, when Renu Khator was named president of the University of Houston, Texas’ third largest public university, many observers claimed she had cracked the “bamboo ceiling” because she was the first Indian American to have achieved such a distinguished executive position.

Both the glass ceiling theory and CRT, particularly its offshoot AsianCrit, are relevant theoretical frameworks to understand the limited representation of Asian Americans in higher education leadership. This research attempts to explore, through the lived experiences and perceptions of sitting Asian American leaders, the under-representation of Asian Americans at the most senior level in higher education and the potential of bias in their journey toward their current positions.

**Operational Definitions**

The term *Asian American* used in this research encompasses 21 different nationalities, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2013). Americans who are born or

In addition, Americans of Asian descent have often been referred to as Asian Pacific American (APA) or Asian-American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) to encompass those born on the tiny islands of the Pacific Ocean. Very few Americans originate from those islands and none of the seven college presidents participating in this study is a Pacific Islander. Therefore, the term Asian American is used instead.

A California community college is defined as one of the 112 two-year degree and certificate granting institutions within the California community college system funded by the state’s taxpayers.

Chancellor is the title attributed to the highest position of a college district that encompasses two or more campuses and has executive authority over the district. The chancellor reports to the local governing Board of Trustees. At the time of writing, there is no Asian American serving in the chancellorship at any of the 72 districts.

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is the highest position at a community college campus or community college district with executive authority over the college or district. The term can be used to refer to a president at a college campus, superintendent of a college single college district, or chancellor of a district.
**Critical Race Theory** is a conceptual framework that theorizes racism is engrained in America’s society and in such a society, the white Caucasian population is more favored and empowered than any other ethnic group.

**Forever Foreigner or Perpetual Foreigner** is a term attributed to Asian Americans who despite being 2nd, 3rd, or 4th generation Americans, are still considered “foreign” due to their Asian physical appearance. Americans of European descent are less likely to be considered forever foreigner because their physical appearance aligns more with the Caucasian population.

**Glass Ceiling** is a term used to describe women and members of ethnic and racial minority groups who face unofficially acknowledged barriers to advancement in a profession. When applied to Asian Americans, the term is used synonymously with bamboo ceiling.

**Model Minority** is a term attributed to a minority ethnic or racial group whose members achieve a higher degree of success than the average population. Because a few Asian nationalities (e.g. Chinese, Vietnamese, or Japanese) excel in both schools and the work place, the term is often used to describe all Americans of Asian descent, which in reality may not be accurate.

**President** is the titled attributed to the highest position at a community college with executive authority over the individual campus and reports to a district chancellor. At the time of this research, there are five Asian American presidents presiding over five individual colleges.
**Superintendent/President** is the title attributed to the highest position of a college district that has only one college campus. The superintendent/president has executive authority over the district and college, and reports directly to the local governing Board of Trustees. At the time of this research, there are two Asian American superintendents/presidents.

**Limitations**

This study examines the career pathways and professional experiences of the current Asian American presidents at two-year community colleges in California. At the time of this writing, there are only seven college presidents who are Asian American. Thus, the pathways and experiences expressed by the research participants are only their own perspectives and may not necessarily reflect the pathways and experiences of other Asian Americans. As noted previously, there are 21 nationalities that constitute Asian Americans. As such, the experience of a Chinese American may be vastly different from that of an Indian American or a Filipino American.

Additionally, the seven research participants in this study is a small sampling and is only limited to two-year degree granting institutions in the State of California. The mission and focus of a two-year educational institution, and therefore the dynamics that exist within the college, may be different from that of a four-year university, either public, private and/or for-profit. Therefore, any generalization of the pathways, experiences and perspectives from this limited sampling must be done with caution.
Moreover, the research seeks to draw from the participants their experiences, ideas, comments, and opinions as vocalized in their own words and recorded on audio-recording devices. Since college CEOs are very measured with their own words and typically exercise caution when making public statements, it is very likely that they may refrain from expressing their true opinions and exact thoughts to the interview questions, particularly on sensitive issues such as race, discrimination, and barriers. Again, any interpretation of the comments made by the participants must be done with an understanding of context and careful consideration.

**Significance of the Study**

Through this in-depth examination of all sitting Asian American presidents within the California community college system, it is hoped that the study will contribute to the scant literature on Asian Americans in higher education in a number of ways. The under-representation of Asian Americans at the highest level of education administration is a phenomenon yet to be fully explored. Why, despite the achievements and successes of Asian Americans in most categories, is there such a limited number Americans of Asian descent serving in executive positions? Are there structural barriers within the educational system that impede their ascension to the leadership level? Likewise, do personal factors and cultural values that Asian Americans maintain prevent them from attaining the top position of a community college? These are some of the questions this research project seeks to answer. An examination into how the seven Asian American
presidents in this study have successfully attained the presidency may have significant relevance to the study of leadership in higher education.

It is also hoped that findings from this research, as seen through the career pathways and practices employed by these seven successful Asian Americans, can inform other Asian American educators who aspire to become a college president some day. The current slate of presidents, superintendents, and chancellors in the community college system are mostly of the baby-boomer era; and many are expected to retire within the next 5-7 years, according to Nancy Shulock of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy (2010). When this happens, vacancies of the top positions at the colleges must be filled, and they can possibly be filled by Asian American educators who are prepared and qualified. The stories and experiences shared by the seven sitting Asian American presidents through this research can be lessons from which other aspiring Asian Americans can glean. If this research does nothing else, it should, at the very least, bring attention to the phenomenon that Asian Americans are woefully absent at the highest leadership level in higher administration.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the community college and the role it plays in higher education. The importance that diversity brings to the educational environment and how it benefits the student’s overall learning experience has been noted by scholars. The under-representation of Asian American leaders at California community colleges
stands in contrast to the campus diversity that scholars in educations have encouraged. Is the low representation of Asian Americans at the leadership level a pure coincidence or a result of structural barriers ingrained within the educational system? Several conceptual frameworks, including Critical Race Theory and Glass Ceiling Theory, are provided to examine this inequitable phenomenon.

The remaining chapters of this research are structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature and summarizes the findings that scholars and researchers have uncovered on the topic of the Asian American leadership gap in higher education. Chapter 3 explains how this study will be conducted and provides a profile of the participants who will be interviewed through the phenomenological qualitative inquiry method. Chapter 4 contains the findings derived from interviews with the seven college CEOs and the major themes as decoded from the participants’ responses to the interview and research questions. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the major findings and an interpretation of the findings through the theoretical lenses. Because the overarching goal of the study is to yield lessons that could be enacted to increase the number of Asian American college CEOs, Chapter 5 also offers implications for practice of transformational leadership and public policy, as well as a personal reflection and concluding comment.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter summarizes the existing literature relevant to community colleges and the leadership gap that exists among Asian Americans in higher education. The literature review begins with an overview of the history of community colleges, both in the U.S. and in California. A historical snapshot of the migration by Asians to the United States, as well as the role Asian Americans play in academia, will be provided. The theories that serve as the conceptual framework for this study – The Critical Race Theory (CRT) and glass ceiling – will be discussed. Stereotypes such as forever foreigner and model minority often applied to Asian Americans will also be mentioned.

Overview of Community Colleges in the United States

The American community college can be traced back to the German model of higher education. This model was rooted in the belief that universities should not be burdened with general education that is usually provided during the first two years of undergraduate studies. At the turn of the 20th century, educational leaders such as William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago, David Starr Jordan of Stanford University, and Alexis Lange of the University of California believed that junior college can be the institution where students can obtain the general education and reserve the four-year universities to train those interested in research or advanced degrees.
Community colleges experienced phenomenal growth between 1920 and 1945. After World War I, veterans returning from the war were seeking an education. The four-year institutions were feeling the pressure from the increased interest and could not absorb the high number of applicants who have been unprepared for university-level work. Thus, the community college became the refuge for these students. Brint & Karabel (1989) reported that within the 20-year span from 1920-40, the number of junior colleges in the U.S. grew from 52 to 456, and enrollment increased from 8,102 to 149,845.

Despite the phenomenal growth of community colleges, college educators had to grapple with the negative image that these hybrid institutions were merely an extension of high schools. Four-year universities did not give much consideration to the community colleges because they refused to accept transfer credits from the community colleges. Faced with these serious issues, college educators began to address a major philosophical question: what is the mission of the junior college? Initially, the mission of these two-year community colleges was two-fold: 1) to weed out students with low academic ability, and 2) to promote high achieving students to the 4-year college and university (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Discussions on the college’s mission took place through American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) which was formed in 1920 as a forum for similar concerns or questions. The outcome was a mission focused on providing vocational studies and general education that can transfer to four-year institutions. Those students desiring to obtain only a two-year Associate degree or
program certificate could also do so at the community college and not have to attend a four-year university.

The AAJC eventually changed its name to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) so it could rid itself from the stigma and connotation of being a “junior” in education. Since its founding, the organization has become the leading proponent and the national voice for community colleges. Today, the AACC represents nearly 1,200 community colleges and collectively enroll more than 13 million students in all areas of the United States (AACC 2012).

**Community Colleges in California**

Community colleges in California are shaped by the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education developed by policy-makers who were appointed by the Regents of the University of California (UC) and the California State Board of Education. Led by Clark Kerr, then the President of the UC system the developers of the 1960 Master Plan established a coherent system for post-secondary education and assigned specific roles to the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU) and the California Community Colleges system (CCC). The mission of the California Community Colleges system mirrors that of the community colleges at the national level because it is committed to offering a wide range of educational offerings, including workforce training, basic courses in English and math, certificate and degree programs and preparation for transfer to four-year institutions (California Community College Chancellor Office, 2012). Today, the California Community College system is the
largest system of higher education in the nation, with 2.6 million students attending 112 colleges.

The community colleges in California reflect the state’s diversity, with a student body consisting of approximately 15% Asian Americans, 8% African American, 36% Latino, and 31% White (California Community College Chancellor Office, 2012). The 15% Asian Americans attending the community colleges are similar to the percentage of Asian American population in the State of California. If an equitable and proportional representation of Asian Americans is to be achieved, there should be an equivalent number of Asian Americans amongst the faculty and administrative ranks in the California Community College systems. But regrettably, only 8% of community college faculty are classified as Asian Americans, and only 4% of the chief executive officers (president, superintendent, and chancellor positions) are Asian American. These figures are dismally low compared to the 15% of Asian American student population.

**The Benefits of a Diverse College Campus**

The benefits that diversity brings to a college campus can be found in the existing body of knowledge pertaining to higher education. Milem (2000) posits that both the individuals and institutions gain from greater diversity because a diverse campus: (1) enriches the student’s educational experience, (2) promotes personal growth and a healthy society, (3) strengthens communities and the workplace, and (4) enhances America’s economic competitiveness. Garcia and Moses (2000) found that a campus with more Latino faculty would aid in the recruitment and retention of Latino students.
Nevarez and Borunda (2006) suggest that students are exposed to multiple opinions, viewpoints, and ways of thinking if the campus at which they study has a diverse array of faculty and administrators who offer varying perspectives. In a study that surveys a substantial number of community colleges on racial relations, Kee (1999) concluded that a more harmonious campus climate can be achieved if the faculty and administrative staff are diversified. As informed by the existing body of literature on diversity, an administrator who is Asian American can contribute to the student’s experience and campus climate through his or her live stories, experiences, and perspectives. Ladson-Billings (1992) developed the concept of a “culturally relevant pedagogy” to signify that students can be enabled and empowered intellectually, socially, and emotionally if educators can build a bridge that connects with the student’s shared backgrounds, experiences and knowledge.

**Asian Americans in Senior Administrative Positions**

The shortage of Asian Americans in leadership positions has been reported in both the business world and academia. In an article titled “Study Finds Asians Occupying Few Corner Offices” published in the Wall Street Journal, Stock (2011) found that less than two percent of Asian Americans serve in any administrative position at the Fortune 500 companies. Similarly, Iris Weisman and George Vaughn (2002) reported that Asian Americans represent only 1% of all community college presidents in the U.S.

The limited number of Asian Americans in executive positions can be attributed to several factors. One of them is the perception that Asian Americans are “Forever
Foreigners”, as explained in the writings by Tuan (1999) and Wu (2002). In 1965, during the height of the civil rights movement, the U.S. passed the Immigration and Nationality Act which enabled immigrants with labor skills and family relationships with residents in the U.S. to become American citizens through the naturalization process. Immigrants from major Asian countries with employable skills began to emigrate to the U.S. and found new and promising careers. The conflicts in Indochina which Americans commonly refer to as the Vietnam War from the 1960s through 1975 also paved the way for many Southeast Asians to resettle in the United States. Today, descendants of these Asian Americans are either second or third generations, referring to those whose parents or grandparents were born in the foreign country, respectively. However, these Asian Americans have not being fully accepted as “True Americans” because their Asian appearance does not resemble the white, Caucasian look of the dominant population in the United States.

In a comprehensive study titled *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, sociologist Mia Tuan (1999) captures the experiences of 95 middle-class Asian Americans through personal interviews. She found that unlike white ethnics, racial ethnic minorities over time do not become part of the mainstream. By the color of their skin, hair, and other physical attributes, Asian Americans remain non-white. For instance, the public considers the American born Irish as American, but for Asian Americans their physical appearance marks them as "un-American" even after several generations.
This perception is validated by a 2001 survey on the attitude that Americans have of Chinese and Asian Americans. The landmark survey was conducted by the Yankelovich Partners in collaboration with the Anti-Defamation League and the Marttila Communications Group. The survey of 1,216 Americans randomly polled found that 25% of the general public would feel uncomfortable supporting an Asian American presidential candidate, compared to 15 percent for an African American, 14 percent for a woman and 11 percent for a Jew. As Ted Wang, policy director for Chinese for Affirmative Action in San Francisco, commented, “There is a perception that we are still not American, that we’re the perpetual foreigner. That plays into the distrust of Asian Americans in the context of government and private corporations” (Yi & Kim, 2001).

Whether they are forever foreigner or not, immigrants from Asia must find ways to assimilate and acculturate in the newly adopted American culture and society. According to Levine and Hogg (2009), the term assimilation was originally used to describe the process by which immigrants inevitably gave up their culture of origin for the sake of adopting the mainstream language and culture of their adopted country. Later, scholars adopted the term acculturation to describe the more fundamental process of bidirectional change that occurs when two ethnocultural groups come into sustained contact with each other. Levine and Hogg (2009) suggest that assimilation is only one of the many acculturation strategies that immigrant and national minorities may adopt as they strive to adapt to mainstream society. The notion of acculturation would have applicability to Asian Americans who maintain a bicultural identity.
Another concept that theorizes the shortage of Asian Americans in top administrative posts is the “model minority” stereotype. Asian Americans were first characterized as a model minority group by UC Berkeley sociologist William Pettersen in his essay entitled "Success Story, Japanese American Style" published in the New York Times. In the article, Pettersen (1966) contends that Japanese Americans are better off than any other racial group in the United States. Another article published in the same year in the *U.S and World Report* (1966) portrays Chinese Americans as an industrious, hardworking, uncomplaining group willing to take actions to enhance their lives instead of sitting around and moaning.

Wu (2002) notes both the forever foreigner and minority model in his book describing the racial discrimination that Asian Americans encounter. Wu admits he has been asked multiple times by native Americans the question “Where are you from?” and hates answering it because the question is routinely followed by “Where are you really from?” The questioner in this case wants to imply that Wu is not from the U.S., despite the fact that he was born in the U.S. like the questioner. Wu writes, “More than anything else that unites us, everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome. We are figuratively and even literally returned to Asian and ejected from America,” (p.79). In another section, Wu continues, “…the perpetual foreigner syndrome works to deprive Asian Americans of civil rights and transform us into a racial threat” (p. 95).

Wu despises the model minority myth because it assumes that all Asian Americans have become highly educated and successful through their own hard work and
effort, when in fact it only pertains to a few Asian Americans. He argues that while praising Asian Americans is "complimentary on its face… it is disingenuous at its heart" (p. 49). He believes that Asian Americans become pawns to politicians, often conservative, who use the model minority myth to taunt African-Americans and to deny that Asian Americans are subject to racial discrimination and other civil rights abuses. Paradoxically, this model minority stereotype may have impeded the ascension of Asian Americans and may be a factor in explaining the perception that Asian Americans lack the drive and capacity to assume positions of leadership.

**Asian American Executives in Higher Education**

In examining the number of Asian Americans in higher education in the United States, Cook and Cordova (2006) reported that this population group has made significant strides in college administration as it boasts the highest percentage increase in
administrative positions in a ten-year period. In 1993, Asian Americans in the U.S. holding administrative positions in higher education numbered 2200. But in 2003, the number jumped to 4800, which represents an increase of 114%. Table 2-1 illustrates the percent change within the ten-year period for Asian Americans, as compared to other major ethnic groups.
Table 2-1: Full-Time Administrators in Higher Education in the U.S.

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<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>118,651</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>147,613</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>12,232</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>17,226</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3,580</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>7,006</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>2,243</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>4,813</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>114.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1,064</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Cook & Cordova, 2006)

Despite this significant and impressive increase of Asian-Americans in administrative positions, the number of Asian-Americans holding positions at the presidential and chancellor levels in two-year community colleges is woefully low.

Similarly, in their 2001 research brief, community college researchers Iris Weisman and George Vaughn reported that Asian Americans represent only 1% of all community college presidents in the U.S. (Weisman & Vaughn, 2001).

Community colleges in California, and in the U.S., did not have an Asian American as president until 1977 when Jack Fujimoto was named to the presidency at Sacramento City College (Fujimoto, 1996). In an effort to convey his thoughts as the first Asian American community college president and to call upon other Asian Americans to follow in his footsteps to reach the highest level of educational administration, Fujimoto published “The Community College Presidency: An Asian Pacific American Perspective”. The 1996 article was a major contribution to the limited
literature about Asian Americans in community college administration. In this article, Fujimoto encouraged Asian Americans to come together and create organizational structures and processes that would put qualified leaders in this top position. He noted that given the tremendous growth in students, Asian American leadership in community college is badly needed, and the Asian American community must create an organized pipeline to prepare and qualify future Asian American leaders for senior administrative positions.

In tracking the ascension of Asian American to the CEO positions in higher education, St. Cloud State University President Roy H. Saigo noted that between 1999 and 2009, there was only one president of Asian descent the California State University system, the largest four-year university in the U.S. Writing in 1999, Saigo noted the 22-campus CSU system had 276,054 undergraduates, of whom 53,895, or 19.5%, were Asian-Pacific Americans. Based on that representation, Saigo argued that proportionally there should be four Asian-Pacific American presidents in the system. Even if the 12% Asian population in the State of California is considered, one would expect to see two or three Asian American presidents. Nevertheless, there is only president, and he happens to be from Iran, which by the definition of the U.S. Census Bureau is Asian-Arab.

In his 1999 essay titled “Academe Needs More Leaders of Asian-Pacific Heritage” which appears in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Saigo poignantly asserts, “The one area in which you would not expect Asian-Pacific Americans to be discriminated against, or overlooked, is academe. But, although we are in the classroom
– both in the seats and at the lectern – we are not often found in the dean’s, chancellor’s, or president’s office.” Saigo provided additional statistics to that support his assertion:

The United States is home to 2,294 four-year colleges and universities. If we were to use a strict quota system for college presidents based on the percentage of Asian-Pacific Americans in the population (3.8 percent in 1997), 87 of those institutions should be headed by Asian-Pacific Americans. If we were to base our quota system on the representation of Asian-Pacific Americans on college faculties and professional staffs (4 percent), then there should be 92 presidents from among our ranks. In fact, there are 13. That is about one half of 1 percent (Saigo, 1999).

