Ethnography of Asian American and Asian International Students at Parkland College

Last spring I looked around Parkland and realized how diverse the school really is. I grew up in the Mahomet-Seymour school system so I was pleasantly surprised to see how, in contrast, diversity was a major characteristic of the college student body. The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (U of I) is a school that is known for its diversity, particularly with the Asian population. Since Parkland and U of I are so close together, I had always assumed that most of the Asian students went to U of I. As I continued to attend Parkland, however, I realized that Parkland has a substantial Asian population. With this, I began to wonder, why both Asian international and Asian American students are attending Parkland when the U of I is right next door. I wanted to know if their motives were like mine as a student at Parkland or if they were completely different. My group and I decided to discover the answer to this. To begin, we tried to clear out any cultural stereotypes so we could stay as objective as possible. That really helped us when recorded audio when we interviewed students for our podcast. We struggled with finding Asian international and Asian American students to interview, but the two we finally had agree to an interview gave us quite a bit of very useful information. Though our ethnography, we discovered that Asian international and Asian American students are attending Parkland college for the same reasons that almost all other Parkland students are: because it is economical and saves money; and because it is great gateway school.
To be honest, my group struggled to find people to interview. In fact, half of our group was unavailable to help with the interview process because of other obligations so it was just me and another group member, Jaryn. We could only go at one in the afternoon which seemed to be the main study time for anyone, especially Asian students, lingering in Parkland’s library or lounges. We were fortunate enough to find two great interviewees; one being an Asian international student and the other being an Asian American/Canadian student (he was born in Canada). Through a series of questions, we discovered that the Asian international student was from China and is going to Parkland to save money. She intends to transfer to U of I once she received her associate’s degree at Parkland. I definitely think that this is one of the main reasons students are attending Parkland. Because the cost of tuition is lower at Parkland than most other universities or colleges, students can save a lot of money. The other student we interviewed was of Asian descent but he was born in Canada. He has lived in the United States for many years now so we counted him as an Asian American student. He started off going to U of I but wanted to change schools so he thought it would be economically savvy to transfer to Parkland for a semester and pay less than continue to attend U of I and pay more. He chose Parkland not just for its convenience; he also chose Parkland because of the great classes and the fact that all classes are accredited and transferrable. Many students use Parkland as a pathway college that leads them to the university or college that they want to receive their undergraduate degree from. By hearing these two cases, we observed that ethnicity does not determine why someone goes to a specific school. In this case, Asian international and Asian American students are no different and attend college for similar reasons as other students.

We realize that because we only had two interviews in our podcast it is hard to make assumptions about a whole population with this small sample, so my group and I complemented
this data with participant observation to strengthen our conclusions. I know several Asian international students who are choosing to attend Parkland because of scholarships that they were awarded and I engaged them on informal conversations on why they came to Parkland. From my conversations, I found that one scholarship in particular gives students money to attend a community college but picks the location. Upon hearing this, I was interested enough to carry out a Google search on these different types of scholarships. I found that, believe it or not, there are many different grants and scholarships that are offered to international students who want to attend a community college like Parkland. One of my group members, Jaryn, also knows an Asian American student who has vocalized that he is at Parkland for economic reasons. This additional data allowed us to strengthen our findings that Asian students, international or not, are attending Parkland for reasons similar to other students.

We first struggled with trying to find interviewees, but we ultimately struggled to set aside any stereotypes that would interfere with our findings. For me, I had a notion that all Asians went to U of I because, in my mind, the Asian population is surprisingly close to the Caucasian population academically. In Diamond’s article “Race without Color,” he says that “sometimes cultural anthropologists focus on a single cultural concept and take it apart, demonstrating its historical roots and its relation to other social beliefs” (Diamond2013: 162). The reason I wanted to do this ethnography was to take apart this concept I had and change my perceptions and stereotypes. The article was written about breaking down and problematizing the concept of race but I liked what he was ultimately saying. Diamond is telling his readers to deconstruct concepts that we are taught so that we can gain a better understanding of them and really learn the truth about them. Diamond states that race is culturally constructed and is not biological. To break down the use of “race,” we need to pull it apart and learn where and how it
came about. In the same way, I needed to understand where my conceptions about Asian students came about. I realized that I was ignorant on the subject and, in order to let go of my stereotypes, would have to further research this subject.

Once I got over my stereotypes, I was truly able to gain the insight I was looking for. In the story “Eating in the Kalahari,” author Richard Borshay Lee learned a lesson on ethnographic field work that was similar to the lesson I learned during my ethnography. In the article, Lee tells a story about how the !Kung San make fun of an ox he was buying the tribe for a Christmas dinner. The !Kung San people made fun of him and the ox saying that it was too skinny and not good enough for the whole tribe to eat. Lee was at first discouraged by this treatment because in his society people were not treated that way when giving a gift. As it turns out, the !Kung San people poke fun in this way to keep all members of the tribe humble and equal. If Lee would have looked past his cultural perceptions early on, he would have been able to understand why the tribe was treating him so harshly (2013: 11–15). This is similar to my experiences in our ethnographic study. I started off having specific notions as to why Asian students are attending Parkland. Because of this, I was shocked and a little confused as to the type of answers I was receiving. I actually did not expect the interviewees to answer our questions the way they did. So, instead of looking at their responses through my cultural perspectives or stereotypes, I looked at the responses objectively and the ethnographic data gave me a better understanding.

I have always been curious as to why Asian students, international or not, are attending Parkland instead of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which is a popular school for Asian students. Through my group’s ethnographic study we discovered that Asian students are like any other student attending Parkland. They are there because it is convenient, economically savvy, and because it’s a good transfer school. Although the conclusion to our
ethnography may seem common sense, it is also very informative because it helps to break some of the typical stereotypes within our community. After doing this study, one topic I think would be very useful for further research is if someone broke down the majors dominated by Asians at Parkland and contrasted them to the majors dominated by Asians at U of I in order to see if the results correlate with why Asian students are attending Parkland over the U of I.

**Works Cited**
