A Tale of Two Central Graduates 20 Years Apart: A Collaborative Autoethnography on College Access

Gao Thor
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs, Diversity, and Outreach

Dr. Na’im Madyun
McNair Scholar

Abstract: In this collaborative autoethnography, the researchers described and analyzed their own experiences with college access within their sociocultural contexts. They investigated the questions: How did we choose to go to college? Why did we choose our respective colleges (Macalester College/Morehouse College)? The researchers read the book Becoming Critical: The Emergence of Social Justice Scholars edited by Muhammad A. Khalifa and Felecia Briscoe (2016) and utilized techniques that some authors used for this present research. They collected data through a.) writing prompts, b.) interviews, and c.) researching primary sources. Results indicated two separate individual themes of early seed planting and acculturation navigation and a joint theme of the unjust practice of school tracking.

Research Questions
- How do underrepresented students choose to go to college?
- Why did we choose to go to college?
- Why did we choose our respective colleges (Macalester College/Morehouse College)?

Introduction
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported Adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) for American Indian/Alaska Native (72%), Black (75%), and Hispanic (78%) students were below national average of 83%
- ACGRs for White (88%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (90%) students were above national average
- Percentage of students of color (SOC) attending college has risen, but still disproportionately less than White students
- Percentage of white students obtaining bachelor's degree make up more than half of average
- ACGRs for White (88%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (90%) students were above national rates (ACGR) for American Indian/Alaska Native (72%), Black (75%), and Hispanic (78%)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported Adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) for American Indian/Alaska Native (72%), Black (75%), and Hispanic (78%) students were below national average of 83%

College Access Programs
- College access programs have been instrumental in increasing SOC's opportunity for higher education (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Perna, 2002)
- Many SOC primary sources of direct college-planning support and guidance should come from schools (Farmer-Hinton, 2008)

College Recruitment
- Another mode of college access to SOC is recruitment from higher educational institutions themselves
- Oliver and Brown (1988) argue that most colleges do not prioritize recruitment for minoritized students
- Minority recruitment efforts are low and inadequately planned, staffed, and financed

Factors and Motivations of Attending College
- Top five factors of college attendance: 1.) Increased possibility of achieving desired career, 2.) Earning a degree as a personal goal, 3.) Possibility of getting a better job, 4.) Possibility of making more money, and 5.) Parents’ encouraging college attendance (Pope & Fermin, 2003)
- Unique factors to the experiences of students of color: African American, Latino, and first-generation Asian students more likely to consider input of parents when choosing a college, racially underrepresented students more likely to feel that racial climate of campus is important (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008)

Methodology
Collaborative Autoethnography as Methodological Approach
- Reflexive method acknowledging that research can never be completely objective
- Researchers use their autobiographical data to understand a social phenomenon (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011)
- Researchers collect, analyze, and interpret autobiographical data about particular social phenomenon making sense of personal experiences within sociocultural contexts

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures
- Researchers completed reading book Becoming Critical: The Emergence of Social Justice Scholars edited by Muhammad A. Khalifa and Felecia Briscoe (2016), a collection of autoethnographies written by multifaceted scholars describing and theorizing critical moments in their development as social justice leaders
- Findings collected through a.) writing prompts, b.) interviews, and c.) researching primary sources
- Each researcher analyzed own autobiography for emergent themes

Themes
- Na’im’s Theme: Humility/Imposter
Access to advanced courses as “enrichment” opportunities that expanded my world of teenage black excellence was critical. An expanded social network allowed me to value my own cultural and intellectual capital. Unfortunately, not being pushed and having a modest comprehension of a teenage black intellectual identity interfered with my ability to accept and embrace my accomplishments fully.

- Gao’s Theme: Self-Authorship
I attribute my admittance [into Macalester] to my sense of responsibility to be a trailblazer who rewrote the narrative of what it means to be Hmong in America, especially a Hmong woman. This self-authorship was a form of resistance to the dominant narrative of Hmong students being delinquents and low-achieving and Hmong woman as oppressed and submissive.

Discussion & Conclusion
- Access starts long before it is time to begin choosing colleges
- Unfair that opportunities are not given to all
- Mixed ability classrooms/groups are needed
- Teaching bicultural sophistication
- Acculturate without assimilating
- Exposure to institutions with diverse ways of knowing
- Strong sense of ethnic identity at early age

Narratives
- Na’im’s Narrative: From the Delta to Morehouse College
Planting the Seed
“I remember a strong early influence… my dad pushing [us] to learn…by first grade... the words: confidence, determination and self-sufficiency… It was a strategic seed … a reminder… that my existence was not entirely stereotypical of Black boys in the Mississippi Delta.”

A Critical Moment
“Up on reflection, I realize that my journey from high school to college was heavily supported by people who believed in me more than I believed in myself, to paraphrase the TRIO legend Sharyn Schelske.”

- Gao’s Narrative: From the Projects to College
College Was Not a Necessity
“…my ultimate goal from a young age was to get my family out of receiving any sort of governmental public assistance. College did not seem like a vital step for me to get to where I wanted to be…”

Exceptional Top Student
“A friend of mine remarked that I have never been like ‘other Hmong students since elementary’ and that my story is not representative of other Hmong students’ experience. She was referring to the privilege that I had as a student who was recognized as ‘elite’ since elementary school.”