Counseling Southeast Asian American Male Students: Insights from Community College Counselors

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Abstract

Engagement with counselors has been documented to positively impact the success of male students of color in community colleges. However, there is limited understanding of this engagement experience from the counselor perspective. This study highlights findings from a qualitative study focused on counselor engagement with male students from Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese). Specifically, the current study sheds light on the different ways in which community college counselors engage with Southeast Asian American male students. Two themes emerged from the data and emphasized the significance of humanizing the counseling experience and providing intrusive counseling support. The first theme described how counselors individualize interactions with each student and invest time to understand the student’s story and frame of reference. The second theme described how they create conditions contributing to student’s willingness to disclose information and discuss educational goals. Implications for community college research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Americans, male students of color, college counseling

Although studies investigating factors contributing to the success of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) college students have proliferated in recent years (Gloria et al., 2017; Museus, 2013; Phommasa, 2015; Tang, Kim, & Haviland, 2013), few have explored their experiences in the community college setting (Xiong, 2019a, 2019b; Xiong & Wood, 2016). This is problematic because
SEAAs are primarily concentrated in community colleges and have unique challenges in these environments in comparison to their SEAA counterparts at four-year institutions (Pak, Maramba, & Hernandez, 2014; Teranishi, 2010; Wagoner & Lin, 2009). In addition to focusing on the community college experience, it is also important to concentrate on the SEAA male student experience. One-third to more than half of SEAA male students leave college without completing a degree in comparison to one-fifth of male students from other Asian American and Pacific Islander ethnic backgrounds (Teranishi & Pazich, 2014). Research has also indicated that SEAA male students are more likely to drop out of college in comparison to their female counterparts (Teranishi & Pazich, 2014). Therefore, empirical research is warranted to provide a more nuanced understanding of SEAA students attending community colleges, particularly SEAA male students.

Given these challenges, community college institutions and student affairs professionals must invest efforts to increase persistence and degree completion rates among SEAA male students. To increase persistence and attainment rates, community college leaders and practitioners must understand the factors that impact the success of this student population. While engagement with counselors has been found to be a promising practice that contributes to the success of male students of color in community colleges (Wood & Harris, 2017). As community colleges invest resources to close equity gaps in outcomes among male students of color and other disproportionately impacted student groups (Harris et al., 2017), counselor engagement with male students from ethnically diverse backgrounds must be better understood. The current study sheds light on the different ways in which community college counselors engage with SEAA male students.

Before proceeding, there are several noteworthy terms for consideration in the current study. First, the term SEAA used in this study refers to individuals from Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, or Vietnamese ethnic backgrounds. While Southeast Asians may include additional ethnic groups beyond these four ethnicities, this definition is consistent with other scholars who have explored the experiences of SEAAs in higher education (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Second, all participants in the current study were community college counselors from the state of California. As such, the use of the term counselor throughout this study instead of advisor is reflective of the distinct differences between minimum qualifications and roles among counseling faculty and educational advisors within the California community college system. Whereas the minimum professional education qualification for educational advisors is an associate or bachelor’s degree, counseling faculty requires a counseling-related master’s degree (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2012). Regarding their distinctive roles, educational advisors focus primarily on the advising needs of students while counseling faculty focus on
addressing the academic, career, and personal counseling needs of students (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2012).

**Literature Review**

Over the past decade, scholars have highlighted some of the outcomes associated with SEAA student engagement with counselors. For instance, Palmer and Maramba (2015) explored the significance of social networks for SEAA college students and concluded that counselors provided them with critical information to access and succeed in college. Chhuon and Hudley (2008) conducted a qualitative study and found that counselors played a key role in supporting Cambodian American students’ adjustment to the university. In a study of Hmong American college students, Lor (2008) found that counselors were identified as individuals who supported their persistence and completion of a college degree. Similarly, Xiong and Lam (2013) explored factors contributing to the success of Hmong American graduate students and found that counselors were instrumental in supporting their matriculation into a graduate program. Research from other scholars confirm these findings and indicate that engagement with counselors is positively associated with the success of SEAA college students (Maramba, Palmer, Kang, & Yull, 2018; McClain-Ruelle & Xiong, 2005).

