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Critical Cultural Student Affairs Praxis and Participatory Action Research

OiYan A. Poon, Loyola University Chicago
Dian D. Squire, Iowa State University
Delia Cheung Hom, Northeastern University
Kevin Gin, Boston College
Megan S. Segoshi, Loyola University Chicago
Aaron Parayno, Northeastern University

Abstract

This paper explores how student affairs practitioners may engage in critical cultural praxis through participatory action research (PAR). As authors, both researchers and practitioners, we partnered with one another to conduct a needs assessment of Asian American students through PAR methods at a university in the northeast United States. Unfortunately, the PAR project as initially designed did not come to fruition. We used autoethnography to understand the many barriers that prevented the completion of the project, such as lengthy and unclear IRB processes, lack of organizational stability, and limited institutional support. Finally, we offer insight into how scholar-practitioners and institutions can better prepare for and support PAR initiatives as a way to engage in critical cultural praxis on their campuses.

Keywords

participatory action research, critical cultural praxis, practitioner

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Two decades ago, Rhoads and Black (1995) outlined three waves of evolution in student affairs work. The first two waves of student affairs work are commonly cited and discussed in student affairs graduate preparation programs. The first, and longest lasting, era was guided by the principle of *in loco parentis*, characterizing the relationship between the student affairs educator and student as one of parent to child (Lee, 2011). The second wave emerged with the rise of the student development perspective in the early to mid-20th century (Stage, 1994). In this approach, practitioners guide students' social, spiritual, and academic development (Stage, 1994). The most recent but less commonly discussed and understood wave is one identified as the critical cultural perspective (Rhoads & Black, 1995). Arising from calls to advance multiculturalism, diversity, and social transformation in higher education, "A critical cultural perspective helps student affairs practitioners understand the power of culture and, in so doing, enables them to engage in campus transformation intended to dismantle oppressive cultural conditions" (Rhoads & Black, 1995, p. 413). They suggested that this wave emerged by the 1990s and called for the advancement of transformative education in student affairs. However, they provided few details about how student affairs professionals might tangibly advance this perspective in their daily work and generally in the field of student affairs.

Therefore, this article seeks to accomplish three objectives. First, it revisits the idea of a critical cultural perspective in student affairs work. Second, it suggests participatory action research (PAR) as one approach to tangibly apply this perspective in student affairs. Third, it presents a preliminary exploration of the feasibility of PAR as a scholar–practitioner model to enact a critical cultural perspective. Emerging from the critical pedagogy tradition, PAR offers social justice oriented student affairs practitioners an innovative, social justice grounded method of working with college students as educational partners for transformative change. PAR is a potentially powerful, albeit challenging, means for engaging diverse student and practitioner stakeholders in a practice of active democratic education (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004). We argue that the implementation of PAR, when done with thoughtful intentionality, is one way to apply a critical cultural perspective to student affairs practice in alignment with principles articulated in foundational student affairs documents such as the American Council on Education's (ACE) 1937 and 1949 *Student Personnel Point of View*.

in the remainder of this article, we situate our study within extant research literature on social justice and the scholar–practitioner models in student affairs. We then present our conceptual framework for PAR, which is guided by concepts of critical pedagogy and praxis. To examine the feasibility of PAR as a socially just scholar–practitioner model for student affairs work, we engaged in an autoethnographic reflective evaluation of the implementation of a PAR project at an Asian American cultural center.

Literature Review

Student affairs professionals represent a vital workforce on college campuses. The student affairs profession emerged to deliver a range of educational services in partnership with faculty as demands on faculty to focus their work on research, teaching, and administrative service increased. The responsibilities of student affairs professionals span the entirety of college student lives including retention programming, mentoring, admissions, academic advising, counseling, multicultural student centers, among others (Schloss & Cragg, 2013). According to ACPA and NASPA (2015), all student affairs professionals should be competent in ten wide-ranging

areas. For the purposes of this article, this literature review focuses attention on just two of these professional competencies. The first is social justice and inclusion, which can be understood broadly as interested in advancing social justice change. The second is assessment, evaluation, and research, which aligns with calls on student affairs professionals to be scholar–practitioners. Given these significant demands on student affairs professionals, we examine relevant research literature to understand existing models for social justice and scholar–practitioner praxis in the field.