Saigo concludes, “The facts speak for themselves: although Asian-Pacific Americans represent a significant portion of the population and, as a group, are more successful than most, we are almost invisible in the high-profile positions that normally result from such success” (p. 1). The reason for this phenomenon, Saigo argues, is that for years, the media have subtly suggested that only Americans of European descent are “real” Americans. Thus, this contention aligns with the forever foreigner perception previously noted.

Published in the Diverse Issues in Higher Education, Lum’s (2007) interview with Gregory Chan, provost and chief academic officer at St. Thomas University in Miami, Florida, reveals some major reasons for the lack of Asian Americans in higher education administration. Chan alludes to the fact that many Asians refuse to seek out adventures and take the risk of applying for senior administrative positions. He took the job of provost and chief academic officer at St. Thomas University, a Hispanic-serving institution, as an adventure and was of the mindset that if I don’t fit in, I can also find another job. As an ACE fellow (American Council on Education), Chan believes that
Asian Americans should take advantage of these mentorship programs so they can embolden themselves and expand their networks which can facilitate their ascension to senior administrative positions.

Turner (2007) studied the pathways of three minority female administrators who made history by becoming the “first” female presidents of their respective universities through an article published in the *Harvard Educational Review*. Using her 30-year career in higher education and given her longstanding relationships with scholars from various racial and ethnic groups, Turner was able to interview and shadow the Hispanic, American Indian and Asian American presidents at their respective institutions. Documenting the biographical sketches of these three successful university CEOs, the study reveals that all three took advantage of opportunities to develop their administrative skills and leadership capabilities early in their careers. They had mentors and champions who recognized their talents; and also encouraged, nominated, and pushed them to the next step, ultimately resulting in their achieving the presidency in a four-year college. It is of interest that each of these women first served as presidents of a two-year college on their journey to a four-year college presidency. In addition, these women college presidents gained visibility by stepping out of their comfort zone into new jobs that carried expanded responsibilities.

In addition to peer reviewed journals and other publications, the obstacles that Asian American educators face in their ascension to the top position are also documented in textbooks. Leonard Valverde’s (2003) *Leaders of Color in Higher Education: Unrecognized Triumphs in Harsh Institutions* illustrates the pain that leaders of color,
including Asian Americans, experience in higher education. Valverde is popular among readers of minority groups not only because his book points to the systematic injustices and discrimination in today’s colleges and universities, but because he also advises minority leaders to realize the change they wish to see at the institutions they serve.

Specifically, Valverde encourages new leaders to apply transformational leadership to change their institutions. He writes:

> For a person of color or a woman to be a leader is to be a change agent. To be an agent of change is not to tinker around the margins of the institution; it is to work on the core…to demonstrate leadership they now have to transform campuses. This agenda will continue to be the main purpose of future leaders of color (p. 141).

The scant literature on the causes of the Asian American leadership gap in postsecondary education is augmented by a growing number of doctoral dissertations. Many of these dissertations were completed within the past 12 years. Through a narrative inquiry approach, Wilking (2001) interviewed five Asian American female presidents, provosts, and chancellors to understand the barriers and challenges they faced in their journey to the top positions. The study finds that the traditional Asian American cultural values these Asian American administrators hold were both a positive and negative impact to their ascent to senior administrative levels. Challenges shared by the participants included balancing family and work obligations, dealing with stereotypes about Asians and women, and enduring phases of self-consciousness or self-doubt. Factors that led to their success were: (1) a willingness to take on new challenges, (2) family support, (3) continual development of leadership skills, (4) a "servant" leadership style, (5) a strong work ethic, (6) feeling "lucky" or "fortunate", (7) having a
positive attitude, and (8) self-identification of being "unique" or different from "typical" Asian Americans. While Wilking’s study was informative, it was limited to only Asian American female administrators in different higher educational settings.

Neilson (2002) interviewed ten Asian Americans holding senior administrative positions (deanship and above) to understand the career paths/mobility of Asian Americans in higher education administration. Her study finds that seven out of his ten interviewees held full-time professional positions in higher education prior to their current senior administrative position, nine sought mentorship towards their administrative advancement, and all ten belonged to professional organizations and social networks outside of their position which served as pivotal reference points.

During the same year, Lam (2002) studied six Asian American college and university presidents in California through a structured questionnaire mailed to the participants. The interview questions focused on factors, major events, and inhibitors that affected their ascension to the presidency. Lam identified three major themes that had enabled these Asian Americans to attain their executive positions: 1) positive family influence, particularly from parents’ emphasis on the importance of education, 2) personal confidence and self-esteem, 3) overcoming of cultural stereotypes and myths through hard work.

Somers (2007) explored the experiences and perspectives of five Asian American females who had sought the presidency or vice presidency at community colleges. The researcher found that the five interview participants listed nine factors that were facilitators in the pursuit of career advancement, including: 1) role model, 2) mentor, 3)
leadership training, 4) good luck, 5) educational achievement, 6) mother as role model, 7) biculturalism, 8) strong work ethic, and 9) positive attitude and strength.

While the aforementioned literature explored how some Asian Americans reached their current administrative positions, none is devoted to examining how the seven Asian American presidents in the California Community College system achieved their positions.

Relevance of Critical Race Theory

Scholars have often applied the Critical Race Theory to explain the racial discrimination in the American educational system. With roots in legal studies and originally employed within a Black/White binary, CRT has since expanded to include other fields, including education. In recent years, CRT has been broadened to capture distinct racial identities, including Latina/os (LatCrit), American Indians (TribalCrit), and Asian Americans (AsianCrit).

Applying it to the educational setting, UCLA Education Professor Daniel Solorzano (1998) suggests that CRT is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that attempts to disrupt racism and dominant racial paradigms that exist in the American educational system. Specifically, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define CRT as “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contributed to the discourse on
education and critical race theory through their seminal work “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” which asserts that race continues to be a significant factor in the U.S., and the inequity across multiple disciplines, including education, can be understood through the lens of race. Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante (2009) posit that Critical Race Theory can be an important tool for developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of specific Asian American ethnic groups and individuals.

The Emergence of Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit)

More recently, a number of Asian American scholars in higher education have expanded CRT to address the racial discrimination faced specifically by Asian Americans, often referred to as Asian Critical Race Theory, or AsianCrit. A contribution to the AsianCrit literature is the work of Law Professor Robert Chang which explores critical race theory in the context of Asian Americans. Chang’s (1993) article affirms the persistent view of Asian Americans as “foreigners”, and this stereotype has had added to the flames of nativistic racism experienced by this population group. For example, an Asian individual who is a U.S. citizen may want to simply be identified as “American,” but regardless of that desire, the person will still look Asian and therefore find it difficult to escape the identity of “Asian American.”

Education scholar Mitchell Chang (1999) examines the educational benefits of having a racially diverse student population. The results published in the Journal of College Student Development indicate that a racially diverse student body has a positive effect on educational outcomes through its effects on diversity-oriented student activities
and experiences. Chang concludes that racial diversity within the context of institutional commitment can optimize racial encounters for both faculty and students.

In his study of two subpopulation groups within the category of Asian American, Teranishi (2002) uses the CRT perspective to deconstruct the conventionally simplified ideas of Asian Americans by exposing the divergent educational and social conditions of Chinese and Filipino students. He finds that both individual subgroups have expressed being victims of overt and covert racial stereotyping. For example, Chinese students were stereotyped as model minorities, whereas Filipino students were stereotyped as delinquents or failures. Teranishi stresses educators must be attentive to the contextual social and institutional realities as different Asian subgroup would experience it differently. Similarly, Escueta and O’Brien (1995) and Siu (1996) argue that the model minority myth is a social construct that aggregates the experiences of all Asian Americans, even though the community is one that is composed of over 25 different ethnic groups with diverse histories, immigration patterns, and cultures.

Liu (2009) concludes that Asian Americans should not be considered as one monolithic group, but rather their educational experiences and outcomes should be disaggregated. Recognizing that Asian Americans are not one uniform model minority is essential for better understanding this population. Liu further emphasizes that issues of race and racism, particularly as it challenges the model minority stereotype, should be addressed openly. By exploring the intersection of Critical Race Theory, Asian Americans, and higher education, Liu has contributed to the development of Asian critical race theory framework, which is still in its nascent stage.
The Glass Ceiling Theory

Researchers have also used the glass ceiling theory to examine the pathways and roles of Asian American leaders. The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) defines the term glass ceiling as "the artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals, including those who are non-White, from advancing upward in their organization into management level positions," (p.1). Through the Civil Rights Act of 1991, President George Bush and Congress formed a 21-member bipartisan body known as The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission. The Commission’s mandate was to identify the glass ceiling barriers that have blocked the advancement of minorities and women as well as the successful practices and policies that have led to the advancement of minority men and all women into decision making positions in the private sector. The Commission found that while Asian Americans are superior professionals and technicians, they are not in management leadership positions. The Commission also discovered that corporate America tends to ignore or neglect the complexity, needs, and differences among Asian American groups and does not understand the experiences of foreign and U. S. born Asian Americans.

Building upon the Commission’s work, Woo (1994) suggests in her research monograph titled The Glass Ceilings and Asian Americans that subtle racism and prejudice are often systemically and structurally embedded in an organization, and as such it is difficult to pinpoint to any specific policy or individual to be the cause of the racial barriers. Woo uses the glass ceiling theory to examine the experiences of Asian American scientists and engineers working in a large government organization, and found
that there was no Asian American at the senior executive level. The absence of Asian
American executives in the organization was noticeable and striking, particularly when
half of 105 Asian American scientists and engineers she studied expressed a desire for
career advancement.

Contributing to the literature on the glass ceiling, Cotter et al (2001) establishes four
criteria that attribute a discriminatory practice as resulting from the glass ceiling concept:

1. A gender or racial difference that is not explained by other job-relevant
   characteristics of the employee.
2. A gender or racial difference that is greater at higher levels of an outcome than at
   lower levels of an outcome.
3. A gender or racial inequality in the chances of advancement into higher levels, not
   merely the proportions of each gender or race currently at those higher levels.
4. A gender or racial inequality that increases over the course of a career.

Cotter’s work focuses on the inequality that exists among female and African men.
While Cotter and colleagues did not see a correlation between the glass ceiling theory and
African-American males, they found the applicability to be prominent among the female
who encountered the inequality. A weakness to Cotter’s work is that the research fails to
consider other minority populations, including Asian Americans.

With a particular focus on Asian American faculty, Lee’s (2002) work titled “Do
Asian American Faculty Face a Glass Ceiling in Higher Education?” found that Asian
Americans appear to have more limited pathways to higher salaries. The result was from
a survey of 1,019 Asian Americans and a comparison group of 14,381 non-Hispanic Whites. Despite the disparity, Lee cautioned against concluding that Asian American faculty either face or do not face a glass ceiling. Instead, she called for more research into the topic. While Lee’s work does not directly link to Asian Americans in administrative positions, the fact that Asian American faculty have more limited pathways compared to their white counterparts is telling.

It should be noted, however, that not all barriers confronted by Asian Americans in their ascension to senior administrative positions are externally imposed as the glass ceiling theory suggests. Many of these barriers are self-imposed. When Renu Khator was named president of the University of Houston – Texas’ third largest public university – many Asian Americans proclaimed it a great day because an Indian female educator had cracked the “bamboo ceiling”, a term synonymous with glass ceiling but is often attributed to Asian Americans. Published in The Presidency – a journal by the American Council on Education – Khator’s (2010) article describes the reasons that have made it difficult for Asian Americans to become college presidents. Among them are the values that Asian Americans hold, including deference to authority figures, respect for elders, self-effacement, restraint, avoidance of family shame, and placing others’ needs ahead of one’s own. While these values are commendable under many circumstances, Khator suggests they also can be perceived (or misperceived) as being contrary to the generally accepted traits required for leadership in American universities.

Khator offers some specific examples to support her argument. For instance, Asians believe having too much eye contact is disrespectful and even confrontational.
However, not making eye contact can be misconstrued within the American system as an indication of insincerity or discomfort. Similarly, deference to authority may be likened to timidity or a lack of opinions. Khator sees these and other values as obstacles that Asian Americans impose upon themselves, thereby limiting their pathways to the presidency. Human resources executive and educational consultant Jane Hyun (2005) explains in her book, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*, “While biases in the workplace do exist, this ceiling is not always imposed by others. As with many challenges, Asian Americans should acknowledge that barriers could also stem from self-limiting cultural influences on their behavior, attitude, and performance in various social and professional settings” (p. 29).

**Conclusion**

As pointed out in the current literature, Asian Americans have the highest educational attainment compared with other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, yet this population group has the lowest representation at the senior leadership level in academia and corporate America. Scholars have attempted to explain this phenomenon and social inequity through a number of lenses, including the forever foreigner perception, model minority myth, Asian Critical Race Theory, and glass ceiling theory. To date, no single factor can be conclusively attributed to the lack of representation by Asian Americans in higher education administration. What is agreed upon by scholars and activists alike is that there needs to be more Asian American executives in academia if our higher education institutions are to achieve a more balanced, harmonious, and
positive learning environment. The research and findings uncovered in the following chapters seek to contribute to the scant literature of the Asian American leadership gap in academia.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodological approach used by the researcher to obtain the answers to the research questions. The research questions and the procedures for collecting the information will be presented. The chapter will also address the rationale for the qualitative research approach used in this study. A description of the study population, methods of sampling and collection of data, role of the researcher, limitations of the study, participants’ rights and ethical considerations will also be provided. Lastly, the data collection and data analysis method employed by the researcher to analyze and interpret the data will be discussed.

Research Design

Through a qualitative research approach, the researcher seeks to understand the career paths of the seven sitting Asian-American college presidents in the California community college system. Since the goal is to understand the lived experiences of the seven current Asian American college presidents, the qualitative narrative method was deemed to be the most appropriate to explore their life situations and capture data from their standpoints. This phenomenological method, as Creswell (2009) suggests, is the best research method to use when the researcher seeks to understand the subject’s experience within a phenomenon.
Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2009) suggest that qualitative research method is useful in situations where:

- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection
- The researcher strives to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world experiences
- There is a lack of theory or the existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon
- The product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive.

Miles and Hubberman (1994) also believe that this methodology is best for obtaining narrative data because it (a) allows for intense contact with a life situation, (b) captures data on the perceptions of local actors, (c) produces a holistic overview of the context under study, (d) segregates the research into different themes, and (e) explains the ways people in particular settings come to understand their daily situations.

With the phenomenological method, the researcher specifically examined the participants’ professional training, personal qualities, and factors that have propelled them to the top position.

**Role of Researcher**

The role of the researcher in this study is to have brief interactions with the seven participants for the purpose of collecting the data. The researcher has no prior relationship with the participants. Contacts with the participants will only for the purpose of securing and arranging for the interviews so the researcher can conduct the interview.
The researcher will contact these college presidents to secure appointments and conduct 60-minute interviews at a time and location convenient for them, possibly in their respective office at the college. In addition, the researcher will review the speeches they have made, articles they have published, and reports written about them. These artifacts, in the public domain, will be analyzed to determine if there is any connection or influence to their becoming a community college president.

Research Questions

Light, Singer and Willett (1990) posit that in a qualitative research, the research design should be driven by the research questions themselves. Since the purpose of this study is to explore the paths that have led the seven Asian Americans to the top executive position in California community colleges and to uncover the experiences they encounter while serving as college presidents, the researcher seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What circumstances, preparation, and strategies have helped Asian Americans to become college presidents?
2. What positive and negative experiences have Asian Americans encountered in their journey to become college presidents?
3. Why are Asian Americans underrepresented at the top executive level in higher education?
Setting and Sampling

The participants chosen for this research are current college presidents who are of Asian descent within the California community system. The California Community College system currently has 112 college campuses, divided into 72 districts. The majority of the districts have more than one college campus. Some districts, such as Santa Monica Community College District and Santa Rosa Junior College, are one-campus districts. Thus, the president at the one-campus district carries the title “Superintendent/President” because his/her role involves reporting directly to the governing Board of Trustees. Conversely, a college president at a multi-campus district, such as San Diego Community College District which encompasses three colleges, reports directly to the District Chancellor who acts as a buffer between the college president and board of trustees.

As reported by the CCCCO (2012), of the 112 college campuses and 72 college districts in California, only seven superintendent and/or president are of Asian descent. At the time of this research, there are no Asian Americans who serve as district chancellor of a multi-campus district. This research study interviewed all seven sitting chief executive officers who are either president of a college campus in a multi-college campus district or a president/superintendent of a single college district. At the time of this study, only two of the seven Asian Americans serve as president/superintendent of a single college district and report directly to the Board of Trustees. The other five Asian Americans preside over a college campus that is part a multi-campus district and reports
directly to a district chancellor. The names of the sitting seven presidents who take part in this study and their affiliated institutions – both current and previous – are kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. They are referred to as President One through President Seven, in the order in which they were interviewed by the researcher. Their institutions are referred to as College A through College G to correlate with President One through President Seven, respectively. Table 3-1 illustrates how each research participant and his/her college is referenced.

Table 3.1 Identification of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Institution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President One</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Two</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Three</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Four</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Five</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Six</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Seven</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>College G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: California Community College Chancellors Office, 2012)

Instrumentation and Materials

The interviews with the college presidents occurred during the winter break of the 2012-13 school year. Requests for one-on-one interview appointments were sent to the research participants via telephone and email communications starting in October, upon securing clearance from the Institutional Review Board of the California State University, Sacramento. The researcher explained the purpose of the research in the email correspondence. With their willingness to be interviewed, a confirmation notice was sent
to all participants, along with a consent form asking each participant to grant the researcher to audio-record the interview.

The one-on-one interview consisting of approximately 10 open-ended questions was recorded using a hand-held audio-recording device. These 10 questions were structured to find the answers or explanations to the three research questions described above. The 60 minute interview was transcribed verbatim, and a transcription was sent to the respective participant for his or her review.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Creswell (2009) suggests that analysis of the data collected from a phenomenological narrative inquiry involves several steps, including (1) preliminary exploratory analysis, (2) coding, (3) listing code words, and (4) developing themes. The preliminary exploratory analysis entails reading the transcribed notes in their entirety and thinking about the data. The process of coding involves identifying and bracketing the text and assigning a code word or phrase that best describes the text’s meaning. Creswell (2009) continues to suggest that this meticulous coding process should enable the researcher to extract meaning from text data, divide the data into segments and label each segment with codes, and examine the codes for overlap or repetition. If done accurately, this coding process should yield broad themes which the researcher should use as findings from the research.
The researcher used Creswell’s coding strategy to identify themes and factors that relate to the three research questions. In doing so, the researcher attempted to examine the barriers and challenges that the participants might have faced in their journey to become college CEOs; and whether their struggles are a result of any racial bias, as informed by the Critical Race Theory and glass ceiling theory. From their stories, the researcher discovered the participants’ pathways, as well as practices and strategies they had used to reach the top executive position.

**Validity and Reliability**

The use of audio-recorded devices and code/re-coding analysis helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. The recording of the oral interviews, as opposed to manual writing, allowed the researcher to transcribe and review the exact language used by the participants. Coding and re-coding strategies enabled similar data or corresponding themes to be grouped together. These strategies helped to ensure that the data for this study are both valid and reliable.

**Protection of Participants**

The discussion of race and diversity is rather sensitive and can carry implications for the participants and their affiliated institutions. That is why the participants’ names and institutions are not revealed, except for their gender, in this study. Each of the seven research participants was referred to as President One through President Seven, in the order in which they were interviewed. Similarly, their institutions are referred to as
College A through College G, respectively. For example, in the case of the president who was interviewed first, he is known as President One presiding over College A. The second letter in the alphabet, B, is attributed to President Two. As such, President Two presides over College B, her current institution. When referring to the institutions with which each president was previously affiliated, the numbers 1, 2, 3 are attached to each college designation, with number 1 signifying the first college at which the participant worked. For instance, if President One worked at five different colleges prior to assuming his presidential position at College A, then the first college he worked at is designated College A1. This method of designation was shared with the research participants and all concurred that it was an effective way to maintain the confidentiality of their personal identity and that of their institutions.