Some scholars have also documented SEAA college student experiences with counselors. When counselors engaged more frequently with SEAA students, exhibited familiarity with their cultural background, validated their academic abilities to succeed in college, and cared for them not just as a student but as a person, SEAA college students were more likely to perceive the value of interacting with counselors more positively (Lor, 2008; Maramba et al., 2018). SEAA college students also reported positive experiences when counselors proactively engaged them in navigating academic policies and procedures, connected them to campus resources, and directed them to opportunities for professional development (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Maramba & Palmer, 2014). However, when these efforts were not present, SEAA college students did not find their interactions with counselors as beneficial, perceived counselors as unsupportive and unwelcoming, reported the counseling experience as transactional and dehumanizing, and limited their engagement with counselors (DePouw, 2012; Tang et al., 2013; Wagoner & Lin, 2009; Xiong & Lee, 2011). Findings from these studies suggest that the perceived value of counselor engagement is a function of the quality and quantity of interaction between SEAA students and counselors.

Other scholars have offered insights into approaches that may enhance the quality and quantity of interactions. For example, Xiong and Lam’s (2013) study suggests that Hmong American college students may be more likely to interact with counselors when counselors employ intrusive, solution-focused, and reality counseling approaches such as proactive engagement that center
student goals. Xiong and Lam (2013) contend that intrusive counseling approaches that centers proactive engagement from the counselor can communicate care; solution-focused counseling approaches may help to build self-efficacy; and reality counseling approaches may provide Hmong students opportunities to negotiate balancing different needs. Additionally, counselors must understand how a student’s race, culture, expectations, family, and peers are important considerations when working with Asian American students (Kodama & Huynh, 2017). Given these complex influences, scholars recommend the use of an intrusive approach that includes counselor-initiated engagement early and often, time investment to explore students’ backgrounds and experiences, and opportunities to interact with counselors who share similar racial/ethnic background with the students or culturally competent non-Asian American counselors (Kodama & Huynh, 2017; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Phommasa, 2015).

Collectively, these findings provide insight into the critical role of engagement with counselors on SEAA college student success and the conditions that impact engagement, but several knowledge gaps persist. First, current literature has focused primarily on student perceptions of their interactions with counselors and the voices of the counselors are missing in these interactions. Second, the current literature on SEAA college student engagement with counselors does not account for the gendered experiences of students and how the experiences of male students are different from their female counterparts and the larger SEAA college student population. Third, except for one study (i.e., Wagon & Lin, 2009), this scholarship has been limited to exploring the counselor-student interactions of SEAA students at four-year institutions rather than community colleges. The current study begins to address these gaps in the literature and was guided by the following primary research question: What approaches do community college counselors employ when working with SEAA male students?

**Methodology**

Data for the current study were drawn from a larger qualitative study exploring the engagement between counselors and male students of color in community colleges (Xiong, Allen, & Wood, 2016). Criterion and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit counselors for the larger study. Counselors that were recruited had five or more years of counseling experience, extensive work experience with male students of color, and were identified by their counseling peers as having a successful track record of serving male students of color. These criteria were used to ensure that counselors identified for the study have been effective in supporting male students of color over time and can offer insight about their counseling approaches with this student population. While the larger study focused on engagement with male students of color, counselors were instructed to limit their responses to only one racial/ethnic group (e.g.,
Data for this study were extracted and analyzed from six counselors who indicated their responses were specific to SEAA male students. There were three male and three female counselors from four California community colleges. With regard to ethnicity, the participants consisted of four Hmong, one Cambodian, and one Latino counselor.

Data primarily consisted of written responses from counselors that were collected via an online questionnaire. Counselors were asked to explain in detail the different counseling approaches they employ when engaging with SEAA male students. For each counseling approach they shared, counselors were also asked to describe why this approach was unique or more important for SEAA male students. Detailed, selective, and holistic reading approaches were employed to identify themes as described by van Manen (1990) for thematic analysis. First, a detailed reading approach was used to review every sentence or cluster of sentences to understand each counselor’s engagement with SEAA male students. Second, a selective reading approach was used to carefully identify and isolate statements that were essential to understanding their engagement. The final step used a holistic reading approach to review the written responses and identify thematic phrases that best capture their counseling approaches. Peer debriefing and data triangulation were employed to ensure trustworthiness of the thematic phrases (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Findings