Social Justice Praxis in Student Affairs

In the field of higher education and student affairs, scholars have called for critical ways of thinking and practicing student affairs for social justice and democratic ideals of education (e.g., Bensimon et al., 2004; Bondi, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Manning, 1994; Obear & martinez, 2013; Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, & Patton, 2010; Rhoads & Black, 1995). For instance, Manning (1994) advocated for a "Freirian philosophy in student affairs," to "fully improve the educational opportunities for students of color . . . [and] *all* who compose university communities" (p. 94). Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, and Patton (2010) challenged administrators "to center subjugated knowledges in the academy, to honor different ways of knowing, and to work for progressive social change by engaging in projects that create an academy that is truly inclusive" (p. 338).

Although there are examples of student affairs practice that espouse social justice outcomes, few do so from a critical cultural perspective, which requires a goal of acting for systemic change (Rhoads & Black, 1995). Leadership models such as the Social Change Model (Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), 1996) have stated outcomes of social change but are not embedded within explicit frameworks that work toward upending systemic societal oppressions such as racism, ableism, etc. Likewise, common campus programs focused on diversity, such as culture-based festivals, leadership retreats, and diversity trainings, have the potential to reify stereotypes, especially when lacking a grounding in a critical cultural perspective (Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012). There are also programs such as intergroup dialogue that facilitate social identity formation and intergroup relationships with a desired outcome of advancing social justice (Quaye & Baxter Magolda, 2007; Zúñiga, 2003). Intergroup dialogue "potentiates a democratic process that acknowledges and respects all parties, creates a context that reinforces the notion that change is possible, and transforms relationships toward positive social change" (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington 2006, p. 304). Although vital dialogues are facilitated through such programs, action for transformative social justice change is not an explicit goal.

Lechuga, Clerc, and Howell (2009) explored another facilitated activity called encountered situations. Encountered situations "provide the opportunity for students to engage in dialogue based on personal experiences to explore issues of social equity and justice" (Lechuga, Clerc, & Howell, 2009, p. 232). The two types of encountered situations explored, role playing and "shock" immersion, are problematic within a critical framework. First, they require that knowledge is transferred to the learner, is applied in practice, and holds significance in the learner's value system (Lechuga et al., 2009). Immersion programs also assume a one-way transference of knowledge from a subordinated group (e.g., guests in a shelter for the temporarily homeless) to a privileged group (e.g., students visiting the shelter), representing a "taking of knowledge" from shelter guests by students. Such a model of learning does not directly address wide-ranging systemic forms of oppression that contribute to homelessness.

Bridging the Gap Between Practice and Research

The NASPA Task Force on Research and Scholarship (2011) defined the creation of scholarship (i.e., research, assessment, evaluation) as a core value of student affairs. Successful scholarship should be defined by its relevance and importance to supporting student success and addressing pressing issues facing today's colleges and universities broadly. Topic nine in the Task Force's (2011) report noted:

> Student affairs educators have long taken the lead with diversity, cultural pluralism, and social justice efforts on college campuses. As student populations continue to increase in terms of diversity (e.g., race, sexual orientation, economic class) and empowerment (e.g., equal access to campus services, marriage rights, economic justice), student affairs educators will continue to adjust and further develop as a professional field. (p. 10)

Although it did not present a specifically critical perspective of social justice, this document situated social justice-based work as important to the field. The report also noted that practice should be informed by theory, and theory informed by practice, because student affairs is an applied field. Accordingly, it encouraged scholar–practitioners to engage in research that is both relevant and critical to a social justice mission. Missing from these frameworks is an explicit call to engage in critical examinations of systemic oppression in higher education and student affairs. Few have explained how to be effective scholar–practitioners with a critical, or social justice oriented, perspective.