Each participant had ample time and opportunity to thoroughly review the transcription before any of it was used in the study. The audio recording materials and notes from the interviews will be discarded within a reasonable period of time from the date of the interview, but no later than one year after the completion of the study. Only the researcher has access to the data from the interview as the information is stored in a computer file accessible only with a passcode maintained by the researcher.

**Limitations**

Each interview with the participants lasted 60 minutes. These are all busy executives who have to juggle multiple tasks at any given time. The interview appointment for this study was sandwiched between their other presidential commitments
such as meetings, phone conferences, and campus events. During the interview, the research participants gave their full attention to answering the 10 interview questions, plus some follow-up probes.

Despite their full engagement and attention, there is a limit to what they can share in 60 minutes. Sometimes recalling specific examples to support their assertions may be challenging given the brevity of the interview time. It would have been nice to have a lengthier interview time to capture the complete picture and richness of their stories, but such a proposition would have been unacceptable given their busy schedules.

Additionally, the discussion on race is highly sensitive. As public servants and leaders of their respective institutions, what these seven presidents say, or not say, about this controversial topic can be interpreted in different ways or can also potentially be used against them by any member of the stakeholder group. As such, the intent of the research is to ensure the anonymity of the research participants and their affiliated institutions. Even with such anonymity and confidentiality, the research participants may elect to choose words or convey thoughts that may be politically correct, given the sensitive nature of the topic.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the research findings derived from the interviews with the seven participants, all of whom are Asian American presidents leading seven of the 112 community colleges in California. The chapter is divided into three key sections:

- Their stories and journeys to the presidency
- Factors affecting their ascension to the presidency
- Experience as an Asian American college president.

The objective of the first section is to provide a description of each participant’s journey to become a community college president. Of particular focus in this description are the circumstances that led them to choose the community college as a career and the various positions they held prior to assuming their presidential positions. The stories shared by the participants, as conveyed through their own words and voices, are consistent with the narrative tradition of qualitative research. The goal is to capture the tremendous achievements and unique perspectives that each of these seven remarkable individuals hold.

In the second part, narratives are analyzed and categorized into factors that have significant impact to their ascension to the presidency. Their comments, collectively, reveal three factors that play a major role in their attainment of the presidency, including (1) development of a specialized expertise, (2) the impact of family, and (3) the benefits of mentorship and professional development.
The third part is devoted to exploring their experiences as an Asian American educational leader, and what discriminatory treatment, if any, did they encounter as an Asian American. From their accounts, it appears that all of the research participants have experienced some form of racial micro-aggressions in their personal and professional lives. Additionally, because the representation of Asian Americans at the highest level of education is extremely low compared to other racial groups, the research participants were asked to share their perspectives on what they see as the reasons for the dearth of Asian American CEOs in higher education. Their comments and perspectives seem to contradict the common belief that there are certain structural barriers for Asian Americans to become the top leader at a community college.

Each of the participants was pleased to participate in this research project and hopes that their stories and voices can add to the paucity of literature on Asian Americans and higher education leadership. As the discussion of race and diversity is rather sensitive and can carry implications for the participants and their affiliated institutions, the participants’ names and institutions are not revealed, except for their gender. Each of the seven research participants is referred to as President One through President Seven, in the order in which they were interviewed. Similarly, their institutions are referred to as College A through College G, respectively. This method of designation was shared with the research participants and all concurred that it was an effective way to maintain confidentiality of their personal identity and that of their institutions.
Their Stories and Journeys to the Presidency

“President One”

President One currently leads College A, in Northern California which enrolls over 10,000 students each semester. President One came to the U.S. from a small country in Southeast Asia when he was 21 and today speaks Chinese Mandarin fluently. His first educational job in 1981 was teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) to newly arrived high school students, mostly from Asia, in the K-12 system in Orange County. It was by chance that he moved into educational administration, and then eventually into the community college environment. As he recalls his early days in the educational field:

I started out teaching ESL, and when I moved into administration, it was not by ambition. My supervisor at the time suggested that I give administration a try by assuming a coordinator position for a federally-funded project. A special program funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, SPICY [an acronym for Special Program for Indochinese Youth] seeks to provide intensive ESL and vocational training to high school dropouts. Many of the students arrived here at the ages of 16 and 17, and couldn’t finish high school or obtain a diploma. Getting them into a vocational training program was a way to get them into the workforce.

The SPICY program coordinated by President One was only one of three in the country at the time. In following conversations with the program’s grantor at the Department of Labor, President One was told his was the most successful of the three programs.

Funding for this categorical program ended after two years, and President One was intent in returning to the classroom. However, his supervisor saw that he had a
knack for administration and encouraged him to piece together another grant proposal. President One did just that and fortunately the MAESL (Medical Assisting English as a Second Language) project he proposed was funded. MAESL was intended to provide the adult-student refugee population in central Orange County with intensive ESL training while the students worked to earn a certificate or degree in medical assistance. Upon graduation, the bilingual medical assistants would provide translation to patients in local medical facilities.

As was the case with many categorical funded programs, funding for MAESL ceased, which required President One to seek employment elsewhere. Coincidentally, a supervisory position for the Regional Occupational Program (ROP) at a local high school became available. President One applied and was offered the position. The ROP responsibilities involved supervising multiple programs, which was a change from his prior positions. President One recounts:

My role has changed. Earlier, my role was to manage a single project. Now, it’s multiple projects, multiple faculty at a site. I worked in this role for 7 years. And that’s how my transition into serious administration took place.

The leap from high school to community college for President One didn’t occur until after 10 years working in the K-12 system and continuing education. His first community college position was Associate Dean for Occupational Training at College A1, a small rural college in Central California. College A1 spans across a large geographical area, and the vast boundary made it difficult for students to attend college, particularly single-mothers who lacked a reliable mode of transportation and needed child
care services. To accommodate the needs of this particular student population, President One proposed and instituted a rather revolutionary enrollment practice. Revising the enrollment process from a standard semester to an “open-entry and open-exit” process, the college allowed students to take certain courses (e.g. computer application classes) at any time during the day and on any day during the semester, so long as the student could complete the required hours for the class. As President One explains:

So, if a particular course requires 54 hours, the student would put in their 54 hours at any time. If they can get child care services for four hours on one day, they come in for those four hours. If they can’t do it today, they can come in tomorrow. What I have done here was to tailor the classes to meet the unique needs of the students, despite the opposition by a lot of faculty. As you know, online education during that time was in its infancy.

The accomplishment of President One at College A1 paved the way for his ascension to the deanship of academic programs at College A2, a community college located in the eastern part of Southern California. At College A2, President One was responsible for all aspects of academic programs which were about two-thirds of all programs offered by the college. The other one-third was vocational programs. As the college was divided into only two divisions – academic and vocational – the entire campus had only two deans. As the dean with the larger portfolio, President One supervised 82 full-time and over 250 part-time faculty/staff. With such a large staff and no assistants to help him, most of President One’s time was spent on putting out fires rather than planning and strategizing as he would have preferred. As he recounts his time at College A2: “My five years there was not an enjoyable time of my life, but I certainly learned a lot.”
President One received a promotion when he became Vice President of Instruction at College A3, a 6000-student college situated at the mid-point of Central and Southern California. His prior exposure to both academic and vocational programs came in handy as the chief instructional officer at College A3. While there, he used his keen understanding of the general educational curriculum and vocational training fields to develop additional credit and non-credit programs to suit the needs to his students. During his six years at College A3, he was instrumental in hiring, firing, and recommending tenure for faculty.

After serving in a multitude of positions, President One felt he was ready to take on the responsibilities of a college president. When the position of president at College A – his present college – became available, he applied and was selected to lead the campus, the first Asian American ever to occupy the office. The presidential post at College A was actually available on an interim basis several years prior; however, President One did not seek the opportunity as he felt it was not a good fit for him at the time. He felt his leadership style and that at the district level were not compatible, so he decided to wait for a while. When the position opened up again and the management team at the district had been replaced, he threw his hat in the ring and was offered the position, which he gladly accepted.

Figures 4-1 provide an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President One.
“President Two”

In 2007, President Two became the first female and Asian American to lead College B when the district chancellor, with consent by the board, appointed her as college president. Still in her early 40’s at the time of the appointment, President Two was also the youngest ever to preside over the college. College B is about 50 years old and with over 20,000 students, it is the larger campus of the two-college district that serves a diverse student population in the southern tip of California.
President Two came to the U.S. when she was five, along with her two siblings and parents. It was her mother’s nursing profession that brought the family to Dallas, Texas. Her father was a professor at a Christian college in India. The original intent was for the family to reside temporarily in the U.S. and then return to India. But after a while, the family enjoyed their new lives in this country and decided to stay.

Her mother’s job took the family to different places, including small towns in Missouri and Pennsylvania. President Two left the family for Washington D.C. when she was accepted to American College for her undergraduate studies and subsequently attended Georgetown for her Ph.D degree in bio-chemistry. Aspiring to become a university professor, she took up post-doctoral studies at the Institute of Cancer Research in Houston. As she describes it, her work at the Cancer Center focuses on “cancer metastasis and explored how cells break off from the primary tumor to form another tumor somewhere else in the body, and why.”

Upon completing her post-doctoral research, President Two began to look for teaching positions. Along the way, she had also picked up a high school teaching credential but never taught in the K-12 system. As she began to make calls to various universities, she became curious about opportunities at the community college because the local community college district where she lived was starting a brand new college. As she recalls:

I didn’t know what a community college was. I had no idea that they even existed because I had only gone through the university system. As this college district was trying to create the fourth college to serve the residents of Houston, they were
looking for a new faculty. I submitted my application, although I still had no idea what a community college was. I was called to an interview and was hired as the founding faculty at the brand new college. That’s how I got started in the community college.

Once in the system, President Two fell in love with the community college and the concept of open access. She quickly learned about the community college system and rapidly ascended through the ranks at the both the college and the district. Her passion as a teacher and effectiveness in administrative affairs earned her the chairmanship of the biology department, and then the deanship of the science division. Her work ethic and intelligence attracted the attention of district administrators who then tasked her to create a new Biology Institute for the entire district appointed her as its first director. The Institute trained technicians for their first career and offered certificates and degrees in various science areas. It also trained incumbent workers through corporate training programs and grants. Leaving behind the traditional academic field of teaching biology, President Two ventured into the world of workforce training, an area she previously neither had any knowledge in nor imagined as part of her career movement. She continued to impress her peers and superior at whatever assignment she took on. She was then promoted to Associate Vice Chancellor to oversee workforce training for all four colleges in the district. Her new role involved a myriad of responsibilities, including identifying new programs, determining which college would get the program, developing curriculum, building facilities, obtaining state approvals, seeking and securing grants, as well as managing continuing education – both credit and non-credit curriculum – for the entire district.
President Two’s rapid ascension through the various positions in the same college district was not driven by her ambition to move up the administrative ladder. She discloses:

For all the positions I took, I never really wanted to apply for the next job. I was always asked to do this and that. My superior would say “we really wanted you to apply for this position”. I never felt like I was ready. And I always loved what I was doing. So, I was never looking for the next job. The same thing happened when I became the associate vice chancellor at the district. They had a vacancy and wanted someone to fill it. They felt that someone who can get the office established, create structure, and get others to buy in should assume this position. They thought I fit that description.

President Two continues:

Throughout my career, I have good superiors who were also my mentors. I guess they saw that I have the stuff to move up. Remember, I come from science. When you are in science, if you can string a sentence together and you are personable, you are head and shoulders above many scientists who just want to be in the lab bench dealing with their tissue culture and test tubes. If you are articulate, persuasive, and somewhat charming, you’re a superstar all of a sudden.

In her role as the associate vice chancellor, President Two worked with all five college presidents (by this point the district has added another college which today is a five-college district). Of particular note in the discussions with her college presidents was the decision regarding which college would receive and implement the new program that her office rolls out. President Two felt it was particularly a challenging job as every president wanted the new program to be at his/her campus.

It was not until this juncture that she started to contemplate about becoming a college president. President Two shares:
I looked at other people, and they were good at somethings and not good at other things. It was the first time in my higher education career that I realized I could do that job just as well as these people could. And when I told my boss whom I have worked with for a number of years that I am going to look for a presidency, he was about to fall off his chair because he never thought I would say I was ready for the next job, let alone the presidency.

President Two applied for three presidential positions in Southern California and was offered the presidency at College B, after going through a series of interviews and meetings with the district chancellor, board of trustees and campus stakeholders. For a passionate teacher and learned scientist who knew nothing about community colleges or realized it ever existed until she got her first job as a college instructor, her rapid ascension to the presidency in less than 12 years is indeed impressive.

Figures 4-2 provide an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President Two.
Figure 4-2

**President Two Event Analysis**

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<thead>
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<th>Key Events</th>
<th>Effects/Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relocate to U.S. at age 5</td>
<td>Experience of racial discrimination; Driven by challenges; Excel in academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat in Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Expertise in science; Desire to teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D in Bio-chemistry</td>
<td>Commitment to community college mission; Knowledge of instructional services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer Researcher</td>
<td>Interaction with 5 college presidents; Program Development; Funding &amp; Budgeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founding Faculty; Department Chair &amp; Dean at College B1</td>
<td>First Female Asian-American President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc. Vice Chancellor of Workforce Training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President at College B</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**“President Three”**

President Three assumed her first presidential post in 2010 when she was asked to preside over College C, a campus envisioned by its founders as a “college without walls”. Founded in 1976, College C was intended not to be similar to its two sister campuses.

The Distributed Model upon which the college was founded entails the concept of “offering programs and classes where the students live and work”. Thus, the college does not have one campus site, but three. Faculty would provide instruction to service personnel in military bases, corporate offices or community centers. At one time,
enrollment by military students reached over 20,000 students. Thanks to the technological advancement which has proliferated distance learning, College C has continued the “college without walls” model through on-line and tele-courses. President Three shares that her college has garnered as many as 20 Emmy awards for its tele-courses. As the college expands, it needed a home for its administrators, faculty, and staff to carry out their functions. Today, the college has three sites spread across a wide urban area in Southern California. Each site is headed by a dean who oversees all instructional and administrative functions, and the three deans report directly to President Three.

President Three believes that her path to the presidency is non-traditional. She even admits her career in education is “by accident”. After completing her bachelor’s degree in her native land, a country located off the South China Sea, she went to work for the U.S. Peace Corps as an instructor and coordinator of cross cultural studies. The Peace Corps job allowed her to acquire skills in program development, planning, evaluation, and budgeting which laid the foundation for much of her work in later years. She then married a Peace Corps volunteer. When her husband’s service in her homeland was over and he had to return to the U.S., she came with him and both resided in Tennessee.

The early years in Tennessee were quite a challenge for her. She recalls:

I went through a difficult adjustment period, not knowing my place. Tennessee was a tough place to land because it wasn’t as diverse. The people there didn’t know the difference between a Vietnamese and a Filipino, or Thai, etc… I really didn’t know what to do and was unemployed. I find it difficult. I ended up
getting a divorce and moved to California. Again, I didn’t know what to do. And as an immigrant you lose self-confidence, and tend to undersell yourself.

My life took another turn when someone I met asked me “why are you doing this to yourself?” Eventually, I was connected to a four-year university in California’s Central Valley and was offered a clerical position at the university. My work ethic gradually caught the attention of the university’s associate dean who then recognized that I had worked in a cross-culture setting. He brought me over to his department and enabled me to work with international students on cross-cultural issues. While working at the university, I took the opportunity to obtain my Master’s degree in communication theory.

President Three’s entry into the community college began when a nearby college, College C1, recruited her to its International Student Advisor. In this new role, she was in charge of recruiting and advising international students. She also had a chance to team-teach a class with a counselor. After a brief period in her new job, College C1 faced budgetary constraints and her position was targeted for elimination. Her colleagues and mentors encouraged her to seek something else. She applied for a student affairs officer position at College C2 in Southern California and was offered the position. After six months into her job, College C2 hired a new president who was an African American female. She sought to establish a relationship with the new president and the chemistry between the two strengthened to the point that she eventually asked the new president to be her official mentor.

President Three’s work at College C2 was comfortable, enjoyable, and productive to the point it compelled her stay at the same institution for 13 years. During this lengthy period of time, she was promoted to dean of student services and assumed a myriad of responsibilities that were beyond the normal duties of student affairs. She developed
partnerships with high schools, provided counseling services, and served as interim dean of counseling. She also served as interim vice president of student services. Amidst these professional duties at work, President Three enrolled herself in a doctoral program offered jointly by a CSU university and a private research institution. Upon her completion of the doctoral studies, she felt it was time to move on.

In 1997, the position of vice president of student services at College C3 in Northern California became available. Thinking that she would be competitive given her long tenure as a dean and the multiple duties she shouldered at College C2, she submitted her application. Without much of a surprise, she got the job. The position at College C3 was a perfect fit for her because the majority of its students were from various ethnic groups. There was also a large population of students who share her particular culture and native language.

After three years at College C3, a colleague informed her that College C in Southern California was looking for a president and suggested that she should consider it. She was ambivalent about the suggestion, questioning if she was ready. President Three recounts:

Throughout my career, I have been exposed to different leadership programs and have been mentored by women presidents who felt I should be president. But I never was really sure that was something I wanted to take on but then I came to a point and said: “If I want to do it, I should give it a try”.

When a colleague suggested the presidency at College C, I felt the position is not for me because it’s a high-tech college and a campus with a Distributive Model. But my colleague and friend said: “This should be exciting. You should go for it anyway.” A mentor once told me sometimes I discounted myself, eliminating
myself before I even tried. So, I decided to apply, and it was the first presidency that I applied for. Another consideration I had was I wanted to move back to Southern California because both of my sons whom I have raised as a single mother resided in the region. It would be a chance to be close to them.

As luck would have it, she was appointed president of College C after a national search, becoming the first person ever from her native country to serve as president of a higher education institution.

Figure 4-3 provides an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President Three.

**Figure 4-3**
“President Four”

President Four has led College D since 2010, his first college presidency. Founded exactly 100 years ago, College D is one of oldest colleges in California and today enrolls over 20,000 students. President Four came to the U.S. in 1985 from China where he worked for the United Nations teaching English and directing the UN Language Program. He was born in an island-nation off the Indian Ocean which was once colonized by Great Britain. Today, the island’s inhabitants consist of several ethnicities, with a large number of Indians. Years ago, his great-grandparents were brought from India to this British colony to work as “coolies”, (unskilled native laborers) in the sugarcane. Given the multiple languages spoken in his native land, President Four today is fluent in Creole, French, and English; and he is also conversational in Chinese and Spanish.

His first educational job in the U.S. was at a four-year institution in Philadelphia where he taught reading through an assistantship. When he first arrived in the U.S., he didn’t know that community colleges existed. After obtaining his master’s and doctorate degree in Reading, he continued to work for four-year institutions, first as director of graduate programs in education in Philadelphia and then as chair of the reading program in Long Island. How he ended up in community college, as he described it, was by “accident”. President Four recalls:

My wife and I were raising our first child when I was working as an administrator at a university in Eastern Long Island. Long Island is nice but the winter months
could be unbearable, particularly if you are trying to raise a child. So, we decided to move to sunny Southern California. I applied for teaching jobs in Southern California, including the instructor of reading position at College D1. I was offered the teaching position at College D1, and that’s how I got into community college. So, I went from being a graduate program director to department chair at a four-year institution to a faculty at a community college. But within one year, I became Dean of Language Arts and P.E. because of my administrative background.