Findings from this study delineate the different ways community college counselors engage with SEAA male students. Two themes related to counseling approaches specifically for SEAA male students emerged from analysis of the data. These themes reflect the significance of (a) humanizing the counseling experience and (b) providing intrusive counseling support. The first theme refers to the ways in which counselors personalized the counselor-student interaction and engaged in opportunities to learn more about each SEAA male student as a person. Counselors described how they individualized interactions with each student and invested time to understand the student’s story and frame of reference. The second theme refers to the ways in which counselors were attentive to the help-seeking behaviors and prior counseling experiences of SEAA male students. Counselors discussed how they employed practices that contributed to the student’s willingness to disclose information and discuss educational goals. The following sections provide an overview of each theme and include selected quotes from counselors to illuminate the various counseling approaches. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the privacy of the participants and anonymity of the responses.

Humanizing the Counseling Experience

The first theme emphasized the critical role of counselors employing humanized counseling approaches. By personalizing each counselor-student interaction and
engaging in opportunities to learn more about each student as a person, counselors in this study felt that these approaches were critical in establishing rapport, developing trust, and demonstrating care with SEAA male students. Moreover, counselors understood the interconnectedness of how students’ stories provided the necessary context needed for individualized support.

Many counselors made intentional efforts to ensure SEAA male students knew they were individually valued by personalizing the experience for each student. Saul, for example, validated their presence by thanking them for being on campus. He also ended his appointments with, “Did I miss anything? What could the student leave with to make them feel important as an individual? Right before they leave, ask an open-ended question…Is there anything else I can assist you with?” Saul’s comments illustrated how many counselors did not rush through their counseling appointments and were committed to providing individualized counseling. Similarly, Kathy discussed how she intentionally “makes the first counselor contact very specific [to] learning about [her] student as a person.” She reflected that “by not rushing straight into academics right away, [she was] able to build trust with the student so they can feel more comfortable in slowly engaging actively in their planning of educational goals.” Thus, Kathy’s comments highlighted how beneficial it can be to understand more about the student as a person before addressing the student’s educational goals.

Counselors also discussed their investment in learning more about each student as a person. Saul elaborated on the importance of understanding SEAA male students’ background and experiences before addressing their personal, academic, and career needs. For example, Saul discussed the importance of “taking time and patience to listen to their story and find value in past experiences.” He also described how SEAA male students’ stories and past experiences can help to “understand their perspective” and “see the whole person.” Saul’s comments emphasized the need to understand student’s journey and frame of reference. Another counselor, Sheng, also described why this was important, writing that “counselors need to understand the [students’] backgrounds in order to provide effective advising.” However, Moua explained that “time is needed to develop the counselor-student relationship prior to the student feeling comfortable enough to open up to the counselor. This is when the student’s needs can be fully addressed.” Moua’s comments suggested that time is needed to gain a holistic understanding of the student as a person.

Providing Intrusive Counseling Support

The second theme highlighted the importance of counselors providing intrusive counseling support for SEAA male students that emphasized proactive engagement from the counselor. By understanding some of the apprehensiveness of SEAA male students to seek guidance and structural challenges they experience in accessing information, counselors in this study
employed proactive approaches that allowed them to engage students first before they asked for help and educate students to consider all career options. Specifically, counselors described the critical role of counselor-initiated efforts to providing SEAA male students access to information.

Counselors discussed the need to be sensitive to and respectful of the ways in which SEAA male students disclose information. Kathy described the importance of this sensitivity, sharing that some SEAA male students “are not fast to disclose information” and she understands that “sometimes it can take a few counseling appointments for the student to open up.” Additionally, Moua described how “the idea of opening up your internal emotions and personal struggles to a total stranger is very foreign for Southeast Asian men.” He added that they may “not be very direct in terms of describing their goals or plans” but cautioned that they “should not be labeled as uninvolved and lacking interest in [their] education.” He also discussed how “counselors need to develop extensive listening skills to catch subtle words or phrases to be able to effectively engage the student in an effort to help him to open up.” Indeed, counselors’ comments highlighted the importance of understanding how SEAA male students disclose information and the intrusive counseling skills needed to facilitate that process.