Bensimon and Bishop (2012) take on the implicit nature of hegemonic perspectives in traditional modes of research, particularly in higher education. In their call for alternative approaches to research on race and equity in higher education, they critiqued how dominant models of research privilege the researcher as central to the general exclusion of practitioners and other stakeholders from the knowledge production, or research process. Addressing the gap between research and practice, Bensimon et al. (2004) presented a practitioner-as-researcher model in the Diversity Scorecard project with student affairs professionals at multiple urban colleges. Their work provided reflections on the experience of implementing a practitioner-as-researcher model of knowledge production and evidence that supported the professional and personal development of those practitioners due to their involvement in that type of research. This approach requires that "the roles of the researched and researcher are reversed to some extent. That is, practitioners take the role of researchers, and researchers assume the roles of facilitators and consultants" (Bensimon et al., 2004, p. 108).

The practitioner-as-researcher model is one approach for social justice praxis in student affairs. Bensimon et al.'s (2004) Diversity Scorecard project resulted in many positive outcomes. It influenced how some practitioners-as-researchers conceptualized inequity on their college campuses and how they thought about research and the data uncovered in the research process. Participants began to "realize the seriousness and enormity of the problem" with racial inequity on college campuses (Bensimon et al., 2004, p. 115). The shift was attributed to the participant–researchers' own creation of knowledge. Bensimon et al. (2004) noted that "when practitioners are the researchers, the knowledge they generate is more likely to produce a conceptual shift" (p. 116) because the shifts must be self-initiated through the process of doing research. There was also potential for self-change and self-empowerment among participant–researchers who saw themselves as able to maintain efforts around the research project and who had a compelling interest in race and equity work on their

campuses beyond the scope of the study.

To date, Bensimon et al.'s (2004) study is one of the few presenting an alternative epistemological model to tangibly bridge the gap between research and practice. Their study largely decentered the professional researcher as sole authority and expert in the research process, acknowledged the expertise held by practitioners, and invited them to subjectively engage in most of the research process. They offered a more inclusive and humanizing approach to research in higher education. However, in this practitioner-as-scholar model, the Diversity Scorecard project did not involve practitioners in the identification of the problem for study, nor were they involved in the research design development. Thus, their project's approach differed from a PAR approach, which is "concerned with producing knowledge and empowering people and communities through genuine collaboration" on all aspects of the of the research project from initiation through completion (Bensimon et al., 2004, p. 109).

The present study contributes to the fields of student affairs and higher education by considering the viability of a PAR project in student affairs practice to advance social justice. It primarily considers the feasibility of PAR as a model to bridge research and student affairs practice guided by principles of critical cultural perspectives and social justice values. It also seeks to empower both students and student affairs staff through research to advocate for systemic transformation.

Conceptual Framework

To explore what it means to engage in student affairs praxis as a scholar–practitioner informed by social justice, we drew from a critical cultural perspective on student affairs (Rhoads & Black, 1995) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000). Guided by these concepts, we provide an example of a PAR project to offer an innovative scholar–practitioner model for student affairs work. Increasingly, PAR and youth participatory action research (YPAR) have become a vibrant area of scholarship informed by theories of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and social justice praxis in K–12 education (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Kemmis, 2006; McTaggart, 1994). Because few studies in higher education and student affairs have incorporated PAR, the approach and how it is aligned with the critical cultural perspective and critical pedagogy warrants some explanation.