After six years as an instructor and dean at College D1, he sought and secured the position of vice president of instruction at College D2, which is located only 30 miles from College D1. At College D2, he oversaw all aspects of instructional services for another six years, and felt it was time to move on. He applied for a number of presidential positions and was short-listed and interviewed at nearly half a dozen. He was offered the presidency at College D and took it without hesitation.

Unlike many of his peers who had prepared for the presidency, in part, by enrolling in professional development programs and seeking the guidance of a mentor, President Four had neither. He admits:

I don’t know theories. I don’t have a degree in education leadership. My Ph.D is in psychology of reading. I have not gone through any professional training. Other than my MBA degree which I picked up 15 years after my doctorate degree because it was free, I have not studied anything relating to administration and management.

He continues:

I have done everything by myself. I have not been mentored by anybody. I have not sought advice from anyone, except for letters of recommendation. I have done everything by myself. I am a loner. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. I have failed. And I have learned from my mistakes.
For President Four, a key factor that contributed to his rapid ascension to the top position in the community college is his ability to build relationships. He explains:

The most important thing to do is to build inter-personal relationships. You need to be able to relate to other people. The basics of the job are very simple. Academic knowledge, content-area knowledge, everybody has that. But to succeed in doing it, you need to be able to work with people. If you cannot work with people, no matter how smart you are, you will fail as a leader, as a college president. Your success as a college president will depend how you make the people who worked for you look good. For you to be able to do that, you need to understand them, know where they come from, and what makes them tick. You must be able to build trust with the people who work around you.

As President Four sums it up, the key to his success in achieving the presidency rests upon the ability to work well with others and learn from his mistakes and failures.

Figure 4-4 provides an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President Four.
### Key Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UN Language Instructor Relocate to Philadelphia</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>University Faculty; Department Chair; Program Director</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D in Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading Instructor, Dean of Language Arts at College D1</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice President of Instructional Services at College D2</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>President of College D</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Effects/Outcomes

- **Readjustment to way in America; Additional education**
- **Experience in teaching and administration;**
- **Knowledge of community college; Knowledge of academic programs;**
- **Chief Academic Officer; Preparation for Presidency**
- **First Asian-American President**

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**“President Five”**

President Five has led the one-college district, College E, in Southern California for the past seven years. He came to College E after serving as president of a smaller college campus in the Bay Area. As the CEO of both the college and district, President Five reports to a seven-member board which is elected by the voters residing within the geographical boundaries served by the district. Assisting President Five in the daily management and operation of the 30,000 student campus are seven vice presidential level
positions who handle affairs ranging from human resources to academic affairs to institutional communications.

President Five was born in Hong Kong and came to the U.S. after completing his high school. He started his post-secondary education at a community college in the East Bay (Northern California). After completing the general education requirements, he was accepted to UC Berkeley where he completed his bachelor’s degree; and then went to Stanford for his Ph.D in linguistics.

With his Stanford doctorate degree in hand, President Five spear-headed a national research project funded by the National Institute of Education. The three-year research project explored the language use patterns of non-English elementary students both at home and in school. His experience of leading the grant project paved the way for a position as the director of a community-based, non-profit organization focused on providing language education, job skills, and work experience to the refugee populations from Southeast Asia. The Asian American refugees served by President Five’s non-profit organization were either unemployed or under-employed who needed the skills to acquire a new job. President Five recounts his 10 years directing the 30-person organization as:

My first job as director of the non-profit was pivotal because in that capacity, I learned and exercised a lot of skills. The skills required to manage a small agency are somewhat similar to running an educational institution. The only difference is scale. I had to learn about developing budgets, writing proposals, program design, curriculum development, as well as teaching which I previously had. Hiring, firing, cooperating with others, working with the politicians and funding
institutions, and the politics of getting the money were all part of my role as the director. I learned all of these things on the job during those 10 years.

President Five’s entry into the community college began in 1994 when the chancellor of a multi-campus college district, College E1, appointed him as dean to manage one of the campuses in the district. At this district, there were no vice president positions. The dean position in which President Five served was considered a “super dean” because he was the chief executive for his campus. He describes the responsibilities of his position:

As one of the super deans, I was in charge of all departments and affairs for the campus. I also had the overall supervisory role of providing funding and support for the 103 training programs spread across the district. So, I ran a fairly good size operation at the time.

After five years in the position, President Five felt his responsibilities were becoming less challenging so he set out to seek for new and bigger challenges. He shares:

I thought I could take on a more challenging position, and being a college president sounds like a good place to go. I thought I could do the job better than the people I saw.

He applied for the presidency at several colleges and was offered the position at College E2 which was located in the heart of Silicon Valley.

He enjoyed his time and duties at College E2 so he stayed for nine years, a rather extensive time for a position with an average tenure of only three years. One day in 2006, President Five received a phone call from a head-hunter informing him that the
presidential post at College E in Southern California is vacant and that he should give it some thought. He didn’t know much about College E, but after consulting with his wife he decided to submit his qualifications. The selection committee liked what they saw in President Five so they invited him down for an interview. He was somewhat reluctant to go for the interview because the job, if offered, meant he and his family would have to relocate to another region of the state. But his wife insisted that he should fly down to check it out as she could tell that he was getting bored with his current job. What he saw at the day-long interview impressed him. He recalls:

I came down for the interview and I was impressed at what I saw. I was encouraged to continue with the process. I was impressed by the interview process, the questions they asked, the people I met, and the interest they showed in what I had to say. I had a good impression.

Likewise, the selection committee was impressed by what they saw in President Five and believed he was the right candidate for to lead the district and college. They felt he had the right academic background, leadership skills, and vision for the college. They proceeded to offer him the position, thereby making him the first Asian-American ever to hold the top position at this prestigious community college district.

President Five didn’t have much formal training in educational leadership, either through education or professional development. He believes people can develop leadership and management skills in situations in which they found themselves. Interestingly, he attributes his leadership abilities to his years as a college student. He was actively involved in student groups while studying at UC Berkeley and assumed a
directorship of a student club. Additionally, to make ends meet, he worked at a liquor store in Berkeley and learned how to deal with all kinds of customers. As he puts it:

I gained valuable experience dealing with different people, different situations who came into the liquor store from the streets of flatland Berkeley. The few leadership training seminars I have gone to were more like a common sense reminder on how to make decisions in a logical manner. I learned from my own mistakes. I have made a lot of mistakes, but am never afraid of them. I am reflective by nature. I learn from all the decisions I made, good and bad. It is this continuous re-examination that leads to improvement and confidence in my own growth.

It is interesting to note the positions President Five had held since completing his doctoral education at Stanford were all at the executive level. He first headed a national research project, and then assumed the executive director position of a non-profit organization. Next, he served as an executive dean of a college campus, and subsequently became a college president when he was still in his mid-40’s. His rapid ascension to the executive management positions is indeed impressive, particularly for an immigrant who resettled in the United States as a community college student at the approximate age of 20, and had to be accustomed to a new life in a new country, all on his own.

Figure 4-5 provides an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President Five.
Figure 4-5

**PRESIDENT FIVE EVENT ANALYSIS**

**Key Events**
- Relocate to US
- Community College Student
- Ph.D in Linguistics
  - 9 years
- Executive Director of Non-Profit Organization serving refugees from Southeast Asia
  - 10 years
- Executive Dean at College E1
  - 5 years
- President of College E2
  - 9 years
- Superintendent of College E

**Effects/Outcomes**
- Readjustment to way of life in America; Familiarity of community college, Additional education
- Expertise working with Asian American refugee population; Experience in budgeting, management, and program development
- Knowledge of community college; Experience in campus management; Preparation for presidency
- Chief Executive Officer; Preparation for superintendency
- First Asian American President; Report to Board of Trustees

“President Six”

President Six currently presides over College F, a college located in a rapidly growing suburban community in Southern California. When she arrived at the college in 2006, the campus consisted of only portable buildings. The only permanent structure on campus was a small administrative office building that housed the administrative staff, and today is the oldest facility on campus. Thanks to the generosity of the local voters who entrusted the college district with their tax dollars through two facilities bond measures totaling a billion dollars, the face of College F has been transformed drastically.
As the construction fences are being folded and all of the 10 newly constructed buildings become operational, each engrained with a plaque bearing the name of President Six because all were constructed under her presidency, President Six has been credited as “the founder” of the newly renovated College F.

Upon completing her bachelor’s degree in a tiny country of the South China Sea where she was born and raised, President Six emigrated to the United States to pursue her graduate studies. After she completed her master’s degree, she worked for the College of Education at a four-year university in Detroit, Michigan. At the College of Education, her job entailed administering programs to increase student retention and graduation rates. After a short period of employment, she chose to stay home to raise her son and daughter who were in their infancy.

When she re-entered the job market six years later, she accepted a position as a counselor at College F1 which is located within the Los Angeles region. Because counseling at the community college is a faculty position and her desire was to be an administrator, she left College F1 to become the director of transfer program at a nearby four-year institution. Her knowledge in student transfers became handy when a similar position at College F2 became available. At the time, community colleges were focused on getting students transferred to the four-year institutions. The California Community College Chancellor’s office required each college to create a Transfer Center with the sole purpose of guiding students through the transfer process, and College F2 was no
exception. Looking for someone with experience in student transfers, the college hired President Two and tasked to create a new Transfer Center.

By this time, President Six has come to appreciate the core mission of the community college primarily because of its open access to education for all students. She felt committed to mission and was constantly looking for better ways and new opportunities to serve the students. In 1995, when the dean of admissions position at College F3 became available, she applied for it and was offered the position. Her time at College F3 lasted only for two years because in 1997, she was offered the dean of student services position at College F4. The dean position at College F4 was equivalent to a vice president level as the college’s organizational structure is such that below the president is an executive vice president who oversees primarily academic and business affairs. As dean, she was the top manager for all affairs relating to student services. Her stint as dean at College F4, however, was also brief because after a while she moved to College F5 to assume the vice president of student services position. In 2000, College F6, a bigger college campus in the northern part of Central Valley with a more robust student services program was seeking an individual to fill the vice president of student services position. She applied and was offered the job. She served in this position until 2005 when the college president left abruptly, requiring the district chancellor to fill the position on an interim basis. President Six submitted her application for the interim position. Recognizing her strong work ethic, the district chancellor appointed her interim president at College F6 for one year. She recalls:
When I applied for the interim president position, I knew that after the one-year appointment I would have to return to my role as vice president or seek the presidency at some other institution. The policy of the district prohibits anyone who has served in a management position as an interim from seeking that position. I believe the policy was put in place to ensure fairness for all candidates seeking the permanent position. In retrospect, I am glad I served as interim president because the experience I gained during that one year was instrumental in securing the presidency I am currently in.

Timing was on her side when, in 2006, the presidential post at College F in Southern California became available. She applied and bested several candidates from around the state to become the first Chinese-American female president at the college. When she presides over commencement ceremony for the Class of 2013 in the newly constructed Campus Quad replete with fresh green lawn and an outdoor amphitheater surrounded new buildings, President Six will also celebrate her seventh anniversary as president of this beautifully renovated college campus.

Of particular note in the career trajectory of President Six is the brief time she spent at each of the six college campuses before ascending to the presidency. On average, she spent only two years at each of her jobs. She explains why:

I worked at six different colleges for a total of 12 years before landing my first presidential job. I did that intentionally. You see, I was removed from the labor market for six years at early in my career because I wanted to devote entire time to raising a family. When I re-entered the workforce, I felt I was somewhat behind compared to my colleagues. I needed to catch up with the rest of my colleagues. So, I was committed to learning, and acquiring knowledge and experience that I did not have during those six years. By taking on more responsibilities and trying different positions at various colleges, I would be exposed to many situations and challenges, and could learn and grow from the different jobs and campus settings.
While she had a passion to be in administration, President Six did not hold the ambition to be college president until she was appointed the interim president at College F6. She admits:

I never thought of becoming a president. Throughout my career, others have suggested I should become college president someday. I am not sure what I had that made them think I am presidential-type. Perhaps it’s my work ethic. I work very hard and long hours, but I don’t publicize it. For example, in my current job I stay at my office til very late but don’t tell my staff that. When the custodians come around to clean the office at night, they would still see me here. When the campus police patrol the campus, they would see my car still parked in the parking lot. I think they started to tell others on campus, and that’s how the faculty and staff know how late I work.

In retrospect, President Six is proud of the fact she took the time off early in her career to attend to her children who are now both successful lawyers and doctors. The hiatus from the workforce put a dent in a career. But when she returned to work, she did so with vigor and worked extra hard to make up for the time she missed. Her hard work and tenacity are commendable; and they are the qualities that propelled her to success.

Figure 4-6 provides an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President Six.
“President Seven”

President Seven currently leads a single-college district in the Northern California, a region known for beautiful vineyards. This is his second presidency as the first one was at an ethnically diverse college located in the Bay Area. Of the seven Asian American presidents interviewed, President Seven is the only one born in the United States. He came to Berkeley for his undergraduate studies after spending his childhood in Chinatown New York where he was born. His original intent was to return to New York after his undergraduate studies to become a social worker. But inspired by leading Chinese activists and civil rights leaders at UC Berkeley and in Bay Area during his
college years and beyond, President Seven began to immerse himself in various campus movements and community activities and ended up staying in Northern California ever since. His community involvement led him to the world of politics in which he served as an assistant to a well-known politician in the California State Legislature. As a legislative assistant, he worked on issues relating to higher education affairs, among others. His work in the Asian Americans and visibility in the community caught the attention of other public figures in the region, including the chancellor of a multi-campus college district. This chancellor hired President Seven from the political arena to lead one of his campuses as the campus dean. President Seven thought he would stay in his new job only for a brief time. But as he became more involved in the education field, he grew to love the profession and his new career; one which he has maintained over the last two decades.

After overseeing the campus for two years, President Seven was promoted to oversee student services for all of the campuses in the district. He served as the dean of student services in the same district for 10 years. During this period he furthered his education and earned a doctorate degree in educational administration.

Upon completing his doctorate degree, President Seven sought the presidency at College G2 and was offered the position. He presided over College G2 for three years and then moved to a nearby district to assume the presidency at College G3, a flagship campus in a district that has four campuses and serves nearly 100,000 students.
A rare and unique opportunity came his way in early 2010 when the U.S. Department of Education asked President Seven to coordinate the national agenda on community colleges by coordinating activities with the 1200 community colleges in the country. The position made him the first Asian American ever to hold such a prestigious and powerful role in higher education. President Seven immediately seized upon this opportunity and relocated to Washington D.C. to work alongside with the nation’s Second Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, to promote and strengthen the community college degree for millions of students in the country.

After two years in Washington D.C., President Seven decided it was time to return to sunny California. In 2012, several chancellor and superintendent positions became vacant and President Seven fielded several inquiries from head-hunters. He applied for the position at College G and bested several prominent candidates interested in the lucrative position. President Seven is only the fifth person to serve as President and Superintendent of the 93-year old college campus.

President Seven attributed his ascension to the college presidency to his community activism. He shares:

I have always been a social person and knew I would work with people. So, I set out to be a social worker because I majored in social welfare and Asian American studies while at Cal. Working in the state legislature and being involved in the community were also part of my community activities. It was Evan [the college chancellor who hired him to be a dean at one of campuses] who gave me the opportunity to work in the community college arena. Evan is politically astute. He would hire people from both the inside and outside to run his campuses. He had the vision to hire community leaders to work in community colleges. This is
very non-traditional. But when I was dean, I initially worked with many Asian American immigrants and ESL students, and I enjoyed it. So, I fit in just fine.

President Seven continues:

After a while in my new career, I decided that I would stay in higher education. And once I have decided on this career move, I had the aspiration to be in a leadership position and wanted to be college president someday. That’s why I enrolled myself in a doctorate degree program in higher education and also completed the Educational Management program at Harvard. And yes, there were many people, like Evan, who really encouraged, nurtured and mentored me throughout my career.

President Seven is a role model for many aspiring Asian American educators. He is very visible in the higher education arena. Given his work in politics and higher education, President Seven connected to prominent public figures in both California and throughout the country. He believes the expansive contacts he has made tipped the scale in his favor when he applied for the presidency at College G.

Figure 4-7 provides an event analysis showing the key events that affect the pathway of the President Seven.
Factors Affecting Their Ascension to the Presidency

The stories told by the research participants contain some profound revelations pertaining to their ascension to the presidency. These seven remarkable individuals all come from different backgrounds and each has his or her unique leadership style and ways of achieving success. What follows is a discussion of the factors that have helped them to attain the CEO position at their respective colleges.
Developing an Expertise in One Service Area

The ascension to the presidency by each of the seven participants is marked by a career path that is unique to each. Whether by design or circumstances, the presidents upon the expertise they gained from their initial job in education.

For President One, his first educational job was teaching ESL to the growing refugee student population from Southeast Asia who resettled in the Orange County in the early 1980’s. At the time, his colleagues and superior believed that if he speaks an Asian language (Mandarin) and looks Asian, he should be able to connect with students from other Asian languages and cultures. This mistaken belief actually worked in his favor because he was tasked to manage a grant project focused specifically on refugee students from Southeast Asia. Once on the job, President One continued to strengthen his skills in working with the immigrant student population, as evidenced by his success in managing SPICY and MAESL programs which aimed to provide language skills to Asian American students. He also built upon this expertise by designing programs and curriculum for special student population groups, whether it was for single mothers on welfare who needed to obtain an education to enter the workforce or high school graduates who needed occupational training through the ROP program. Working with these special student populations had helped him to earn a reputation amongst his colleagues and propelled him to bigger and more challenging responsibilities through his positions as dean and vice president of instruction.

The focus on the Asian American student population that defines President One’s early professional career is a pattern that is also seen in the pathways of President Five
and President Seven. Both of these presidents also worked with the Southeast Asian refugee populations in the Bay Area community early in their respective jobs. President Five did so through a community non-profit organization and President Seven through his civic and political activities. Both gained their reputation by working effectively with the special student population from Southeast Asia. Their success and track record then prompted the chancellor of a community college district to recruit them to work at his district, albeit at two different campuses and at different times.

President One, President Five, and President Seven all honed their skills and developed an expertise in working with the Asian American immigrant population. Their Asian look and cultural capital were part of the reason they were selected for their initial jobs. As President One bluntly states, “The only reason I got the job during those days was people assume if you look Asian, you will be able to communicate with all the Asians.” President Seven offers a more diplomatic comment regarding the question whether his Asian look and biculturalism had anything to his securing the community college positions he had held:

That’s an interesting question. I heard a political consultant said that the highest concentration of Asian American in elected officials positions are in education, because the white people trust Asians with education. They [Asians] are admired because of the emphasis and importance that education plays in their culture. So, quite a few Asian Americans get elected to school boards. Whether it plays for or against you, a lot depends on your personality. For me, I was conscious to apply at colleges that had large Asian student populations and communities. College G2 (in the Silicon Valley) had large Vietnamese and Chinese communities. College G1 and College G3 (in the Bay Area) both have large Asian populations. This is the first job [College G] I took that didn’t have a large Asian population, but you can’t have everything.
In a different path, President Three and President Six began their careers by initially providing counseling services to cross-cultural students and transfer students, respectively. At that time, the presence of international students and the focus of getting students transferred to four-year institutions were emerging. Both of these female administrators honed their skills and became experts in their respective areas. President Three found her experience working with international students at a four-year university useful in her role as the international student advisor at her first community college job. Timing was perfect for President Six because after a stint as director of transfer program at a four-year institution, she went to College F2 to develop a transfer center the college was mandated by the state to have a center to help students transferred to four-year institutions.