Counselors also discussed how they proactively connect SEAA male students to information, particularly campus resources and career options. Song, for example, discussed that some SEAA male students “are apprehensive about seeking help” and may require a more proactive approach. She described how she shares with them the benefits of utilizing campus resources, teaches them how to research available programs and services, and walks them over to personally connect them with colleagues. She emphasized the importance of this proactive approach because “sometimes they do not know who to talk to about a specific program and are not aware of where to start.” Moua also spoke about how he engages SEAA male students to consider all career options. He discussed how some counselors “do not engage Southeast Asian men enough to discuss options that go beyond vocational training at a community college. They are not informed and made to consider the possibility of attaining something higher than vocational training.” He described how SEAA male students need to be “reaffirmed that they too can attain professional careers” beyond vocational education. Counselors’ comments illustrated challenges SEAA male students faced in accessing information critical to their success and proactive approaches that provided opportunities for them to engage with this information.

**Discussion**

There is a need to better understand the interactions between counselors and male students of color in community colleges. The current study addressed this issue by exploring how community college counselors interact with male
students of color from Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese). Findings from this study highlight the different approaches community college counselors perceived to be important and have found to be effective in their interactions with SEAA male students. As previously mentioned, these approaches include the role of humanizing the counseling experience and providing intrusive counseling support. The findings of this study confirm and extend the current literature in several ways.

This study has provided an example of how the counselor perspective can be critical to understanding the SEAA male student engagement experience with counselors. Indeed, previous studies have explored engagement with counselors from the student perspective (e.g., Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Lor, 2008). However, this body of research has been limited to the student perspective and is missing the counselor perspective. It is important to note that student and counselor perspectives of the same interaction may vary. Both perspectives are necessary to provide a more complete understanding of the counselor-student interaction experience. What this study adds to the current literature is the inclusion of counselor voices and perceptions of approaches critical to their engagement with SEAA male students.

Counselors in the current study reported that humanizing the counseling experience was important in their engagement with SEAA male students. This finding is consistent with current literature that underscores the significance of institutional agents who employ humanizing approaches (Lor, 2008; Museus & Mueller, 2018). For example, this finding supports Museus and Mueller’s (2018) conclusion that efforts to humanize the educational experience were among the key characteristics of institutional agents who SEAA college students perceive as contributors to their success in college. In the current study, counselors humanized the counseling experience by providing individualized attention and creating opportunities to learn from students’ stories. This finding reinforces the importance of humanizing approaches but also offers a more nuanced understanding of how counselors employ these approaches specifically for SEAA male students in community colleges.

Additionally, counselors in this study emphasized intrusive counseling approaches for SEAA male students to access information. This finding provides additional support for previous studies that indicate proactive engagement from counselors as essential to SEAA students accessing resources critical for their success (Maramba et al., 2018; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). This finding is consistent with Palmer and Maramba’s (2015) study on SEAA college students and social capital. Participants in their study identified counselors as institutional agents who contributed to the development of social capital through providing them with information on how to access, adjust, and succeed in college (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). However, the current study extends the existing literature on how counselors provide SEAA male students access to information through
counselor-initiated engagement opportunities. With an understanding of SEAA male students’ help-seeking behavior and previous experiences with other counselors, counselors in the current study used that understanding to proactively engage them in the exploration of all major and career options and physically connect them to appropriate resources.

Furthermore, counselors in this study seemed more attuned to employ humanized and intrusive counseling approaches. Five counselors in this study were of Southeast Asian descent and one identified as Latino. All reported extensive background and experience in working with SEAA male students. It may be plausible that this shared commonality and/or familiarity with the students’ cultural background provided them with a greater level of awareness to employ these approaches (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Perhaps the counselors understand that their student may be one of the few SEAA male students enrolled on campus and the individualized attention could contribute to a greater sense of belonging on campus (Teranishi, 2010). Additionally, counselors in this study may also recognize the complex influences of the students’ cultural background and past experiences and proactively created opportunities to learn more about the student as a person (Kodama & Huynh, 2017). This level of awareness may have contributed to their heightened sense of importance in humanizing the counseling experience and providing intrusive counseling support. In the absence of these approaches, the counseling experience could be perceived as transactional and counselors could be perceived as unsupportive, unwelcoming, and lacking care for the student’s success (Xiong & Lam, 2013; Xiong & Lee, 2011).