Critical Cultural Perspective and Critical Pedagogy

In their conceptualization of a critical cultural perspective, Rhoads and Black (1995) observed the nascent development of transformative educational practices in student affairs. This perspective relies heavily upon tenets of critical pedagogy, positioning the student affairs practitioner as a transformative educator focused on strategic action for systemic change. In this framing, "The role of the student affairs practitioner is to work alongside students and other faculty and staff to transform college and university settings, and . . . help make significant organizational changes" (Rhoads & Black, 1995, p. 420).

Through the critical cultural perspective, student affairs educators are called to work in genuine partnership with other campus stakeholders to collectively advance transformative systemic changes for social justice. Although the definition of social justice remains unsettled and debatable (Mayhew & Deluca Fernández, 2007), for the purposes of this paper, social justice praxis in student affairs "requires that individuals challenge dominant ideology and advocate change in institutional policies and practices" (Watt, 2007, p. 115). In addition to awareness of

social, political, economic injustices, and related systemic power inequalities, ascribing to social justice necessitates student affairs educators to engage in action for systemic change. This concept of social justice and acting for systemic change is aligned with Freirean pedagogy and praxis for critical awareness, reflection, and action to counter dehumanizing systems (Freire, 2000; Manning, 1994; Rhoads & Black, 1995).

Freire (2000) argued for a recognition that students and educators each possess valuable forms of knowledge that may not often be recognized or properly respected by dominant institutions of education. Student affairs praxis guided by Freirean notions of education facilitates the development of critical consciousness through self-reflection and analysis of the ways inequalities are systemically reproduced. With an awareness of how injustices and oppression are produced and reproduced, the critically conscious individual or community would theoretically be more empowered to be critical of and enabled to act against oppressive systems.

The tenets of critical pedagogy, which entail analysis of oppressive systems that inform action for social justice transformation, are well aligned with values and goals of the student affairs profession. For example, Manning (1994) observed that "transforming organizations through individual development, institutional evolution, and a commitment to social change . . . is a long-standing premise of student affairs practice" (p. 95). Thus, student affairs practice informed by critical pedagogy requires reflection to understand systemic injustices and strategic actions toward abolishing oppressive systems.

PAR: Transformative Education and Research in Action

We present PAR as a model of praxis aligned with tenets of critical pedagogy and the critical cultural perspective of student affairs work. PAR is a collaborative research process that involves collective coconstruction of knowledge that collapses traditional hierarchies of power between the researcher and researched, critical self, and group reflection and awareness, "and the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process" (McIntyre, 2008, p. ix).

Many critical scholars in education have identified PAR as a scholarly approach that can fulfill values of social justice because it privileges and centers the perspectives and agency of historically marginalized communities (McIntyre, 2008). In K–12 education, teachers have used the method to position themselves as scholar–practitioners working in partnership with students and communities to advance transformative social justice change (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Such collaborative projects not only empower historically marginalized communities to transform systems of oppression, they also produce research findings that can serve as powerful tools for advocacy (Poon & Cohen, 2012). Therefore, we are hopeful that PAR can offer student affairs educators committed to social justice a means to engage in critical analysis and action for systemic change as scholar–practitioners.

Building the Case

This article provides a space for reflection and analysis on the process of conducting a PAR project in an Asian American cultural center at a private university in the Northeast. The research study reflected on the feasibility of PAR as a scholar–practitioner approach to student affairs work from a critical perspective. We considered the promise of PAR to empower student affairs practitioners to lead a process of critical praxis for

institutional change in partnership with students. Simultaneously, because this study was set in an Asian American cultural center, it also sought to highlight the agency of a population often overlooked in higher education (Museus & Chang, 2009). Because PAR has the potential to spark institutional change led by students and student affairs practitioners (Kezar, 2000; Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009; Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009), it can give voice to marginalized communities, like Asian Americans, who have often been positioned as research objects rather than as subjects engaged in research, reflection, and action.