These two female administrators then expanded their scope of work to other functions within student services, such as enrollment and student discipline. They progressed through their careers by intentionally seeking positions only within the student services division and did not cross over to academic services or other areas that did not align with their expertise. While performing their roles as vice president of student services at their respective institutions, the two female administrators demonstrated their effectiveness in their jobs and also proved they were competent leaders. The next logical move was the college presidency. Their ascension to the presidency is due in large part to the focused concentration and expertise they had developed in one service area, student services, within the community college structure.
The path towards the college presidency that many in higher education claim as traditional is through instructional services, a route taken by President Two and President Four. Both presidents began their community college careers as faculty and were then promoted to dean at their respective campuses. The vice presidential positions they subsequently assumed were also in instructional services.

President Two, a biology professor, was noted for her research and expertise in science. Her scholarship greatly impressed the hiring authority who appointed her Founding Faculty at the new community college. Her teaching and research in science worked in her favor when she applied for the presidency at College B. She reflects:

I could feel I was the right person for what this college needed as I was interviewing with the board. The biology and academic credentials that I had gave me a lot of buy-in with the faculty. They pride themselves on academic rigor, and their science and biology programs are flagships. That automatically bought me buy-in I wouldn’t have had if I gotten a different kind of degree, or had I not started out as a faculty member. All those things were kind of good fit for this organization and a strong science background helped to develop the buy-in. So, I just kind of feel I was the right fit for the college.

Similarly, President Four began his first job in the U.S. as a reading instructor. After several years teaching and leading academic departments at two universities in the East Coast, he secured a faculty teaching in the Language Department at College D1. To him “teaching is teaching, regardless if it’s at a four-year or two-year college”. His expertise in the field of reading and language, coupled with his skills as an instructor, propelled him to higher administrative positions within the instructional area, and culminated in the college presidency.
Their credentials in cancer research and reading had led President Two and President Four, respectively, to teaching positions at their respective institutions. Once there, they pursued higher positions only within the instructional service division and did not venture into other areas in which they did not have the expertise.

It took about 12 years, on average, for each of these seven Asian Americans to attain their first college presidency. Their skills and knowledge in a particular service area, whether it was in teaching, counseling, or working with special immigrant populations, made them marketable for certain jobs. While none of them envisioned becoming a college president nor conceived a plan to become one, they excelled in their jobs and garnered the attention of their colleagues. They rapidly ascended to the presidency because of their expertise in one specialized service area.

**The Family: How It Shapes Personal Qualities and Affects Professional Careers**

Each president interviewed possesses and exerts a dynamic set of characteristics that were instrumental to their ascension to the presidency. These characteristics were heavily influenced by their family and the Asian cultural values in which they were brought up. The values of hard work, determination, and respect for others were instilled upon them by their parents and their Asian culture. Common among the seven presidents was modest socio-economic environment in which they were born and raised in their respective native lands. Their parents had jobs in education or other service sectors which influenced their selection of the career in education. The importance of obtaining a good education and serving others was bestowed upon by their parents very early on. President Seven states:
Like many of us, our parents stressed the value of education, and I took that seriously. I was a pretty good student and I intended to be a social worker.

President Three recalls her parents’ comments:

My parents were both teachers and I was brought up by them until I left for the United States after my undergraduate studies and work for the Peace Corps. I remember my father telling me and my sisters: “You could do whatever you set out to do.” I think that was a strong message that had a long-lasting impact for me.

President Two attributes her personal characters and preparation for the presidency directly to her parents, particularly her father who was a minister and a college professor:

It’s all about how you treat people. You treat people with dignity, respect and civility. All that came from my upbringing. My parents both were in the service profession. My father became a minister when I was in seventh grade. So you have very high values on how you behave in public and what you say to people, because you are the minister’s family. Everybody wants to know how a minister interacts at home, what his kids eat and drink and what they say. You grew up in a very public setting, which is great experience for a presidency. So, the common values of how you treat people, how you behave, all that came from the family.

The other presidents echo the same sentiment. President One attributes his hard work to his family and upbringing:

My upbringing is rooted in hard work. You are taught to work hard in order to get ahead. It’s the hard work that had enabled me to dig deep into my work, and that has gotten me the positions I have held.

President Six strikes a similar chord when it comes to hard work. But rather than simply applying what her parents taught her, she also wants to set an example for her two children:
The determination and tenacity that I bring to my job are qualities that I learned from my parents. My parents are, by far, my most trusted mentors! In Chinese, there’s a proverb that says “How you behave is more important than what you say”. I watched what my parents did, and through their actions, I have learned many valuable qualities. Likewise, I hope and expect my two children to learn from my actions, rather than merely act on my words. So, if I am determined and tenacious, and work hard, I think my children will learn those values from me.

The example that President Six sets through her own actions did pay off as she proudly shares:

I sometimes jokingly tell friends that we have two children in the family but three degrees. Both my son and daughter went to Harvard for their undergraduate studies and they both went to Yale for their law degrees. They chose Yale over Harvard for law because of Yale’s notoriety in public interest law. Both of the kids are socially responsible individuals and are now in public service. My son however furthered his desire for studies by obtaining an M.D. from UCSF. He now works as an ER doctor in a high crime Bay Area hospital that serves low income patients.

Besides infusing values and shaping the characters of the seven participants, the family also played a significant role in their career moves. For President Two, the obligation to take care of her aging parents was why she accepted the presidency at College B. Her parents had chosen Southern California to retire and both have reached the age that needed attention. Like any devoted child, President Two felt the only right thing to do is to be near them and care for them during their retirement years.

Similarly, President Three moved from San Diego to Northern California to assume the vice presidency of student services at College C3 so she could be near her mother. After spending time with her mother, President Two’s next move to assume to presidency at College C in Orange County was also due, in part, to family obligations. She shares:
I have raised two sons as a single mother. By the time I was offered the president’s job in Orange County, one of my sons had moved out and lived in Orange County; the other in San Diego. The presidency at College C aligned with my desire to be close to my sons.

The relocation of President Four from Long Island to Los Angeles to work in the community college was also because of family consideration. He recounts:

I am a married man, and as such I have to balance between my married life and professional life. While in Long Island, I had one young child and we were expecting a second one. Eastern Long Island is a fine place, but only in the summer. During the winter it’s very hard to get around, particularly with young kids. My wife didn’t care much for the place. So, we decided to move to California.

Had it not been for the motivation and encouragement of his wife, President Five wouldn’t have flown to Southern California to interview for the top position at College E. He recalls:

On the day of the interview, I was somewhat reluctant to go. In discussing with my wife whether I should fly down to for the interview, she said I should. Thanks to his wife’s affirmation, President Five became President of College E.

The family, as illustrated by the accounts of the participants, has a profound impact on their careers.

The Benefits of Mentorship and Professional Development

The majority of the participants in this study revealed that the mentorship and professional development they have acquired throughout their professional careers also played a critical factor in their ascension to the presidency. Mentorship, as defined by Blackwell (1989) is a process in which a person of superior rank, achievement, and prestige counsels, instructs, and guides the intellectual development of his/her mentee(s).
A successful mentorship relationship, Blackwell continues, is one in which the mentor and mentee have a degree of trust and see bi-directional benefits in their intellectual, social, and career advancements. This concept of mentorship appears to align with the experience of the participants who spoke about importance of mentorship.

All of the presidents, except for President Four who claims he had not been mentored, had been inspired by their mentors. Their mentors have guided, encouraged, and supported them to achieve their positions, including the presidency. Their relationship with their mentors is marked by a degree of understanding, respect, and rapport. To them, their mentors are role models for whom they reserved the highest regards. Conversely, the mentors see in their mentees the capacity, quality, and potential to be great leaders in the community college. This is evident in the case of President Two, as she recounts her relationships with her mentors:

Throughout my professional career, particularly in the community college environment, I was blessed by the support and guidance that my bosses had given me. When I was a founding faculty at the college, the founding president at that point sat me down and said: “I know you are going to be a president one day, and I know you’re going to be a great president.” He said something about racing with the clock. To this day, I still don’t have any idea what he meant. That was the first shocking moment because I had always loved my job. I said, “Really, do you think I could do that job?”

Then I had a vice president boss when I was dean who also said, “You know we got to get to ready for the presidency.” That was the second time somebody tells me about that. The third time somebody tells me that was the boss I had when I moved to the district. He and I have been working for a number of years, and he was absolutely dragging me up the career ladder. He was the first one to say, “You need to apply for this dean position. You need to apply for this associate vice chancellor, and was very much my champion.” I guess he and others see in me that I have the stuff to move to the higher position.
Other presidents echo President Two’s emphasis on seeking mentorship from the more seasoned administrators. President Three admits:

Throughout my career, I have been mentored by women presidents, especially, who felt I should be president. I have been very lucky to have many wonderful mentors; the closest one whom I have the highest respect for is the president of College C2. I worked for her at the college for 13 years. She is now the chancellor of a district in Southern California.

Besides mentorship, the participants also stress the impact that their doctorate education and participation in leadership development programs have in their preparation for the presidency. A number of participants enrolled in management programs offered by institutions such as the Harvard University, as well as leadership seminars sponsored by the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), Leadership Education for Asian Pacifs, Inc. (LEAP), National Institute of Leaders, League for Innovation, and Kalaidescope.

President Three greatly values the leadership development programs in which she participated. She recalls:

I attended LEAP and that helped me connect with many colleagues who are Asian Americans. I also went through the program offered by the National Institute of Leaders. The woman who ran this program single-handedly was responsible for mentoring a huge percentage of woman presidents. She has a long legacy. The Leaders program (short for National Institute of Leaders) was what cemented my mentorship relationship with the president at College C3 with whom I worked for nearly 13 years. The Leaders program requires you to choose a mentor, and I chose Carroll. It’s a relationship that I embrace and honor to this very day.

Early in her career, President Two went through a leadership program called the Chair Academy, which at that time was offered through Maricopa Community College. She remembers her experience with the program with much fondness:
When I first became a dean, I went to the Chair Academy. By this time, I already had Ph.D in biochemistry but I didn’t get the educational leadership, history of community college, strategic planning, or program development – all these things that are taught in educational administration. I didn’t have any of that. So, that was my first training. You would go for one week, do an internship with someone in a practicum. During that time, you would work with a mentor, then you would go back for another week after the year was over. So that was my fundamental training. And then lots of professional development along the way, lots of conferences to attend. And then, I learned these skills while on the job.

President Seven took advantage of similar leadership programs. At the suggestion of his mentor and first boss in the community college, President Seven enrolled in the Educational Management program at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, the same university where he obtained his Master’s degree. This notable program is reserved for senior administrators who aspire to become a CEO of an educational institution. The program was also a great opportunity to meet other leaders around the country. In his own words, “So much about becoming a president is networking and knowing the right people. And they know you too.” Unquestionably, President Seven credited the Harvard management program to “be very helpful” towards his preparation for the presidency.

Besides leadership development programs, the participants found the rigor provided through their doctoral studies and the possession of a doctorate degree to useful in their ascension to the top positions. All of the participants interviewed possess a either a Ph.D or Ed.D, with the exception of President One who is in the process of completing his dissertation. The value of going through the doctoral process is illustrated in President Two’s remarks:

The persuasion, argumentation, creating a compelling argument is something that came from my doctoral process. So you stand in front of bunch of scientists and
tell them what is right, and they’re going to show you how it’s not right because of their research. Standing in front of an audience and being challenged is a skill I use every day here and throughout my career. How to put together a talk, how to persuade people, how to answer questions and become comfortable in academic debate, all that is learned through my doctoral process.

President Seven also sees the value of a doctorate degree:

Once I have decided on this career move, I had the aspiration to be in a leadership position and wanted to be college president someday. That’s why I enrolled myself in a doctorate degree program in higher education.

Summary of Qualities and Skills Critical for Attaining the Presidency

It is apparent from the accounts of the seven Asian American presidents in this study that their ascension to the presidency is marked by a number of qualities and skills that they possess or develop in their personal lives or professional careers. Qualities such as persistence and hard work, and skills in communications and leadership are essential to their successful attainment of the presidency. Figure 4-8 summarizes the personal qualities and professional skills that help the seven participants to attain the presidency.
The Experience as an Asian American College President

Given the few Asian Americans who are able to attain the highest position at a community college, a motivation for this research project is to understand the individual experiences of these seven Asian American college presidents and whether they have experienced any discrimination resulting from their racial identity. Additionally, the intent is to understand their perspectives on the reasons why Asian Americans are underrepresented at the top administrative level in higher education.
Racial Microaggressions Towards Asian Americans

President One credits his first administrative job in education to his ability to speak Chinese Mandarin and his Asian look. At the time, he was tasked to manage an ESL program specifically focused Southeast Asian refugees who were beginning to resettle in Southern California in large numbers. “The only reason I got the job”, exclaims President One, “was people assume if you look Asian, you will be able to communicate with all the Asians.” In this case, his Asian physical appearance and mastery of a Chinese dialect worked in his favor. But the Asian racial identity which helped him to secure his first administrative position was the same factor that kept him out of the club of elites. He states:

There’s a saying in the American culture that states: “It’s not what you know, but who you know.” That statement however doesn’t apply to me. I have not been a member of the “Old Boy’s Network” and couldn’t get into the club and couldn’t sit at the bar drinking with buddies who make the decisions. The Old Boys Network is not pervasive, not open to cultural diversity, not accepting of others.

President One overcomes this blatant rejection through hard work. He confesses:

I had to rely on my knowledge and on what I know. I sought to increase my understanding of the issues so those who are not familiar or don’t know as much as I do can come to me to ask questions and rely on what I know. And all this come from my hard work.

He continues:

Thankfully, the selection process today is more transparent. These days, not embracing and opening to diversity is not fashionable or not a cool thing anymore. So, I think there is a higher chance that minority can be in positions of power or decision-making, but you have to demonstrate you are capable. I know a counselor at a college who was promoted to dean so the college can show the community it responds to the college and community’s diverse constituencies because it has a large population that resembles the counselor’s ethnicity. The
counselor was then promoted to vice president of instruction at another college, perhaps for the same reason. However, for the presidency, it appears the person has not obtained yet because the capacity hasn’t been demonstrated.

President Two, a female scientist in a male dominated field with noticeable brown-colored skin because of her Indian race, has been an oddity throughout much of her life and experienced actual racial discrimination when she was a child living in a suburban town in Pennsylvania. She recounts her years growing up in a predominant white community and working in the field of science:

To me, I was always in a male dominated field. In science, I was always around more men than women, the same thing in cancer research. All three of my mentors in Houston I mentioned earlier were all white males. When I was in seventh grade, my parents moved to Pennsylvania; it’s a place where the local people have never seen a person from another country. So, I was always the odd ball. Even now, when I look around the room, and notice that there’s nobody brown here. I just catalogue it away. I just look and put a check mark, and move on because that’s how I grow up. I’ve always been the oddity, whether by gender in male-dominated field, or by ethnicity in the place where I have grown up.

But President Two didn’t allow that oddity or the discrimination she experienced to impede her march forward and upward. In fact, she turned that challenge into a drive and saw a need to excel. She states:

Our family was dropped in the middle of this white community where nobody has seen a brown person before. There were times when people would show up at our house, on the front porch, with a baseball bat ready to inflict damage or beat somebody up because of our race. If my father had not been a minister and if we – all three kids – hadn’t founded something that we were exceptional at, we probably wouldn’t have lived to see our graduation. If we didn’t show this community that we had great value in something, they were not going to have any value for us. So, it was very motivating in that way. It was tough for 6-7 years, but we had to do something different to survive in that context.

If you combine this need for survival through achievement to the pressure of achieving usually found in an Asian family, it can become very overwhelming.
How I managed that for myself is through a very high work ethic. I work a lot. I produce a lot. I volunteer a lot. And that’s what got me through. Aside from the challenges she faced as a result of her biculturalism and skin color while growing up in rural Pennsylvania, President Two has not since experienced any other noticeable discrimination during her professional career, including her years as a college administrator in Texas and in her current presidential position. She states:

I don’t think I have experienced it [racial or gender discrimination] in this district or at the college. In this district, we have a long history of diverse men in senior management roles, African American, Hispanic. We also had a female chancellor in the district and the other college in the district had a female president, just not at this college. This is a 50-year old college, and they never had a female president, or an Asian. I was the only woman to be selected for this college. But I never focus on the fact I was Asian American. And the fact that I am one of the few Asian American presidents in the California community college system hasn’t entered my thinking.

President Two’s perspective on racial issues, particularly her refusal to focus on the fact that she’s an Asian American, is echoed by at least one other president. President Five, a Chinese immigrant who came to the US after his high school years, has this to say about his racial identity and his role as an educator:

I never thought of myself as a Chinese American president. I think of myself as an educator, a scholar, and I happen to be Asian American. But that part of it should not be something that I want to deny nor is it a part that should be a determining factor in everything that I do. As an Asian American scholar and educator, I educate not only Asian Americans. I am a scholar first. I am an educator first. I do my job for I believe in the core mission of community colleges, and of course I bring to the job the sensitivity that I have because of my background. That is important. That is something I think adds to the value of who I am.

It’s [being Asian American] is not a badge that you have to wear all the time. You cannot. It’s a job that requires you to treat everybody equitably, and you ought to. So, no I never thought about being one of the seven Asian American community college presidents.
President Five continues with this topic and describes how his bilingualism and biculturalism have affected his career paths:

I think it helps but I am sure had its detraction throughout the processes. But the important part is I never allow it to hinder me. I think as a practice in life there are certain things that are real and certain things that we create out of our minds. And it becomes bigger. The more we believe in it, the more it becomes an obstacle.

We all know that for us to deal with mainstream society, there are certain stereotypes and certain biases that we will run into, and for many of us we have to deal with these challenges and oppositions. Now, it’s a matter of whether we acknowledge them and try to overcome them, or acknowledge them and say this is how it is, and give up. By giving up, one does not help oneself. I accept the reality and work with it, and don’t let that be an obstructing factor.

From their statements, both President Two and President Five see themselves as educators first. Their race, Indian and Chinese, respectively, are secondary considerations in their profession as educators committed to educating anyone and everyone at their college campuses. What is clear about them is that they have not allowed their racial identity to hinder their ascent to the top positions in higher education.

Their sentiments on the race issue are reverberated in thinking of President Four, who declares:

I have lived in this country for 27 years, and yes I may have been a victim of this or that, but that never bother me. People are different, and people can say what they want to say about you. You can go home and think about it, and be miserable, or you can just ignore them, and move on, and keep working towards your goal, or do the things you want to do.

It’s the outlook on life that matters. If you let these things irritate you, then you will be irritated. You will feel isolated, you will feel discriminated against. These things don’t bother me at all. I can walk outside, and people can say “You have an accent, where are you from?” I would start a conversation with them, and
then I would ask “Where are you from?” I tell them they have an accent too. I never see these things as an attack on me.

It never crossed my mind that I am one of seven Asian American college presidents. I come to the campus to serve all students. The fact that I am an Asian American in no way makes me a better person or more prepared to help students of Asian descent or minorities. Perhaps some will disagree with me on this perspective, but that’s how I see it.

As his comments reveal, President Four acknowledges that he has been a victim of racial discrimination due to his accent and skin color, but he has not been irritated or challenge by it.

The other presidents, too, have experienced some degree of discrimination in their personal and professional careers. President Six has experienced some racial incidents during her presidency, but says, “not anything major”. She shares:

During my first year on campus, a faculty member came to me and questioned my leadership style, saying it’s too Asian. She received emails from me on the weekends and after work hours, and to her those hours were reserved for her private affairs. I think her interpretation is that if she receives emails from me beyond normal business hours, she would have to respond to them. So, I sat down with her and explained that because of my busy schedule, the weekends and evenings are the only time I have to send out what was on my mind. With emails, I certainly don’t expect you to read it during your time off. You can read it whenever you want. But for me, I have to send it out because if I don’t, I am afraid I would forget it or never come around to sending it.

