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# Let's start talking: A reflective essay on minority students' experiences in academic spaces, publishing, and journal involvement

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## Key points

- Graduate student population is diversifying, but not enough intentional resources are given to support minority graduate students.
- The need to publish during graduate school in order to have a chance for an academic career generates inequalities.
- Publishers and editors need to be more intentional in creating paid positions and recruiting submissions from a diversity of graduate students.
- We encourage more minority students to share their stories and form interdisciplinary support groups beyond a single institution or country context.

## INTRODUCTION

From 2010 to 2020, there is a recorded increase in graduate program enrollment in the United States (Zhou & Gao, 2021). The latest annual survey of graduate enrollment from the Council of Graduate Schools documented an increase of 20.4% enrollment among Latinx students, 16.7% among Asian students, 16% among Black/African American students, 8.8% among American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 1.7% among Native Hawaiians/other Pacific Islanders students (Zhou & Gao, 2021). According to that survey, enrollment from traditionally underrepresented groups increased, except for international students, which showed a substantial decrease in enrollment between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, likely due to the ongoing pandemic. Nonetheless, the graduate student population is increasingly diversifying. But diversity does not equate inclusivity; having a diversifying graduate student population does not mean the university is ready to welcome and support minority students. For a university to be truly inclusive, more intention needs to be given to hearing and assessing minority students' experiences in graduate school. This reflective essay, then, is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of diverse experiences in higher education among Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) social science majors. Based on our experiences, we argue that recent attempts to diversify higher education, as a

response to national uprisings around racial inequities and violence (Clayton, 2021), are not enough. Without intentionally making space to include diverse backgrounds as sources of knowledge and a clear effort of inclusion, we would just be engaging in tokenism—advocating for diversity to benefit the reputation of the institution at the expense of its minority community.

Although our trajectory to, and experiences in, higher education in the United States are distinct, the expectations of graduate school present similar challenges and additional pressures to minority students. Despite myths of the model minority, there are distinct challenges faced by certain AAPI graduate students (Choi & Miller, 2014; Teranishi et al., 2009). While both authors are under this racial classification, we come from diverse backgrounds and have different trajectories to graduate school. First author is a first-generation Hongkongese American studying sociology for his doctoral degree, whereas second author is a mixed race first-generation Filipina studying criminology and is close to getting her doctoral degree. It is not our intention to represent all AAPI graduate students' experiences. Our intention is to explore a few common challenges we experience in graduate school. One such challenge is the expectation of publication. As graduate students, we often find ourselves facing an omnipresent danger of not publishing. This invasive sense of urgency, be it expressed

formally or informally, can be translated into a common phrase *publish or perish*. Graduate students in most academic disciplines are expected to publish, you either publish and do well in your program, or you do not publish enough and reveal yourself as an imposter. Despite our different backgrounds, we are seeing this as a more present threat, that our 'survival' in our program, or our perception of survival, largely depends on the amount of publications and engagement in the publication process. In a realistic sense, it does not matter if publication is part of the formal requirement for graduation or an informal pressure we apply to ourselves. The consequence of this constructed reality is real for us; we experience it regardless of its origin or authenticity. As the well-known sociological concept 'Thomas theorem' goes, 'if [we] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). To survive in our programs and academia, we need publications to prove our worth and intelligence. However, publication is a long and hard process for graduate students, especially for minority students; we may lack the required social and cultural capital like language proficiency and proper networking to publish the 'right' content in the 'right' place, or to even be aware of the need for publication. This is made more difficult when graduate students are experiencing pressure, perceived or explicit, to teach and take on other commitments. As such, the expectation of publication in the current state puts many minority students at a disadvantage, as this is not a level playing field. It sustains inequality by putting more privileged students on the high ground. We are not against graduate students publishing or being involved in the process, like being an editorial assistant or doing peer review. Quite contrary, we encourage more involvement. Our point is that more intentional inclusion would lead to a more welcoming space for AAPI in knowledge-production and make academia accessible to people from disadvantaged communities.

Of course, our experience and struggles in graduate school are largely different based on our intersecting identities, available resources, existing skillset, career goals, and other factors. As such, we are not aiming to generalize our experience. As two AAPI graduate students, our goal is to share our stories with academics and those interested in entering academia. Through this, we hope to encourage more minority students to share their stories and normalize discussions around the challenges we face and discuss how to build each other up for success. We start by sharing our stories.

## AUTHOR ONE

Author one is a first-generation Hongkongese American who grew up in a middle-income family in Hong Kong. Growing up speaking English as a second language, it does seem like a mistake studying a discipline that requires a lot of reading and writing in English, in a society that speaks predominately English. In terms of writing and publication, I struggle with grammar, complex sentences, and diction. Additionally, as a first-generation college student, I am unfamiliar with the academic world and the

culture of academia. Part of being in an unfamiliar environment is the struggle of not knowing what I should know and should not be expected to know, which generates more self doubt. While my faculty advisor, professors, and colleagues are kind and patient enough to help me acclimate to academia, there are things they cannot properly address. They are kind enough to proofread my writings, give me constructive feedback for my work, introduce American culture and customs to me, and exhibit interests in my studies and my hometown. However, with the amount of work and responsibilities they have, it is unrealistic to have them 'hold my hand' as I learn more about academia and the space I can occupy. There are things that they cannot do and would be unfair to ask them to do.