Implications

The current inquiry has several implications for community college research and practice. First, it is important to understand the effects of these approaches have on SEAA male students. While counselors in this study perceived these approaches to be critical in their engagement with SEAA male students, the current inquiry did not explore how these approaches impact students’ actual engagement with counselors. Thus, future quantitative studies should examine the relationship and effect of these approaches on SEAA male student engagement with counselors. Second, findings from the current study only focused on the counselor perspective. The extent to which SEAA male students also perceive these approaches to be critical and influence their engagement with counselors is unknown. Therefore, future qualitative inquiries should include SEAA male student experiences with counselors and their perspectives on the conditions that contribute to engagement.

Third, the current study included only counselors from community colleges in California. Although California is home to the largest SEAA population of approximately 980,000 (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015) and its community college system is the largest system of higher education in the
nation, it is likely that counseling approaches may vary by institutional context and geographic location. There may be differences in approaches among counselors who engage with SEAA male students in different institutional contexts or in other geographic locations where there is not a critical mass of this student population. As such, future qualitative studies should explore approaches of counselors from four-year institutions in general as well as those at predominantly white institutions, and in geographic locations where SEAA male students may be underrepresented on campus.

Regarding practice, community college counselors who work closely with SEAA male students must understand how humanized and intrusive counseling approaches can create the conditions necessary to provide effective counseling. Specifically, these approaches can help build rapport, communicate care, and establish trust. Therefore, counselors should incorporate this understanding into the delivery of culturally sensitive counseling services. When engaging with SEAA male students, for example, counselors could make coordinated efforts to personalize the counselor-student interaction and learn from students’ lived experiences. Counselors could also proactively connect them to resources, staff members, and information critical to their success. Through these approaches, community college counselors can create conditions that communicate their investment and commitment to SEAA male students’ success in college. Moreover, counselors must be aware of SEAA male students’ developmental needs in order to incorporate these culturally sensitive counseling approaches. Without this level of awareness, counselors may misinterpret SEAA male students’ behavior of disclosure and academic help-seeking.

Findings from this study can also be used as a basic framework for assessing and evaluating counseling services with SEAA male students. For example, community college counselors should be assessed on their ability to effectively employ humanized and intrusive counseling approaches. As such, community college leaders could include these approaches as items on counseling evaluation forms and other assessment tools to evaluate the performance of counselors. Additionally, these efforts should also provide opportunities for counselors to be assessed and evaluated from multiple perspectives. This may include student evaluations from SEAA male students, counselor self-evaluations, and peer evaluations from tenured counselors. Insights from multiple perspectives can be triangulated to capture a more accurate assessment and evaluation of the counselor’s ability to deliver humanizing and intrusive counseling approaches.

Finally, counselors in this study emphasized the critical role of time in employing humanized and intrusive counseling approaches for SEAA male students. For example, several appointments were necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the student’s background, experiences, and how these factors influence the student’s help-seeking behaviors and decision-making process. Additional time was also needed to educate SEAA male students about
resources and to physically connect students with on-campus staff members. While these counseling approaches are crucial to engaging SEAA male students, many community college counselors may perceive them as not feasible to implement because they do not meet with the student long enough or frequently enough to employ these approaches. Therefore, community college leaders must consider allocating additional resources in counseling services so that counselors can provide humanized and intrusive counseling.

Conclusion

This study sought to better understand community college counselors and their engagement with SEAA male students. There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the current study. First, community colleges committed to advancing success outcomes for SEAA male students need to focus on the counselor-student interaction experience. This is important because engagement with community college counselors can positively impact the persistence and degree completion of male students of color, particularly SEAA male students. Second, community colleges need to also ensure that SEAA male students have access to and opportunities for engagement with counselors who can humanize the counseling experience and provide intrusive counseling support. These were approaches identified by counselors in the current study as critical in their interactions with this student population. Finally, if community colleges are dedicated to enhancing the quality and increasing the opportunities for engagement with counselors among SEAA male students, it is important to include the counselor perspective in student success efforts related to counseling. Student success efforts missing the counselor perspective may be incomplete. It is imperative to include multiple perspectives of individuals directly involved in the counselor-student interaction experience to offer a more nuanced understanding of factors that impact engagement.

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