I think my hard work ethic which I acquired as a result of my upbringing requires me to work hard and long hours, and perhaps that work ethic didn’t align with certain people, including this non-Asian faculty. If that is the case, then I don’t know what to say. But to question my leadership style which results from my work ethics and labeling it as “too Asian” may be inappropriate.

President Three experienced her first culture shock when she relocated with her Caucasian husband in Tennessee when she was still in her early 20’s. She remembers:
I think that was my first time experiencing racial discrimination. We were staying with my in-laws for a while, and we didn’t seem to connect well because of how I looked. I left my husband and went to New York for a while, and then to California to start my own career. Racism is about ignorance. I would walk in a grocery store and hear comments like, “Oh, mommy, her hair is so black”.

In my professional career, the discrimination is rather overt. Being a woman and a person of color, sometimes I feel I am invisible in the room. When you raise your hand and speak up, you don’t get acknowledged. It’s not very often, but I am conscientious of those things. I am conscientious when it happens to other people. For example, the accent, for Asian it’s about the accent. If you have a French or British accent, it’s kinda sexy. But a Filipino accent? Sometimes it’s a back-handed comment. I interviewed once and the vice president on the panel wanted to compliment me, but in front of the whole team said, “Hey, you know what, unlike other Filipinos, you don’t have an accent.” My response was, “Of course, I do. I have an accent.” But then I think to myself what’s the point? Why do you want to say that? Even stating it in the positive: “You don’t have an accent” can be demeaning.

These racial incidents irritate me, but they don’t impede my work. If your superior has a discriminatory perception against you, what can you do? I guess you try to excel to prove your worthiness. I think you have to try harder if you are of a different race, because your superior doesn’t originally recognize your ability.

Unlike her four counterparts, President Three is irritated by the racial comments or discrimination levied upon her and believes they don’t belong in our society or workplace.

President Seven is constantly aware of his identity as a Chinese American. He immersed himself in political and civic affairs within the Asian American community at a young age. As such, he is fully aware of the discussions on race and culture in his surrounding community, including the stereotypes often attached to Asian Americans. He admits he’s a social person who constantly seeks ways to network with others. On
many occasions, President Seven has been told by his non-Asian friends and colleagues that he’s different from other Asian Americans given his out-going personality. He says:

I like to use the term that a lot of boards and society see Asians as work horses but not the race-show horses. They have the stereotype that Asians are really hard workers and get things done, but they are not leaders. I think to some extent the stereotype is true because of our cultural upbringing. We’re taught to be humble, to be deferential. Sometimes people misinterpret that to be weak or subservient.

People often tell me “Well, you are not Asian. You are as Asian as about Tiger Woods. You are not a typical Asian. I say “What do you mean by that?” And they say, “Well, you can b.s. with your friends, you can go drinking, you can go play golf, you are very American.” Then, I say “You are right, I am very much Americanized. I am an American-born Asian.”

President Seven’s comments reveal that Asian Americans, in the eyes of mainstream America, are not socially active and possess a degree of humbleness and deference. As such, they are viewed as subservient and not leadership-quality. For President Seven, he defies that stereotype by becoming actively involved in his own Asian American community and beyond.

The accounts by all seven presidents reveal that throughout their personal lives and professional careers they have experienced some degree of discrimination due to their racial identity and biculturalism. The minor incidents such as the ones experienced by President Three in which others commented about her dark black hair or her speaking English without an accent constitute a form of racism which psychologists refer to as racial micro-aggression. According to the American Psychological Association (2013), when racism is so subtle that neither the victim nor perpetrator may be aware of it entirely but can still inflict harm or discomfort to people of color, it is known as racial micro-aggression. A study in the *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*
conducted by Columbia University Psychologist Derald Wing and colleagues found that many Asian-Americans cited the experience of people asking them where they were born or telling them they spoke good English. Sue et al (2007) argue comments such as these send the message that they, Asian Americans, are aliens. "These incidents may appear small, banal and trivial, but we're beginning to find they assail the mental health of recipients," (Sue et al, 2007, p. 42).

**Why Are There So Few Asian American College Presidents?**

The underlying question of this study is why are there so few Asian Americans leading the community colleges California? The search for an explanation to this question is a key reason that inspires and guides this research. Is the under-representation of Asian Americans at the top management levels in education the result of racial discrimination or structural barriers? It is fitting to take this question directly to the seven Asian Americans who have attained the highest position at a community college campus and hear their perspectives on this perplexing issue.

President Four has this to say about the notion that there are certain structural barriers that may impede Asian Americans from attaining the community college presidents:

I hate to disappoint you. I think this is a made-up of the imagination. Asian Americans have a tendency to think that they are different, they are discriminate against, they are elitist, they are technocrats, and that they are not leaders. If you go with that attitude, and you think like that, and let that bother you, you are not going to get it. You need to be more open. Asian Americans don’t want to be bothered. We have this attitude that “I just like to do what I am doing. I don’t need that leadership position.”
But then how do you explain the fact that those who wanted the position but did not get it? President Four explains:

There is the culture piece that is involved. Asians in general cannot accept failure. It’s the guilt feeling. I am a failure. I was being rejected. I didn’t get the job. They turned me down. I am not going to try again.

You know how many times you need to interview before you get a job? A lot of times, and that’s for a normal job where there are thousands of positions available. There are 112 colleges, so there only 112 presidents. I applied to many places and interviewed five times until I got this president position at this college. That does not include many other colleges that didn’t even bother to call me for an interview.

I brought this issue up at one of the API conferences. You have to accept the fact that you will be rejected. And that is something that doesn’t sit well with Asians. I am Asian too. Asians cannot take it. They feel that they have failed. Asians push their children too hard, put pressure that they must succeed. But you need to understand that you will fail many times. And if you are not prepared to fail, you are not going to get the top job.

The persistence to apply for many presidential positions with the hope of landing just one, combined with the willingness to accept failure and learn from it as exhibited by President Four resonates with President Five. Here is President Five’s thought on why Asian Americans are not ascending to the presidency despite their success at the lower management level:

I think it’s a complex issue. I think it has to do with societal factors, personal factors, time depths that each group has in the profession. It’s an intermix of all of these. And certain factors would play a stronger role at different times. It would be difficult to say what exactly is the cause. In race relations we like to say that there is a certain tendency or certain way to explain things. Yes, there are tendencies, but I think sometimes it’s an excuse for us to rationalize certain situations. I don’t think there is enough knowledge to pin-point one or two reasons. Social science, at best, can only indicate certain tendencies. It hardly has the ability to pin point anything despite all the research that has been done.
It’s easy to blame it on the system when an individual fails. And I think when you deal with a person who has failed in reaching the top position, do you tell the person to give up or try harder. Is there a guarantee in society that someone will succeed?

President Five succeeds in attaining the presidency by being persistent:

I was very persistent in applying. Sometimes it crossed my mind that why bother trying. But then I always wanted to do something more. It (attaining the presidency) took me a long time. I interviewed at many, many different places. I became better at interviews. It was a process of learning, the failure. It’s hitting my head against the glass ceiling. I learned as I went through it, about the position, the institution, and about myself. And I found it very interesting. I went to about 10 interviews, including out-of-state, and was a finalist at more than five places. And in this position, it’s all about finding the right match. I never consider that I got turned down for a position because I was not qualified. I see it as not the right match for me, and for the institution.

Rather than citing structural impediments for the lack of Asian American representation at top executive level in the community college system, President Five urges a more comprehensive approach when addressing this issue. Personal factors such as the persistence in applying for multiple positions, the readiness to accept failure and learn from it, and the willingness to relocate and tolerate inconvenience for the individual and family, all have a role in possibly explaining why Asian Americans are not reaching the top position in higher education.

President Two also doesn’t want to blame the system or society for the lack of Asian American representation. She believes:

Ultimately whether you are Asian, green, brown, yellow or whatever, you have to exist in this predominant culture, whatever that is. By this, I mean there is a culture of society, but then there is a culture of education. So it doesn’t matter who you are and where you start with to be successful, you have to blend in with the culture and society that you are in.
I think Asians sometimes don’t, can’t, or aren’t willing to modify themselves in order to fit this culture, if that makes sense. For example, there are particular communication styles in the Asian population that may not fit themselves towards being that high level person. Unless you are willing to modify that, you may not be selected for that role. You may be the most capable, best talented technical person for that job, but part of being the CEO is all that pieces about bringing people along, being charismatic, all that kind of thing. Not all Asians even value those things. Many Asians think that if you are technically strong, everything else should be in place.

President Seven echoes President Two’s comments the qualities necessary to become a college leader. He says:

Being president, you have to be a leader. The stereotype is Asians are really hard workers and get things done, but they are not leaders. People view us as not ready for prime time, not having leadership abilities. I think to some extent the stereotype is true because of our cultural upbringing. I don’t think a lot of people see Asians as leaders. But that is changing because you’re starting to see at very high level like Norm Mineta (U.S Congressman from Bay Area and Secretary of Transportation during the George W. Bush administration). You are starting to see Asians in high-level positions and doing well too. You start to see that in the corporate world too, people like the woman at Avon or Jerry Yang of Yahoo. They start to break the mold.

President Six strikes a similar chord. In pin-pointing the reason for the low Asian American representation at the community colleges, she suggests:

First, I think it has to do with our personality and the culture in which we were brought up. We Asians don’t like to argue in a public setting, and we tend to think that being assertive is similar to being argumentative. I often think that being assertive is different from being argumentative. As president, you have to be assertive and be willing to advance certain agendas or issues. You also must be willing to accept or deal with the resistance from others on campus, the district, or in the community. And I don’t know if Asians are willing to do be assertive in a public forum.
President Three has a differing viewpoint. She is very involved in multiple professional development associations aimed at guiding and training Asian Americans to become college leaders. Through her involvement, she believes there is some degree of institutional racism. She states:

There appears to be something not right. There are reasons why Asian Americans are not ascending to this position. Part of it however is our DNA. Asian Americans like to be invisible, sort of. We want to be able to do our own stuff. There are many who believe we Asian Americans are not good in politics. We self-select. You begin to believe the stereotype. People are just as happy being faculty, why not right? You only have to teach so many hours. You don’t have the responsibilities. Not a lot of Asians choose education because they rather be doctors, lawyers, accountants because their parents you do better with those jobs. But the ones in education, the ones who want to ascend are not ascending, so that’s where I think institutional racism takes place. It’s something that I am always bothered and I feel I have a role to change that. We need to continue to work on it.

The participants’ testimonies appear to contradict the simple argument that racism and institutional barriers are the impediments to Asian Americans achieving the top executive position in higher education. Collectively, they seem to suggest that individual characteristics and personal factors, including but not limited to communication styles, leadership qualities, charisma, personal comfort, tolerance for failure, are the reasons for the low representation of Asian Americans in the top echelon in higher education. While Asian Americans may be stereotyped to possess certain qualities which may or may not be accurate (i.e. hardworking, subservient, technically capable), in the end it is up to the individual to accept or dispel those misconceptions. For these seven Asian American college leaders, they chose not to be molded by these stereotypes and elected to engage themselves in extraordinary things to reach their desired career goals.
Summary of Participants’ Responses to Interview Questions

The interview with each of the seven research participants consists of about 10 questions. The questions were intended to garner information that may answer the three research questions which guide this study. Their responses to the 10 interview questions (see Appendix A) have been categorized into factors or issues that are related to their professional careers, and ultimately their ascension to the presidency. Table 4-1 presents a summary of the participants’ responses to the key issues/factors raised during the interview. Numbers 1-7 represent the identification of the participants, President One – President Seven. A solid, black square suggests a positive response (or “yes”) and a semi-solid, gray square means a negative response (or “no”). A blank, white square means a response was not provided (or “not available”). Presidents Two, President Three, and President Six are female, and the remaining four presidents are male.
Table 4-1    Summary of Interview Responses on Key Issues/Factors

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Is There a Need for More Asian American Presidents?

The majority of the participants see the values that an Asian American president college would bring to the community college campus, and would like to see more Asian Americans in the top position. An increase in the number of Asian American presidents, as they see it, can help to achieve social equity. More importantly, Asian American presidents can serve as role models for the 13% Asian American student population enrolled in the 112 college campuses throughout the state. President Seven is vocal about
this issue and is disappointed that there so few Asian Americans assuming the CEO level in community colleges. He asserts:

I would like to see the low number of Asian Americans increase. That is why I participate every year in the LEAP program in growing leaders. I always believe that the leadership should reflect the diversity of the community. At College G2 where I was president I had 40% Asian American student, and yet very few administrators were Asian American. Not a very good thing. We serve as role models too. We’re not just doing our job. Young people look up to us, and say, “Oh, he’s Chinese and he is the president. That’s very cool. I am Chinese too. Hey, if he can do it, so can I. He’s not that smart.” I think that’s the kind of messaging that goes on.

President One concurs with this perspective as he echoes, “Students need someone to look up to as their role model, someone who shares the same skin color, the same culture and language so they can relate to.” He adds:

There is also a credibility issue if we don’t achieve equal representation. For example, if you have a company that wants to sell its products to a particular clientele, wouldn’t you want your sales representative to be able to relate to the client, speak his/her language, and share what he or she believes. It’s the same in education; you need to find the common ground with your students.

President Six echoes the same sentiment:

We need more Asian American presidents so they can be advocate for students. Asian students face a lot of issues. This notion of Asian students are “model students” is not always true, so they need help. An Asian American president, given his or her background, can relate to those issues better.

President Three has a quite a bit to say about the value an Asian American president brings the college campus. She explains:

Well for one, I think we have a lot to bring to the table. We have a very rich perspective. As Asian American leaders, we just don’t serve Asian Americans. We serve all people of color. In my own role as dean of student affairs, I ended up seeing many students who would have easily fallen through the cracks. They
wouldn’t have gotten the support they needed had they not seen me because I had an understanding of their situation. I had a way to process what they’re going through and understand them at a level that somebody without my own experience or my own multicultural background would have understood.

For example, when I was dean of student affairs, a faculty member wanted me to expel a group of Vietnamese students whom he accused was cheating on their exam. Maybe it happened. At the time, there was a stereotype that Vietnamese American students cheat. When I look deeper into it, and it was helpful that I also included the dean of the department, it is much a responsibility of the teacher also because he was giving the same exam over and over again every semester. He also told the students they could bring a “cheat sheet”. The Vietnamese students decided they knew friends whom they could study with, so they worked as a group to come up with a formula or sampled problem that they all shared. Why not? They weren’t told that they couldn’t work together on the cheat sheet.

When you think about it, when you really go down into it, the students weren’t cheating. They followed the rules. Maybe the rules were incomplete. The teacher should probably have said that they can’t study together, they can’t read together, can’t share the same cheat sheet or whatever. So, in the end I found that they did not violate the code of conduct. The faculty was very unhappy and almost filed a grievance against me. But in the end, he didn’t. This was a white male faculty member, and the dean was a white female. And she stood behind me very strongly, and said no. So, it dissipated.

I also had students who might have violated something but I connected them to something else. When I was College C3, some students would come to me and said, “Hey Dean, remember me, you suspended me or disciplined me, but I am graduating now. I wanted you to know.”

Not that you excuse their behaviors. I was never about excusing their behaviors. But there is a way to reach them, and in that difficult moment, you can connect with them and teach them. I am not saying that I can do it better because I am a person of color, but I have to the ability to understand their situation much better. I am bilingual. I am bicultural, so I understand what it’s like to be from another culture, and it doesn’t have to be Asian. I could apply that to any person of color. I had students who were African American, and when I saw them I wanted them to know that I am there so they could reach out to me, and I won’t pre-judge anyone. I also have different experiences as a dean and vice president. It’s all
about being fair and being able to connect with students. This is something that you carry with you as a leader.

President Three provides a vivid and detail picture of how an Asian American president can be of value to a student who is bicultural because the president, given his and her bicultural understanding, can see the issue more intimately and find ways to help the students.

Contrary to the views expressed by these four presidents, some of the participants do not agree with the contention that equal representation and social equity should be the key reasons behind any increase in the representation of Asian American college presidents. President Two is not hesitant in stating her position on this issue:

I don’t think it does anybody a service. I don’t think I would want to be in a role that I was picked just because I was brown, or because I was a woman, when there are other qualified candidates. It would be insulting to me, insulting to the institution. However, we do need to spread the net very broadly. We need to recruit broadly, increase the pipeline and mentor and guide and speak honestly with people who are considering these roles because we do need diverse people in the pool, in positions. But we also need them to be likely to succeed in those positions.

Several years ago, about 25 college presidents were hired in a year, and 50% of them failed in their first year. They were run-out, non-renewed, fired, but not retired. To me, it doesn’t matter what color you are, what ethnicity you are, transcending to a presidency or in any leadership role is a culture shock that we have to help everyone smooth out. We have to help all people transition into that role.

President Four is very vocal about this issue, as can be understood in his comments:

There’s no need to increase the number of Asian American presidents. That would be a quota system, and that would be illegal.
What we need to ask is: Are they (Asians) capable for the job? Are they applying for the job? Are they ready to accept failure, not a going to get the job? Can they pick themselves up and apply for the position again? Those are questions that need to be asked.

It’s not that I don’t want the number of Asian American presidents to increase. I don’t see the reason why we need to increase the number. If we increase it for Asian Americans, that means we also need to increase for Hispanics, blacks and other racial groups.

It never crossed my mind that I am one of seven Asian American college presidents. I come to the campus to serve all students. The fact that I am an Asian American in no way makes me a better person or more prepared to help students of Asian descent or minorities. Perhaps some will disagree with me on this perspective, but that’s how I see it. Here at the campus, everybody comes together to address the issue. It’s not specific to one particular community.

President Five who distinguishes himself as an educator who happens to be a Chinese American offers a more conciliatory, balanced tone on this sensitive question, “I think the best we can do in a society is to provide the equal opportunity for someone to be successful but we cannot guarantee success”. And he practices what he preaches:

Since I have assumed this presidential position, I have hired three vice presidents (VP of Business, VP of Instruction, and VP of Student Services) who are Asian Americans. I hired them not because they are Asian American. I hired them because they are the best at what they do. They happen to be Asian American.

The comments expressed by the seven presidents can be broadly grouped in two schools of thought; the first one entails more social equity approach while the second one emphasizes competence. Presidents One, President Three, President Six, and President Seven all believe that students with biculturalism could benefit from the bicultural experience that an Asian American president would bring to a community college
campus. Additionally, they are all feel that despite his or her cultural identity, an Asian American must be willing to serve all students regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

President Two, President Four, and President Five agree that a college president must be willing and competent to serve all students on a college campus. However, they argue that culture and race should not be a factor in the selection of a president. The top job at a community college, they contend, should only go to the most competent individual. Social equality and racial preference should not be given any weight to the selection of a president.

The stories and perspectives shared by these seven accomplished Asian American educators differ and sometimes conflict with one another. Their comments reflect their individual experiences, and each has a set different of experiences and worldview. President Five affirms this difference through his concluding comments:

For the seven presidents that you (the researcher) interviewed, I suspect that not only will you get seven different stories, but none of it (reaching the presidency) came easy. It required a certain journey and the journey may be different. The journey itself, I think, is what important because I think it’s all about the learning cycle.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings resulting from the personal interviews with each of the seven research participants, all of whom currently hold the position of president or CEO at seven of the 112 community colleges in California. The chapter began with a snapshot of each president and contains a description of the pathways which ultimately led them attain the highest position at a community college. The narratives, as told in their own words, reflect their personal struggles and how they overcame certain obstacles
to achieve their desired goal of becoming a college president. The participants all have different backgrounds, circumstances, and abilities that affected their ascension to the college. As such, it would be inappropriate to generalize or conclude there are one or two precise pathways to reach the college presidency. However, what emerge from their stories are several factors that play a significant role in their ascension to the presidency.