This section outlines the original project and project timeline (Appendix A). The project, originally conceptualized by OiYan Poon and Delia Hom began in the fall of 2014. A call was made to the Northside University (NU) campus for participant–researchers (Asian American students) to participate in a community-based research project to explore the experiences of the Asian American population at NU. There were ten student participant–researchers who responded and participated in the PAR study and three current and former staff of the cultural center who would act as facilitators and handle logistics. These thirteen participants also consented to data collection for a metastudy of the PAR project (what would later turn into this autoethnographic reflection). Students would be asked to take three short descriptive surveys about their experiences with PAR and write reflection papers after each meeting.

During these twice monthly meetings, participant-researchers discussed their positionality in the university and collectively reflected on their positionality in the university, wrote and collectively discussed their personal experiences with race and racism as Asian Americans. Participant–researchers also explored their previous experiences with research and explored new research paradigms. Students were provided question prompts for reflection. The meetings took place between September 2014 and February 2015.

The three cultural center staff would also be asked to participate in a 90-minute interview at the end of the project in order to better understand their experiences. Staff also wrote reflections after each meeting. Ultimately, the interviews did not happen as the project was not completed.

During the same time, Delia Cheung Hom submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for the project. By February 2015, it was clear that the IRB office was nonresponsive to requests to review this project. The completion of the project was hindered by the slow progress of the review and approval process for the human subjects research proposal by the IRB to engage in the PAR process and collect data on Asian American student experiences at the university. Unable to complete the work of PAR, the staff facilitating the group held a conference call and made the final decision to halt the project and to reflect on the process overall. It was at this time that we decided that a collective evaluation of the PAR process was necessary to gain lessons from the overall experience. We felt final journal reflections were the most appropriate because the research team lived in different cities, worked at different universities, and held different roles during the study period. Based on that decision, this autoethnography was written.

Methodology

This study utilized autoethnography, or scholarly personal narrative, to explore the PAR project experience. Autoethnography seeks to "describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). In

autoethnography, researchers partake in both the "process and product" (p. 273) of the research through the writing of autobiographical stories and the analysis of those stories that results in new knowledge about a particular set of experiences. Autoethnography is well suited for documenting the experiences of critical scholars and practitioners who are attempting to utilize a new methodology (PAR) as a form of resistance and liberation for a racially minoritized group on a college campus. It "blurs the traditional boundaries characteristic of postpositivist inquiry of researcher-participant text and surfaces multivocal and unique perspectives illuminating lived experiences" (Jones, 2009, p. 290).

The process requires researchers to selectively describe an experience that has happened in the past, whether it was a critical moment in one's life or the mundane day-to-day. Through autoethnography, we sought to better explore the experience of conducting a PAR project on a college campus in the Northeast and provide insight into how to better complete such a project on other campuses. At the same time, we were engaging in the process of critically examining "existing structures, theory, and scholarship . . . the conceptual, methodological, or theoretical orientation of the study . . . [and] the historical, linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds of the participants" (Hughes, Pennington, Makris, 2012, p. 212). By utilizing autoethnography in this case, we were able to better analyze the multiple processes at play at NU including the training of participant–researchers, the coordination of an across-country collaborative study, handling the day-to-day operations of a cultural center, changing staffing structures, and an ineffective IRB process. Each of these processes is embedded with a larger social structure and informed by a pedagogical and epistemological worldview that may at times have conflicted with, been informed by, or reinforced each other. For example, although we have no empirical evidence, the IRB office at this university may have been unaware of the critical paradigm from which PAR emerges and, therefore, been unable to cognitively and procedurally negotiate university policy with the research project's intent. Autoethnography allows the space and counterspace for this reflection and analysis to take place.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) described autoethnography as the "study of relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture" (p. 275). In this study's case, the culture is the Asian American Student Center (AASC) and its attempt at implementing a PAR project. This mode of inquiry is particularly poignant to this study because autoethnography can be used to disrupt power and give voice to communities who have traditionally been studied on instead of studied with, which is similar to the goals of PAR. As noted previously, there may have been a conceptual and epistemological disconnect between the PAR project's researchers and the university's IRB. By engaging in coconstructed narrative autoethnographic research, we were able to "illustrate the meanings of relational experiences, particularly how people collaboratively cope with ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions" in the research process at NU (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 279).