Based on my experience, there is also a lack of institutional and/or cultural support in finding a community that shares my culture. In my graduate career, I am unable to find a group that speaks the same language as I grew up with (Cantonese) or shares the same cultural heritage and upbringing. This could be explained by the demographic of graduate students in my university, but there is also a lack of institutional support in doing outreach across discipline, within the school, and outside the school. As a result, I volunteered to participate in different graduate student organizations to find a sense of community, even taking upon leadership positions as I became more involved. This opportunity to serve the community is very rewarding, but as I must step away to focus on my degree progress, I sometimes do ask myself 'what's next?' Is graduate career destined to be isolating? Or should there be a focus on community as well?

To increase the odds of survival in my program, I made sure to also focus on my studies and publications. At the time of writing, I have two publications under my name, with one more accepted for publication; I co-authored a chapter in a textbook with my professor (Wedam & Wong, 2020), I published my thesis in a peer-reviewed journal (Wong, 2021), and my opinion piece on cancel culture has passed the peer-review process and is accepted for publication. The experience of publication helped me polish my writing skills and become familiar with the publication process, both crucial for career advancement if I remain in academia. I also started building connections with different academics in different field (especially in the field of criminal justice and psychology), slowly increasing my exposure to the academic world. Moreover, I have begun teaching college courses since reaching the midway point in my graduate career. I believe most of the reader would agree, this is both a rewarding and taxing experience. On top of that, I was given the opportunity to serve as an editorial assistant in an academic journal, *Contemporary Justice Review*, through a professor's recommendation. I worked for this professor as a graduate teaching and research assistant, and she recommended me as a candidate for this position. Through this position, I learned more about the process of publication, which cleared up a lot of questions I had, such as the roles and stages involved in a publication process, manuscript requirements, and the implications of different editorial decisions. For example, it is through all the preliminary reviews I do for submissions that I truly understand what my professor said, 'there is

always a home for your paper'. As a result, I can better manage my anxiety and more actively ask for feedback on my work. This experience also exposed me to more professional networking, different types of research, methods, and writing style, and had provided me many concrete and quantifiable experiences that can help me improve my academic standing.

As my small stipend from the Graduate School ran out, I needed to work full-time to support myself financially. Thus, my graduate school experience became an endless juggle between financial independency, self worth by publication, gaining a foothold in the competitive job market with teaching, finding and maintaining a space by being an engaged student leader, and contributing to my program and academia in the roles of an editorial assistant and peer reviewer. While the department is not expecting me to do all that at once, I felt pressured to do so because of the competitive job market, and I saw this as a survival mechanism for graduate school. A quick glance at our newly hired faculties, they are all extremely accomplished in every aspects (publication, teaching, and community service). In order to stand a chance in this job market and thrive in the program, it might be wise to get an early exposure in what seems to be a standard expectation for newly graduated PhD.

I am, without a doubt, grateful for all these opportunities and challenges. I strongly believe all these experiences are immensely beneficial to my professional development, hence my continuous participation, but this does greatly exceed my initial expectation of what a graduate career looks like. Perhaps this speaks more directly to the Imposter Syndrome, but I sometimes am still unsure if I am doing enough to prove I deserve to be in academia. Is it expected of me to do all that? Is my struggle telling of my incompetency? Perhaps my graduate program director made a mistake in offering me the acceptance letter. I may never be able to convincingly answer those questions.

## AUTHOR TWO

Author two is a mix-raced (mestiza), first-generation Filipina who grew up in a low-income inner-city community in Chicago's westside. Growing up in under resourced communities, access to higher education was challenging and navigating graduate school is a constant work in progress. Being the first person in my family to go to college, I lacked an understanding of the basics. I was not aware that funding opportunities existed which could support my journey, and I worked mediocre jobs for the first several years of graduate school, often driving straight from work to campus. I also lacked support intellectually with understanding expectations, in general. And, as a mestiza, it was challenging to find a cultural home or community to support me on campus through this journey. The environment in the first several years of my graduate experience felt like a pressure cooker in an incredibly competitive and often toxic environment. There was no sense of community or unity. When opportunities were presented to fellow classmates, there was a sense of urgency to find your own

opportunity, with no one to guide you, or stop you, along the way.

One thing was incredibly clear to me was the importance of publishing. This was clear based on my undergraduate publication being one of the factors which I could use to support my academic capacity given my under resourced educational background. I delivered a confident presentation on the consequences for communities experiencing mass incarceration, this confidence was a result of lived experience with the issue. The success of the presentation resulted in an opportunity to publish the paper as a 'paper presented' manuscript in the *Contemporary Justice Review* (CJR). Although I had not the slightest clue what I was doing, it was the mentorship and patience of the editor of the journal who helped me get the paper suitable for publication. The editor who supported this paper was one of few AAPI scholars I have worked with in my field, and the mentorship and patience came by way of line by line handwritten editing suggestions on format, grammar and conceptual feedback. Once in graduate school, I understood publishing opportunities were rare, and graduate students had very little to say which academia would consider publishable. Thus, publishing encyclopedia entries became a hobby just to continue publishing. Authoring these entries was accessible, there was consistent call for authors circulating through my cohorts inboxes as an easily accessible way for us to publish. I fell into a trap of CV boosting, continuously looking for opportunities to market myself for unpaid service, unaware that in time these opportunities would willingly make themselves available. Censorship is something, in retrospect, I needed. Nearly all those encyclopedia publications from these early years of graduate school remain off my CV, in addition to several other things which only exaggerate my efforts without substance.