As the seven research participants represent a very small number of Asian Americans who have successfully attained the top position at a college community, the interviews with them specifically explore their experiences as Asian American educators and what discrimination, if any, have they encountered as a result of their racial identity. While the participants mentioned they have experienced some form of discrimination, they revealed the racial microaggressions they encountered did not deter them from seeking and ascending to the presidency.

The research participants also shared their perspectives on the reasons why there are so few Asian American college presidents and whether there is a need for more Asian Americans in the top executive position. While they offer differing perspectives on these two questions, none could identify any specific structural barrier that may impede the ascent of Asian Americans to the college presidency.

The research participants all have one expressed hope in participating in this study; that is their stories and how they ascend to the presidency can be a source of inspiration and guidance for those who aspire to pursue the noble profession of educating the future generations.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Study

The number of Asian Americans at the top administrative level in higher education is troublingly low. In 2011, a study conducted by American Council on Education (ACE) reveals that only 1.5% of university presidents are Americans of Asian descent, but another study by ACE in 2013 shows that Asian Americans are better represented at the lower administrative chain, such as deans and director. Why is there an underrepresentation of Asian Americans at the top ranks, despite the broad success that this racial population enjoys within the academy?

Researchers have wondered if the slow rise of Asian Americans to the top chain of command is due to structural barriers resulting from racial discrimination. Kumble Subbaswamy, an American from India was recently appointed president at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst after being a finalist at other institutions, can’t recall specific instances when he faced discrimination in his career but said he’s “sure that people face these things” (Kiley, 2013). According to L. Ling-chi Wang who teaches at the University of California in Berkeley, Asian Americans are marginalized and invisible at the top rungs of American higher education despite considerable success as students and professors at many institutions, (Jashick, 2013). Northern Michigan University President Leslie Wong, one of the few Asian American university presidents today, concurs that Asian Americans advance at high rates to jobs as professors, department
chairs, and lower level administrative positions, but hit the bamboo ceiling when it comes to the top position. "We have no idea what is going on but the data are unmistakable. It is most benign but if the label was African American or female, I'm sure the discussion would be louder," Wong was quoted in an article published by Inside Higher Education (Jashick, 2013).

Contributing to the limited literature on Asian American leadership in higher education, this study explores the under-representation of this racial group at the community college level in California. The California community college system educates a substantial number of students each year. Despite severe budget cuts in recent years which have forced its 112 campuses to reduce course offerings by as much as 15% and turn away hundreds of thousands of students, the community college system in California still served more than 2.4 million students during the 2011-12 school year. Based on the sheer number of students served, the California community college system is arguably the largest the system of higher learning in the world (CCCO 2012). The value the community college system brings to California can be measured in multiple ways, including training 70-80% of the state’s key professions such as nursing, firefighting, law enforcement, and emergency medical services. Additionally, the California community college is the college of choice for many students to take the required lower division courses before transferring to the four-year California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) to complete their undergraduate degrees.

Given the critical role the community college plays in educating Californians and training the state’s workforce, it is important to understand who attends the community
college and who leads the college campus. Data published by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCO 2013) show that of the 2.4 million community college students during the 2011-12 school year, 13%, or 312,000 students, are of Asian descent. The number of Asian Americans who lead these community colleges during the same school year, conversely, is a low 6%. To be exact, there were only 7 Asian American presidents in the entire system of 112 colleges. This number does not include the 72 districts of which the 112 colleges belong. Each district is led by a chancellor who hires and supervises a college president. At the time of this writing, there was no Asian American who serves as district chancellor. The under-representation of Asian Americans at the California community college leadership is consistent with the survey conducted by ACE of colleges and universities in the country.

Research has shown that college presidents with culturally diverse backgrounds can bring their multiple perspectives to the campus, thereby enabling their faculty and students to be exposed to various opinions, viewpoints, and ways of thinking. Through their lived experiences and cultural exposure, these bilingual and bicultural executives can also serve as role models for faculty, staff and students who share similar values and beliefs. To that end, this research study seeks to understand the pathways and experiences of the seven Asian American college presidents currently presiding over seven community colleges in California. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What circumstances, preparation, and strategies have propelled Asian Americans to become college presidents?
2. What positive and negative experiences have Asian Americans encountered in their journey to become college presidents?

3. Why are Asian Americans under-represented at the top executive level in higher education?

The following sections in this chapter provide an interpretation of the findings collected from the interviews with the seven research participants. The themes presented in Chapter 4 will be discussed relative to the literature in Chapter 2. Additionally, recommendations on what can be done to achieve a more equitable representation of Asian Americans at the leadership level in the California community college will be presented. The chapter concludes with a suggestion of topics for further research, a reflection by the researcher on the unique interactions with the research participants, and a concluding statement.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The narratives shared by the seven Asian American presidents were decoded in accordance to Creswell’s (2009) coding strategy for a phenomenological qualitative inquiry. Using this strategy, the researcher has identified several key themes that address the three research questions which guide this research study.

**Research Question #1**

The first research question states: *What circumstances, preparation, and strategies have propelled Asian Americans to become college presidents?*
Developing expertise in one specific service area. While there was no single circumstance, preparation, or strategy that pertains to all seven research participants in their ascent to presidency, each was deliberate in choosing a pathway that aligns with his or her individual background and interest. President One, President Five, and President Seven were intentional on their part to work with the Asian refugee communities early in their careers. Through their work with this special student population, all three developed their own expertise on the subject matter and were eventually recognized by their colleagues and superiors.

The emergence of the Asian-American student population in the 1980’s and its continued growth into the following decades were major demographic shifts which yielded employment opportunities for those who were able to understand the ramifications of the shift. President One, President Five, and President Seven saw this demographic shift and developed skills and expertise to deal with this growing student population. Their ability to work effectively with English learners from Asia – which their colleagues of other racial groups might not have – was a deliberate choice. As President Seven simply stated, he intentionally chose to work at colleges which had a large Asian American student population because he felt his own bicultural identity would align well with those campuses.

President Three and President Six chose a slightly different pathway and attained the presidency solely through their work in the student services area. Neither woman had taught any college course, but their expansive knowledge of issues pertinent to student support, achievement, and success at a community college trumped their peers because
they had served in multiple capacities and at various campuses. While both stated they were not thinking about the presidency until later in their careers, they recognized that advancement to higher positions for them would only be in the student service area.

President Two and President Four chose the academic service route, a pathway believed to be more traditional to reach the presidency. Both earned their doctorate degrees early in their lives and became community college faculty. Given their effectiveness at teaching and managing affairs related to academics, they quickly rose to become department chair, division dean, and eventually vice president overseeing instruction or career training. Both presidents were deliberate in developing their expertise in the academic service area and did not venture into other service areas such as student services.

Based on the findings resulting from the pathways of these seven research participants, each deliberately chose one area of service, either student service or academic affairs, and honed his or her skills and expertise in that specific area. They stay the course and eventually earned the recognition of their colleagues and superiors, which ultimately aided their rise to the presidency.

*The importance of family cohesiveness.* The family played a critical factor in the career advancement of these seven research participants. The participants cited the values of hard work, determination, and tenacity; qualities that were instilled upon them by their family and culture. Additionally, their parents infused in them the importance of an education. They took their parent’s advice to heart by pursuing their educational goals at highly ranked institutions. Four of the participants – President Three, President Four,
President Five, and President Six – resettled in the United States while in their 20’s to pursue their educational goals. Their determination and work ethic, which were heavily influenced by their family, got them through their schooling; and once they found their careers, the same values propelled them to success.

The three women presidents in the study stressed the importance of family cohesiveness. In fact, their decision to apply for the administrative positions, including the presidency, was impacted by their desire to be with their immediate family members. President Two applied for the presidency at College B in Southern California because her parents had chosen Southern California to retire. She wanted to be close to her ailing parents and to care for them, just as they had cared for her 40 years earlier. The job opportunity at College B enabled her to do just that. For President Three, a primary reason for her acceptance of the vice presidency of student services at College C3 in Northern California was because her aging mother lived near the campus. She felt she needed to spend time with her. The impetus for her applying for the presidency at College C, a few years later, was because her two sons had moved to Southern California and the position would allow her to be close to both of them. President Six quit her job early in her professional career to raise her son and daughter so they could receive the best care from their mother. Despite working at multiple campuses scattered throughout Southern and Central California for over 10 years, President Six never sought a secondary residence near her place of employment. Every day, she drove home from work, sometimes up to 100 miles each way, to help her children with their homework and put them to bed.
The tension between family obligations and professional careers is more evident and profound in women than in men, as shown in the cases of these three female presidents. These women are not only remarkable in what they do professionally, but their love and care for their immediate family members are unfathomable. For them, the family comes first. Their careers were impacted by their affection for the family, but they managed to balance both family and work obligations very well.

**Growth through professional development and mentorship.** The research participants indicated their career advancements were due, in part, to the mentorship and professional development they sought. Whether it was by seeking a doctorate degree or engaging in leadership programs, the participants were preparing themselves for the additional responsibilities that a higher administrative position would entail, including the presidency. For instance, President Two took advantage of the Chair Academy to prepare herself for the dean’s job. She also acknowledged the value of her doctoral studies because the rigorous process has sharpened her critical thinking, public speaking, and persuasion abilities; skills that are critical to her current presidential duties. President Three and Seven were heavily involved in a number of leadership seminars, including the League for Innovation in the Community College, Leadership Education for Asian American Professionals (LEAP), and Institute for Educational Management at Harvard. Through these professional development programs, the research participants not only acquired leadership skills but were also inspired by those they met.

Mentorship was also cited as a key contributor to their career success. By seeking guidance from the established leaders, the participants could glean from their mentors
what works – and what doesn’t – when confronting challenging situations. Several participants, including President One, President Two, President Three, and President Seven said their mentors guided, encouraged, and supported them to achieve their positions. Mentorship was also useful for them as it expanded their opportunities for network with other colleagues.

The factors that affected the pathways of these seven participants parallel with those found in other studies on pathways to the presidency. In her research on the pathways of three minority women, including one Mexican American, one Native American, and one Asian American who made history by becoming the first female of color president at four-year degree granting college, Turner (2007) notes that her research participants “benefited from structural opportunities to develop the capabilities, including placement interim appointments, placement in leadership roles on highly visible and influential committees, and in being nominated for increasingly high-level positions” (p. 27). It is interesting to note that prior to being named president at a baccalaureate degree granting college, each of these study participants held a presidency/chancellorship at a two-year college. Turner’s findings correspond with the participants in this study as they all sought to develop their capabilities by engaging in leadership programs, serving in interim positions, and being nominated consistently for higher level positions. In his exploration of the lives and dreams of four immigrant Latinos who realized their dream of becoming community presidents in California, Rodriguez (2005) cites factors such as family, mentorship, and professional development as key influencers in their pathways to the presidency; factors that were also cited by Turner. Studies by other doctoral
candidates (Wilking, 2001; Neilson, 2002; Somer, 2007; Kobayashi, 2008) also mention similar factors that affected the pathways of Asian American administrators.

**Research Question #2**

The second research question seeks to understand the experiences the seven Asian Americans encountered in their lives and careers, and whether their racial identity was the cause of any racial discrimination. Thus, the question asks: **What positive and negative experiences have Asian Americans encountered in their journey to become college presidents?**

*Overcoming racial microaggressions and stereotypes.* A consistent revelation by the seven research participants is that as Asian Americans, they have all encountered some form racial discrimination, either in their personal life or professional career. For example, President Two was physically threatened with a baseball bat by a few of her classmates right in front of her home when she was a high school student in rural Pennsylvania simply because of her skin color. While the other research participants did not encounter as drastic of an experience as President Two, they also experienced some form of racial mistreatment. President One believes he was not accepted into the Old Boy’s Network which comprised of mostly white males because he is Chinese. President Three recalls an incident when a vice president on an interview panel broached the subject of accent and praised her for speaking English without an accent like others from her native land, when in fact she does have a slight accent. President Three also felt because of her female status and Asian look, she is sometimes not recognized or called upon to speak in meetings with executives. President Six’s leadership style was
characterized by a faculty member as being “too Asian” because she worked long hours, including sending emails on the weekends.

The experiences encountered by the research participants, with the exception of President Two who was physically threatened, take the form of racial microaggression. Coined by Chester Pierce, racial microaggression refers to the subtle exchanges which can be demeaning to the participants. Pierce (1978) writes: “In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (p. 66). Contemporary Critical Race Theory scholars Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) contributed to this theoretical framework; and Sue et al (2007) expanded the definition to include: “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273).

Despite the racial microaggression levied upon them and the inequity that comes with it, the research participants did not allow the mistreatment to deter them in their careers. In fact, they confronted and overcame those discriminations. This is evident in their attainment of the presidency. When others asked President Four: “You have an accent, where are you from?” He stopped and started a conversation with them, and said: “You have an accent too. Where are you from?” President Three, who is sensitive to these microaggressions, simply states: “These racial incidents irritate me, but they don’t impede my work.”
**Transforming challenges into motivations.** What is remarkable about these seven Asian Americans is their ability to transform the challenges resulting from racial microaggressions into drives. Their strong will and tenacity to march forward against all odds is what led them to success. For instance, although denied access to the Club or “Old Boys Network” because of his Asian race, President One was determined to attract the attention of those in power by acquiring knowledge and skills they otherwise did not have so they could come to him for answers and solutions. He declares: “I had to fight and work for everything every step of the way.” President Three asserts: “I think you have to try harder if you are of a different race, because your superior doesn’t originally recognize your ability.” Even more profound, President Two had to show her fellow classmates who physically threatened her that she had something to offer. Not only did she have to find ways to overcome the physical threat, she was determined to excel in her studies so her classmates could take her seriously. The mistreatment that President Two faced was consequential because from it, she was determined to transform her challenges into drives.

If there is one salient theme that cuts across all seven research participants in this study, it is the resilience that they all possess. With this resilience, they were able to march forward towards their particular goals with strength, courage, and pride despite any head wind or obstacles. As the prominent African American educator Booker T. Washington (1901) once wrote, “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed” (p. 24).
Like Booker T. Washington, these seven Asian Americans have certainly overcome obstacles. That is why they are extraordinary individuals and exceptional leaders, and deserve a bright spot in the annals of community colleges in California.

Research Question #3

The third research question attempts to explore the reasons why there are so few Asian Americans occupying the top executive position at the community college, through the perspectives of these seven accomplished Asian American educators. The question asks: Why are Asian Americans under-represented at the top executive level in higher education?

Data show that Asian Americans are nearly absent among the leadership ranks in higher education (Escuta & O’Brien, 1991; Hune & Chan, 1997). Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, researchers (Chang, 1993; Chang, 1999; Escueta and O’Brien, 1995; Liu, 2009; Siu, 1996; Teranishi, 2002) have found Asian Americans face some degree of racism in the field of education. Cho (1996) points to racial harassment and accent discrimination as barriers to upward mobility for certain Asian Americans, particularly female. President Six’s comments from the narrative echo this reality when she states: “The ones in education, the ones who want to ascend are not ascending, that’s where I think there is institutional racism that takes place. It’s something that bothers me and I feel I have a role [to change that].”

The glass ceiling theory which informs the works of Woo (1994), Cotter et al (2001), and Lee (2002) suggests the American public views as Asian Americans in general as smart, compliant, and technically competent; but they lack the skills and
qualities to be leaders and top managers. Hune (1998) suggests cultural issues may pose a barrier to their upward mobility. She cites the politeness and deference to a senior colleague – values that Asian Americans hold – can be perceived as lacking qualities of leadership and confidence in abilities. Renu Khator, an American woman who was born and raised in India and in 2008 was appointed president of the University of Houston, agrees the values that Asians hold are often in conflict with those perceived to be vital for a university president. The accomplished Asian American educational leader wrote: “I started my career facing many of those same challenges as a stereotypical Asian American—bashful about speaking in public, academically inclined, reluctant to talk about myself, enmeshed with my extended family, deferential and in awe of figures of authority, and publicly dismissing any desire to be in administration and assume a leadership role” (Khator, 2010, p. 1). But things for Khator changed. With the guidance of a mentor and enrollment in various leadership training programs, she forced herself to acquire the skills demanded of a university president. Because she was able to balance her own cultural values and the qualities required of a president, Khator today holds a key leadership position in higher education that not many Asian Americans can achieve.

The fact that Asian Americans hold certain cultural values which consequently limit their ascension to the presidency resonates with the perspectives of President Two, President Four and President Five. Responding to the question of why Asian Americans can’t attain the presidency when they really wanted to, President Two says:

I think there are particular communication styles in the Asian population that may not fit themselves towards being that level person [college president]. Unless you are willing to modify that, you may not be selected for that role. You may be the
most capable, best talented technical person for that job, but part of being the CEO is all about bringing people along, being charismatic, and all of those qualities. Not all Asians even value those things.

President Four concurs, but also adds:

There is the culture piece that is involved. Asians in general cannot accept failure. It’s the guilt feeling. I am a failure. I was being rejected. I didn’t get the job. They turned me down. I am not going to try again…

To become president of his current institution, President Four applied at many different places and interviewed as many as five or six times before landing the presidency at his current college. He admitted he had failed many times and advised that if one is not prepared to fail, one will not get the top job. He went on to propose:

What we need to ask is: Are they (Asians) for the job? Are they applying for the job? Are they ready to accept failure, not a going to get the job? Can they pick themselves up and apply for the position again? Those are questions that need to be asked.

President Four’s comments imply that he doesn’t agree with the notion that there are structural barriers or external limitations aimed at preventing Asian Americans from becoming college presidents. If there is any barrier or limitation, he believes it is self-imposed or culturally imparted.

President Five shares a similar view with President Two and President Four. He, too, believes an individual’s ability and tolerance play a major in achieving the presidency. President Five’s reply to the third research question takes the form of a query:

It’s easy to blame it on the system when an individual fails. And I think when you deal with a person who has failed in reaching the top position, do you tell the
person to give up or try harder. Is there a guarantee in society that someone will succeed?

Like President Four, President Five was also persistent in applying for the presidency. At one point, he was about to give up, but his desire to do more and seek new challenges kept him going. He shares:

I was satisfied at what I was doing, but then I always wanted to do something more. I had confidence that I was capable of doing more. I just need to find a right match. I never considered that I got turn down because I was not qualified. I always thought it was not a good match… A good match is measured in several dimensions: whether it fits with my family circumstances and all of that.

President Five implies that one must carefully consider one’s family situation when seeking the presidency. President Two, again, wholeheartedly agrees with this point. She confesses:

Being president is a lot of hard work and sacrifice on the family. My son comes with me to plays, football games, and school events, as well as my husband. And there are crazy hours. It’s a seven-day job. You have to have a family that understands and supports it. Or you have to find another job. It is not a job, not a career; it’s a life-style choice. You have to move around. The average tenure of a presidency now is 3 years. So, you need to be willing to move your family around and go to the next place, and change state if you need. Rare is the person to become president at the institution where they started.

The explanations by President Two, President Four, and President Five seem to debunk the assertion that the under-representation of Asian Americans at the community college leadership level is solely the result of discrimination or social barriers externally towards this racial population as maintained by Critical Race scholars and Glass Ceiling theorists. These three leaders want to suggest that personal preferences, family
considerations, leadership skills, and cultural values all play a vital role in one’s capacity to become a college president. To achieve the top executive position, they seem to imply, the candidates – including Asian Americans – must be adequately prepared.