Study Methods

Although the originally planned project was not completed, we felt that an autoethnographic reflection on the process of trying to conduct a PAR project would provide critical insight for others attempting to complete such work on their campuses. We do this through an autoethnographic study guided by the following questions:

1. Is PAR capable of enabling the nexus between research and practice for stu-

dent affairs practitioners who are often overstretched and under-resourced in their daily work?
2. Can a community of practitioners and students use PAR as a method to simultaneously engage in a critical pedagogical process that empowers students to act as change agents, and produce data and analysis that supports advocacy by staff and students?

To address these questions, we explored the feasibility of a PAR project conducted at a private university in New England. In this summary of research methods, we describe the autoethnographic approach undertaken to explore the workability of PAR as a way to do scholar–practitioner work in student affairs for social justice.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ellis and Bochner (2000) noted that both personal reflection and dialogical discussion are key to autoethnographic exploration. After the halting of the PAR project and the decision to conduct this autoethnographic reflection, the first four authors wrote a journal reflection answering the research questions and analyzing project outcomes, issues with the process, and suggestions for future success. Additionally, initial emails and communications to all participants were reviewed to reconstruct the timeline and to ensure the accuracy of the recollection of the events that transpired over the course of the original project. This data was also triangulated with notes from previous discussions between the researchers throughout the planning process. Therefore, a dialogical process took place where discussions supplemented the review of written narratives (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). Participant–researcher (student) reflections were not used as data for this analysis because they did not have direct insight into the IRB procedure or other logistical or procedural happenings related to the project and the cultural center.

Our analytical procedure included reading and rereading these reflections, to generate themes that were utilized as initial codes. Using an axial coding process, we then analyzed the reflections and reread them to ensure proper interpretation and to rectify any disagreement between us (Creswell, 2014). We have chosen to present abridged versions of each of our reflections in our own words to not take away from our individual voices, perspectives, and experiences. These reflections were followed by thematic analysis of the reflections and a discussion of implications for future practice.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in all qualitative research is of the utmost importance. In autoethnography, trustworthiness is met if the narrative "evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 282). Readers must also be able to apply learned knowledge from the autoethnography to an aspect of their experience whether that be work or life in general. In this study, we aimed to provide vivid, deep accounts of our experiences and to provide the necessary context for the readers. Additionally, three of us (Delia Cheung Hom, Kevin Gin, and Aaron Parayno) worked in the same office and engaged in the same PAR project, thereby providing an integrated member checking process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as we read and reread each other's narratives. The rest of us (OiYan Poon, Dian Squire, and Megan Segoshi) were third-party reviewers of the entire experience and engaged the three PAR researchers in discussions around process and function of PAR in student affairs work. The authors also read and reread all reflective narratives. Additional trustworthiness is ensured due to the length of time we spent constructing narratives, discussing the

overall process, and conducting an external review at the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, IL in April 2015.

Reflections on PAR as a Critical Cultural Scholar–Practitioner Model

Although we would have liked to have been able to conduct our reflective evaluation of a completed PAR project, we recognized and respected that the project faced several obstacles that required a contemplative hiatus. We decided as a team to engage in reflection over the lessons learned from this first attempt at implementing a PAR project. Therefore, this section summarizes our collective and individual reflections on the feasibility of PAR as a scholar–practitioner model for a critical cultural perspective approach to student affairs work.