One space I consistently give service to is an academic journal where I served as an editing manager, co-edited a special issue, and now serve on the editorial board. I became affiliated with CJR through the previously mentioned publication. CJR is affiliated with the *Justice Studies Association*, a social justice-oriented organization who was welcoming and warm when I became affiliated over a decade ago. Here I began to form relationships with folks who would open doors to opportunities to work with CJR. As a new graduate student, it felt impressive to be welcomed by advanced scholars and my gratefulness translated into service. Initially I started working with CJR as an editorial associate. The previous editorial associate was part of my cohort in graduate school and was a dear friend, she informed me this was a rare opportunity and would give me experience in this area of service which would be important for my career. I did not hesitate when the incoming editor took the recommendation to work with me and I did this work for 4 years. Although, I had no understanding of how this position might impact my trajectory, this was a very unintentional effort on my end and was based solely in the uneducated idea that I just needed to do everything which became available to me. I continued in the role as editing manager for two additional years when a different editor came into the position. I hesitated to continue this work initially, I felt

stretched thin, and I wanted to open the opportunity for another graduate student. I also still felt insecure around my ability to reestablish a similar role in the future. I hoped my continued service would lead to advanced opportunity, and when my tenure came to an end, I advocated for what I perceive to be an advanced opportunity to serve on the editorial board.

Admittedly, these experiences are unique for graduate students, so, I felt a need to overextend myself at times to avoid what I perceived to be 'perishing'. This habit of overextending is common among minority graduate students, which is particularly stressful for Filipinx and low-income/resourced AAPI students. Consistent lower retention rates for graduate students of colour should be a cause for alarm (McClain & Perry, 2017), particularly when these additional expectations are pressured on us in spaces where we might feel the need to prove our capabilities. As an advanced graduate student, making an intentional effort as to where I invest my energy is increasingly important. After all, the best dissertation is a complete dissertation, as I keep being told.

## REFLECTION OF OUR STORIES

It is not difficult to find similarities between our stories. We both find the benefit in publishing, understand the expectation of publication, and give paid and unpaid services to the academic world. We both agree that including minorities in the academic publishing process, authorship, reviewing, editorship, and journal management, is necessary to make space in knowledge-production for AAPI and to make academia accessible to people from disadvantaged communities, but something is still lacking. It is not equity if you simply set forth diversity agendas without building a supportive culture that is inclusive. There needs to be a sense of solidarity and a sense of community for us to thrive in these settings. An environment that welcomes knowledge and experience that is diverse, rather than a hegemonic space which presents challenges to underrepresented students.

The larger environment of graduate school can feel toxic, and can draw us to situations where we are often lost and isolated. Without proper social, economic, and cultural capital, we find ourselves on the opposite side of gatekeeping, where information is filtered from us. There are many times when we were brought to a situation without knowing what to expect or knowing what we should or should not be expected to know. Oftentimes, those situations are where minorities cannot afford to make mistakes. In a competitive and challenging space, minorities are often not just representing themselves but their community and culture. Mistakes or flaws of an individual could easily be magnified and projected as flaws of the racial and ethnic group. Regardless of the intention, minority students are representing their communities in academia, sometimes even more because of racial misidentification, all the while performing the emotional labor of performing to be accepted in a mostly white space.

Tokenism is also a common practice in many academic spaces (Patel, 2020). Minority students are often asked to be present at spaces but were given little to no power to help improve

our situation; we are asked to smile when the institution is painting us with a diversity agenda in a fire engulfed room. And because of gatekeeping, it often feels like we are being told to perform without given a script. It is not enough to include us in academic spaces, we need a community that will not gatekeep information from us to ensure we can succeed in our roles. This is a communal effort, where we should all challenge the existing toxic culture found in academia. Universities and departments need to better explain the expectations for graduate students and be transparent with different opportunities that can help us improve our career prospects. Universities need to give spaces to graduate students to form a sense of community and provide institutional support towards that goal. Institutions need to reassess their history of racism, microaggression, and tokenism to better address the needs of its minority community. Graduate students need to challenge the current competitive and isolating culture to build a community where we can all support each other. Publishers and editors need to be more intentional in creating paid positions and recruiting paper submission from graduate students. Regardless of the discipline, equity and inclusion should be at the heart of all journals, as shown in the operation of CJR. All in all, more attempts need to be made to break down the barrier that cause inequalities in higher education and create more spaces for graduate students to acclimate to all the process and the behind-the-scene work of academia. After all, if we are expected to perform and thrive, we should be given the necessary and proper tools.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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