**Interpretation of Findings through Relevant Theories**

The findings resulting from the research participants’ narratives are interpreted through the lenses of glass ceiling and Critical Race Theory, two theoretical frameworks which guide this study. The interpretation of the themes or factors are paraphrased and illustrated in Figure 5-1. Each of the themes is reflected in either the Critical Race Theory or glass ceiling theory. The racial microaggression that the participants indicated they experienced in their personal lives or professional careers are interpreted through the Critical Race Theory. Also, the Old Boys Network that President One claimed he was prohibited from joining due to his race and ethnicity can be seen through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Additionally, early in his career, President One’s superiors and colleagues assumed that if he’s Asian American, he should be able to work with all of the refugee students from Asia. While serving this special student population, President One had developed an expertise in working with Asian American students. The assumption that if an Asian American can serve any Asian American student population, regardless of which specific country the student comes from or what language the student speaks, carries a Critical Race Theory implication.
The glass ceiling theory suggests that the ascension to the top executive position for many Asian Americans is impeded by certain personal factors and cultural values that may not align with the qualities or skills required of a college president. Factors such as the desire to locate where their family members reside may limit an Asian American’s chance to become president. The research shows that the female participants – President Two, President Three, and President Six – have strong family obligations or value family cohesiveness. For these three women, when and where they would seek the college presidency was impacted by where their family members reside. The other three factors – the need for professional development, mentorship/networking, and persistence – are also interpreted through the glass ceiling paradigm because they relate to personal factors or cultural values commonly held by Asian Americans, such as lack assertiveness or tolerance for failure or rejection.
Figure 5-1 Model of Pathway to the Presidency

**Model of Pathway to the Presidency**

Factors affecting research participants' pathways relative to glass ceiling theory and critical race theory

The College Presidency

Glass Ceiling Theory
- Family Cohesiveness
- Professional Development
- Mentorship/Networking
- Persistence

Critical Race Theory
- Micro-aggression
- Specialization
- Old Boys Network

**Recommendations for Action**

In its most recent publication *On the Pathway to the Presidency 2013* which examines the demographics of the presidents at 149 universities and colleges in the United States, the American Council on Education (ACE) reports that in 2012 there were only 13% presidents who are from racial or ethnic minorities. The report also compares the number of Asian Americans who are chief administrative officers (e.g. deans, vice president of instruction, provost) between 2008 and 2012 and finds that the percentage of
Asian Americans holding these positions declines from 3.7% to 2.4% during the four year period. If the pipeline for college and university presidents is through the chief administrative ranks, which traditionally is the case, then the data is particularly troubling for Asian Americans. The report emphasizes the need for diversity because of the value it brings:

Diversity—of both thought and background—helps drive fresh ideas and perspectives, enriching the intellectual and cultural environment of an organization. This study underscores the importance of developing a diverse higher education leadership pipeline, which is essential to meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population" (ACE, 2013, p.1).

The need to increase the representation of Asian Americans at the top administrative posts in the community college is echoed by the research participants in this study. The following six-point recommendations are made based on the findings from the study. The recommendations should be considered and implemented by college educators, but most importantly by Asian Americans who believe there should be more Asian American college presidents. If enacted, these six strategies can help to achieve a more equitable representation of Asian Americans in educational leadership.

1. **Provide Mentorship for promising Asian Americans**

Provide mentorship to aspiring Asian American educators who are currently community college faculty or administrators. If each of the current seven presidents can identify one, preferably several, aspiring Asian Americans and personally encourage, support, and guide them in their career trajectories, the probability to increase the number of Asian American college president is higher. As the research participants have shown, they attained the presidency due in part to the guidance and support they received from
Aspiring Asian Americans would be thrilled and further motivated when they have a shepherd who can guide them through the steps and ropes to reach the presidency.

2. **Engage Asian Americans in Professional Development**

   Engage aspiring Asian Americans in professional development and leadership training. A college president must, at a minimum, possess the following attributes: assertiveness, political savvy, effective communication and listening skills, conceptual or big-picture thinking, and ability to engage others. These skills are not typically taught in the traditional master’s and doctoral programs. Additionally, they are attributes that may conflict with the traditional Asian values of respect for others and deference to authority.

   It is imperative that Asian Americans learn, develop, and practice leadership skills that are deemed essential of a college president. Since its founding in 1982, the national, non-profit Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) has attempted to “grow leaders” within the Asian and Pacific communities across the globe. While the program is lauded for its focus on Asian Americans, it lacks a specific focus on the issues and qualities pertinent to the responsibilities of a community college president in California. A more tailored program that can groom Asian Americans to become community college presidents in California may be useful.

3. **Provide Opportunities for Networking beyond the Asian American Community**

   Establish opportunities for Asian Americans to network within the Asian American communities and the greater community of higher education. Having an
expansive network is beneficial for Asian Americans holding presidential ambitions because success is achieved, in part, on who you know. President Seven is a skilled practitioner of this idea as he never ceases to align himself with strategic partners who are decision makers. For the past decade or so, Asian Americans have gathered in San Francisco at the annual Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) conference to confer on issues pertinent to Asian Americans in higher education. Attendees are predominantly faculty, administrators, consultants, or policy-makers who are Americans of Asian descent. However, those who typically sit in hiring committees for college presidents are not Asian Americans. It is imperative that Asian Americans – whether individually or collectively – connect, bond, and network with non-Asian Americans who have a say of influence in the selection of a college president.

4. **Consider Family Circumstances**

Consider personal and family situations and plan accordingly to attain the presidency. As shared by the research participants, rarely does one become president at the same institution or district where one has worked. To attain the presidency, one must be willing to move. That means uprooting the family and relocating to a new community which may create discomfort for both the individual and family, particularly families with school-age children. The preference of the family and the workload requirements associated with the duties of a college president may not align. It is critically important for any individual with presidential ambitions to consider the implications that such a career move would impact the family, and adequately prepare for the changes.
5. **Begin Preparation through Schooling and Job-shadowing**

Prepare oneself the challenging and complex responsibilities of a college president. A college president, as the research participants conveyed, is not an easy job. One must be academically astute, conceptually skillful, and technically competent to effectively handle the myriad of tasks and competing interests confronting the college president on a daily task. Presidential search committees will consider candidates who possess the minimum requirements as demonstrated through the candidate’s education level, experience, and background. While the minimum qualification for a presidential position is a Master’s degree, those with doctorate degrees are viewed more favorably. All of the seven recipients, except for one who is completing his doctoral dissertation, hold a doctorate degree. Asian Americans should enroll in doctoral programs, either Ph.D or Ed.D, so they can be more marketable to presidential search committees. In addition, while in their current educational roles, Asian Americans should seek duties beyond their traditional job descriptions to accumulate more knowledge and experience. Follow the path that President Six took by taking on an interim president position. Such a rare opportunity would provide an invaluable experience of what it is like to be a college president, before seriously considering a run for the permanent position.

6. **Be Persistent in Applying for the Presidency**

Be persistent in applying for the presidency and be willing to accept rejection. Many of the research participants attained the presidency by applying to multiple presidential vacancies and interviewing at several campuses. In most cases, they were denied the position they applied for; or in the words of President Four and President Five,
they have “failed”. However, these two individuals were not deterred by their failure and refused to give up. They picked themselves up after each failed attempt and tried again. Accepting failure is not something that Asian Americans view lightly or accept easily. But Asian Americans must learn to accept failure and be persistent in applying. The number of Asian American presidents is sure to remain low if Asian Americans refuse to apply for the top educational position.

**Implications of Transformational Leadership and Public Policy**

This research study contains implications of transformational leadership and public policy, two major components embodied in the Doctorate in Educational Leadership Program at the California State University, Sacramento of which this study is sanctioned.

**Transformational Leadership**

Coined by James McGregor Burns (1978), the concept of transformational leadership is practiced when the leader induces the follower to act for certain goals that represent the values, motivations, aspirations, and expectations of both the leader and the led. Burns further posits the leader is not merely wielding power, but appeal to the values of the follower. In doing so, the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations of both the leader and the led are raised, and thus it has a transforming effect on both (Burns, 1978).

Bass (1997) builds upon the theory of transformational leadership by Burns and suggests there are four interrelated components that leaders use to move followers into
the transformational style. The first of these four components is the genuine trust based on solid moral and ethical foundation that is built between the leader and follower. The second is the meaning that is embodied in the shared goals and undertakings. The third is intellectual stimulation that arises from the questioning of assumptions generating of more creative solutions to problems. The fourth component is the viewpoint that the follower is an aspiring individual who can fulfill self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and self-worth through appropriate coaching, mentoring, and growth opportunities.

John Kotter, a former Harvard professor and internationally acclaimed management guru, echoes the perspectives of Burns and Bass and views the fundamental purpose of leadership is to produce change. Kotter (1996) contends leadership is about appealing to the values of the followers by satisfying their needs for achievement, sense of belonging, and desire for recognition.

The concept of transformational leadership so eloquently described by Burns, Bass, and Kotter is evident in the practice of the research participants. All seven Asian Americans chose the community college as a career, or avocation, as they wish to transform the lives of the students at their campus. They do so by building trust with their faculty and staff, and inspire their followers to work towards the shared goal of enabling and empowering future generations.

President Two sees herself as a “developer of people.” Her mission in life, as she sees it, is to grow, develop, and empower others; hence education is the perfect field for her. Her leadership style is one dominated by the idea of WOO, short for winning others over. She discovered she has the capacity to “woo” others when she conducted a
strengths inventory certified by the Clifton StrengthsQuest (2013), which is part of the Gallup's Education Practice. The exercise helps her to recognize that she has the ability to engage with strangers, build rapport with others, and energize her followers in a way that wins their hearts and minds. Her six years at College B, thus far, has been focused on making “…transparent, inclusive decisions, and empowering her faculty, staff, and administrators.”

President Four believes a leader must recognize that each individual plays an important role and has something to contribute to the organization. The leader, he posits, needs to relate to his/her followers, build relationships with others, and earn their trust. Practicing what he preaches, President Four walks around his campus and shakes hands with everyone he comes into contact, from the students to the custodians to the deans. His success as a leader is measured not by what he does or claims, but by the success of his followers. As such, he “would not let anyone fail” because he is always there to provide guidance and support to his followers.

The beliefs and practices of these Asian American transformative leaders, as described, align seamlessly with the transformational model of leadership posited by Burns, Bass, and Kotter. Those who have attained or will attain the college presidency, Americans of Asian descent or not, should be guided by the practice of transformational leadership, as exemplified by the seven Asian American college presidents in this study.

Public Policy

The public discourse on race and diversity in America took a turning point in the 1960’s when the civil rights movement resulted in significant legislation that prohibits
employment discrimination based race and ethnicity. In California, voters approved Proposition 209 in 1996 which bars public agencies from discriminating or granting preferential treatment to any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin in the areas of public employment, education, or contracting. The California legislation, in essence, makes it illegal for public schools to grant employment to any individual because of his or her racial identity. For instance, a community college that considers an applicant’s race, ethnicity, and culture in the selection of a college president would violate existing equal employment opportunities law.

As the nature of this research study is to examine ways to increase the representation of Asian Americans at the leadership level in public educational institutions, the researcher is cognizant of the implication this topic has relative to the current legislation on affirmative action and public discourse on equity and inclusion. Some may ask why continue the debate on the topic of racial equality. Doing so, they argue, would only exacerbate the division among the different racial groups and the separation between the minority groups and the white Caucasian population. President Four, in his response to the question on whether the number of Asian American presidents should be increased, declares:

There is no need to increase to increase the number of Asian American presidents. There would be a quota system. That would be illegal.

Later in the interview, he adds:

It’s not that I don’t want to the number of Asian American presidents to increase. I don’t see the reason why we need to increase the number. If we increase it for Asian Americans, that means we also need to increase for Hispanics, blacks, and other racial groups.
Frank Wu, a legal scholar and public intellectual who is currently dean of the University of California, Hastings School of Law in San Francisco, has a differing perspective on the issue of racial equality and affirmative action than President Four. Wu (2002) believes policies that benefit underrepresented groups are justifiable because such policies serve as counter-measures to the discriminatory effects that minority racial groups in the United States have experienced over decades. He notes that racial inequality still exists in America, despite the majority of the American public support racial equality. He points to statistics showing the advantages that white people have over black and other minority groups, including areas in infant mortality, life expectancy, housing segregation, educational outcomes, and employment opportunities.

The late Ron Takaki (1998) points to the fact that we as Americans are embarking upon a century in which no Americans will be the majority group anymore. The prominent Japanese American scholar calls upon all Americans to re-affirm our nation’s founding principle of equality and urged us to put aside fears of the “disuniting of America”. He echoes the Langston Hughes famous words, “Let America be America, where equality is in the air we breathe”.

The dialogue on equality, the researcher believes, should continue as equity in America has not been achieved. This study seeks to contribute to the public discourse on the issue of diversity and equity with the anticipation and optimism that Americans of all races and cultures, including those of Asian descent, can have a fair share at the opportunities afforded in a free, fair, and just democratic American society.
Recommendations for Further Study

In this research study, several topics were triggered either from the literature or findings resulting from the participants’ narratives that may warrant further research. The literature on Asian American leadership is inadequate, and with so few Asian Americans having attained the presidency in higher education, research on this focused topic is even rare and much needed. While this study focuses on the seven current college presidents in California in 2013, other topics would also be useful to explore and would add to the body of literature. The following is a list of topics for other doctoral candidates or researchers to consider.

- Explore the pathways and experiences of all Asian American college presidents and chancellors, past and present;
- Compare the pathways and experiences of Asian American presidents at the community college, CSU, and UC campuses;
- Conduct a longitudinal study of a few college presidents to understand life events and developmental trends;
- Survey community college presidents in the U.S. to understand trends in pathways and experiences;
- Explore the leadership styles of Asian American college presidents and how they are different from presidents of other racial groups;
- Examine the benefits that an Asian American president brings to the college campus and the impact on student success;
Investigate what is deemed “fit” by hiring committees, chancellors, and board of trustees who ultimately hire the college president;

Explore the reasons for the non-selection of Asian American who applied for the presidency;

Examine the influence that Asian American civic leaders, elected officials, and college trustees have on the selection of a college president.

Reflections of Author’s Experience and Conclusion

I am grateful for the personal and professional growth that has resulted from this research study. I set my mind on this topic very early on in my doctoral study because I have always wanted to work on a topic that is culturally grounded. My interest in cultural affairs and diversity issues dates back to my high school years when I founded the International Club and organized the first multi-cultural festival for the multi-ethnic student body to share and appreciate the many wonderful cultures that existed on my high school campus. Since then, I have immersed myself on the issues relevant to culture, race, and diversity.

Like some of the research participants in this study, my journey to the United States is also marked by some degree of struggle. My journey began one summer day in 1981 when I fled Vietnam along with when my father and three older brothers. We were fleeing our Motherland to escape from the oppressive control of the Vietnamese Communist regime at the time. But just one day after leaving the shores of Central Vietnam, we encountered a major storm in South China Sea. The tiny fishing boat that
carried us almost capsized in the high sea. Miraculously, our boat didn't sink. Through trials and tribulations, we found ourselves in the United States one year later.

My father instilled in me the values of hard work and kindness towards others. As a bicultural and bilingual student throughout my school years, I have learned and benefitted from the many wonderful cultural values embodied in the both American and Vietnamese way of life. I believe I am a better person because of this diversity.

The aim of any dialogue on diversity, I believe, should be to arrive at awareness, appreciation, and equity. We are a stronger people because of the values that diversity offers and strengths that each and every American from all corners of the world brings. Stimulated by this philosophy, I embark on this research project to ascertain the incredible stories that each of the seven Asian American educational leaders has to tell.

I have immensely enjoyed my time with each of the college presidents. I am inspired by their remarkable stories and their profound determination to march forward to achieving their goals. The obstacles they encountered did not deter them, but in fact emboldened them. The cultural capital resulting from their biculturalism has enabled them to see things from multiple perspectives. Their unwavering commitment to educating students of all backgrounds is commendable and should be emulated by all educators in our increasingly diverse schools and communities. From them I have learned a great deal, and for them I reserve my highest respect and deepest admiration.

It is my hope that the stories of these accomplished Asian American educators, told from their perspectives, can be a source of inspiration, direction, and optimism for those who wish to seek higher education leadership positions.
APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. **Please describe your career path history?**
   (Probes: What in your childhood lead you to where you are now? Events, persons, facilitators, challenges? What factors lead you to education, and into administrative positions?)

2. **How did you ascend to the current position and come to this particular institution?**
   (Probes: Is the current position something you had endeavored or planned to achieve for a long time? What were the facilitators or challenges that you thought you would encounter in in the path to this position. What did you actually experienced? Has your relationship with the hiring authority or superior help or hurt your attainment of this position?)

3. Given what you have gone through to this be your current position, do you think you would have experienced differently if you were not an Asian American?

4. **Tell me about your goals, visions and plans as President of this campus?**
   (Probes: What are some concrete activities are you doing to achieve your goals/plans?

5. **What is it like to be President of this institution?** (High/lows, good/bad experiences or challenges that you overcame? Tensions or ease for you as an Asian American CEO?)

6. **What advice do you have for Asian Americans aspiring to become a senior administrator in the community college in California?** (What should they expect, how can they overcome obstacles and succeed in attaining and retaining the position?)

7. What do you think should be done systemically so more Asian Americans can attain leadership positions like you in public higher education?

8. Why do you think public higher education in California needs more API administrators?

9. What training/educational/networking opportunities do you see as helpful for future API administrators?

10. Do you have other comments to add or advice you can give to those who see you a role model in higher education.
APPENDIX B
Letter to Research Participants

Dear (Research Participant Name):

My name is Man Phan and I am a doctoral student at CSU, Sacramento. I am in the process of completing my doctoral dissertation research for my Ed.D degree, which I would like to obtain in May 2013. I would like to ask for your permission so I may come by your campus to conduct a 60-minute interview with you for my dissertation research.

Titled “Pathways and experiences of Asian American presidents at California community colleges”, my dissertation seeks to examine the pathways and experiences of the seven Asian Americans CEOs who currently lead the seven different community college campuses/districts throughout California. You are one of this select group of CEOs. The research, I believe, would be of interest to individuals wanting to learn from the success of Asian American educators who have ascended to the top leadership position of a community college, such as yourself.

The interview will be face-to-face, perhaps in your office or conference room. During the interview, I will ask about 10 questions pertinent to your pathway to the college presidency, as well as the experience you have had as an Asian American college CEO. I recognize your time is limited and your schedule may be hectic. If you have any availability from now through the end of December, I would like to schedule a time so I conduct the interview in person.

My dissertation committee and I are extremely excited about this research project and anticipate the qualitative data and story shared by you will be an invaluable contribution to the body of literature on Asian Americans in higher education. I will follow up with other pertinent details (e.g. interview questions, consent form) upon your acceptance of this request for interview.

Feel free to contact me at my personal contact info: m@hotmail.com, 916-xxxxx (cell), or through my work contact info below my signature. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request, as I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Man Phan
APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Respondent Name: 

Respondent Title: 

Respondent Campus: 

Address/Phone/Email: 

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below:

I (☐ do ☐ do not) grant permission to be quoted directly in the case report.

I (☐ do ☐ do not) grant permission to have the interviews audio taped. You have the right to preview the tapes upon request.

I (☐ do ☐ do not) grant permission to use my real name in the final report, which may be published.

I (☐ do ☐ do not) grant permission to use the name of my campus in the final report, which may be published.

Respondent: __________________________ Date: __________________________

Researcher: __________________________ Date: __________________________
REFERENCES