We present excerpts from the journal reflections of the two primary scholar–practitioners (Delia Cheung Hom and Kevin Gin) and an outside university faculty member (OiYan Poon) to illustrate our key conclusions. Reflecting on the challenges the project faced, we reached an understanding that successful PAR projects require several key considerations alongside careful deliberation and intentional planning. We also decided that despite the disappointment of being unable to complete the PAR project, the approach still holds promise as a critical cultural scholar–practitioner approach. Unfortunately, in this case, our excitement about the potentials that PAR held for a social justice driven, critical cultural praxis in student affairs led us to discount several challenges that eventually led to this project's stoppage.

Hope for PAR as a Critical Cultural Scholar–Practitioner Model

The PAR project was conceived by OiYan and Delia following an exciting conversation they had about Asian American student empowerment. OiYan enthusiastically embarked on this new project because of her enthusiasm for PAR:

> When Delia and I met up during summer 2014, we had one of those great conversations about social justice, higher education, and Asian American community empowerment. So many questions emerged from that conversation that excited me as a researcher. Why were so few Asian American students engaged as leaders outside of the AASC on campus, even though they represented a significant percentage of the undergrad enrollment, and beyond to make a difference in their communities? Our conversation about the ways student affairs staff are generally limited in their power to advocate for institutional change simultaneously frustrated me and reminded me of my own desire to engage in research as a means to advocate for systemic change in educational structures. It led me to suggest PAR as a tool for student empowerment and for generating research to substantiate advocacy efforts by both students and staff.

Working with the AASC to explore the possibilities of PAR was an opportunity that OiYan did not want to miss.

Despite the eventual suspension of the PAR project, all of the research team members remained hopeful that PAR could be a model for student engagement and for a scholar–practitioner paradigm for student affairs. In her final reflection, Delia observed:

> Overall, the students were disappointed that things hadn't moved faster. One asked why the IRB took so long, and honestly, I'm not sure why. We talked about why they were originally interested in this as a research project—many of the students talked about wanting to learn more about the perspectives and experiences of other Asian American students on campus. We talked about what research was, and one student

> had a lot to say about research—her perceptions of research not being "rewarding" were pretty interesting. There was a consensus that from a "scientific" perspective that research is "boring." The student commented that research on drugs was not rewarding because there were always negative side effects. In contrast, they thought that "social research" was much more interesting. We spent some time talking about their experiences with research, and they seemed to approach this research project with much more personal interest as opposed to their experiences with "scientific" research.

The student team members were mostly science or applied science majors, particularly pharmacy majors, reflecting the general demographics of Asian American students at the university. As such, several members were familiar with drug testing. Few were familiar with social science research. However, as Delia observed, they were intrigued by the PAR process and felt more personally engaged, suggesting the possibility that a completed PAR project would have given students a valuable opportunity to critically engage and reflect on their social contexts.

Challenges to Implementation

In our reflections, we identified several challenges that accumulated through the fall 2014 semester, making it necessary to suspend the PAR project. These obstacles included substantial organizational changes at the AASC, a long IRB process at the university that prevented the start of the PAR project, limited institutional support for student affairs practitioners to carry out the project, and too little community building among the student–staff research team. We should have viewed these obstacles as potentially insurmountable during the planning stages of the project and contemplated delaying its implementation to the following year. Nonetheless, we forged ahead and have learned important lessons from the experience.

Prolonged IRB process. As Delia summarized, our plans for the PAR project may have been overly ambitious. In particular, the IRB approval timeline took far longer than expected, delayed progress on the project, and ultimately played a major role in its cancellation. Delia stated:

> I still don't understand why the IRB process has taken so long. I wonder if this process would have been different if we had a faculty member on campus involved to help move the IRB process along. I do think that if it weren't for the IRB hold ups, however, things might have been a little more successful.

The lack of faculty presence on campus prompted Delia to ponder the ability of student affairs practitioners to engage in research opportunities on their campuses starting with gaining IRB approval.

Institutional support for practitioner-driven research. Indeed, contributing to setbacks in the PAR project was the lack of familiarity and proactive institutional support for research in the daily practice of student affairs work. The practitioners involved in the project expressed frustration with taking on the PAR project in addition to their existing responsibilities. Delia suggested that without on-campus support for research, engagement by student affairs professionals is very challenging:

> I think it would have been helpful for me to be in a context that better supported projects like these. It didn't seem like a project that anyone else on our campus cared about—I didn't do a lot to promote awareness of this, but people within Student Affairs were aware of it. I think it just wasn't something that was a priority for anyone else. I think this speaks to the overall support for research conducted by student affairs practitioners—if no one else cares and

> asks and follows up, how are practitioners who are doing research being supported, encouraged, etc.?

Delia also emphasized the time constraints of adding the PAR project onto her existing responsibilities:

> To be honest, following up with the IRB, responding to questions, etc., were not at the top of my priority list. I think it was also challenging because we were simultaneously waiting for all of our student researchers to complete their human subjects training. All of these various moving parts were challenging to manage.

Kevin's reflection suggested that his heavy workload as a Ph.D. student at another university also contributed to not prioritizing the PAR project:

> Looking back at this experience, if given the opportunity to relive this experience, I would be hard pressed to volunteer my time to this PAR project. In full honesty, I would not have agreed to come aboard to this project had the person asking me not been Delia, and if she had a full staff to support her. Part of my original willingness to come aboard was a desire to lend a hand to someone who has been supportive of my professional and personal growth in the past. I felt the need to pay the good karma forward, even though I was aware that my fall 2014 semester was not going to be one that was conducive to more projects. Relatively speaking, my fall semester was the busiest semester of my doctoral experience to date, and many of my personal priorities of healthy living, finding time to connect with family/friends, and balancing life with academic responsibilities were not achieved. Additionally, finding time in the middle of the week to get to [campus] was often a struggle, and the trips eventually became more of a burden than a pleasure. As a result, PAR was often pushed to the bottom of my priorities list, which I believe was unfair to both the students and Delia.

OiYan also suggested that intentional and realistic planning was necessary:

> As difficult as PAR may be to implement in a student affairs setting, I'm not ready to give up. When I was a practitioner, I was often asked by institutional leaders where my data and evidence was to support changes I believed were needed to better support marginalized students, but I didn't have time for research on top of my student services duties. I think that a more intentional process in assessing each stakeholder's time, capacity, and priorities for a given time period is necessary. Perhaps setting up a PAR project like a fellowship program with stipends would be helpful. In such a scenario, a selective application process would need to be implemented ahead of time. And staffing for sustained and sustainable curriculum planning for a full year, or a summer and fall term, would be necessary for both planning the project's goals and objectives. I remain hopeful that PAR can be a way for student affairs professionals to engage in research for social justice advocacy.

Research and praxis guided by critical perspectives not only seek to analyze how social systems reproduce inequalities, they also actively pursue goals of transformative change toward a more just society (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 2000). However, as Freire (2000) warned, action without sufficient reflection is inadequate in advancing social justice.

Community building. Even though we implicitly, if not explicitly, recognized the value of strong relational ties to the start of this project, we overlooked the importance of community building among the student research team members with each other and with nonstudent team members. For instance, Kevin reflected on the need for more team cohesion and development:

> During our meetings, we rarely spent time getting to know each other. Rath-

> er, we jumped into our agendas and attempted to discuss PAR. I believe the formal way that these meetings were run, in addition to my confounding role as an outsider, contributed to the lack of cohesion that emerged in my group of students. The students rarely talked, and only conversed in minimal ways throughout discussions. When I attempted to facilitate icebreakers, or brainstorms to generate activity, I was mostly greeted by silence. I believe the discomfort felt by both the students and myself was a result of our lack of connection to each other.

Moreover, as he noted, his status as r to the AASC as a former staff member set the stage for his own feelings toward the project:

> Many times, I felt like an outsider coming into a space that was once familiar. The layout, the wall decorations, and the space were the same, but the people (both professional staff and students) were strangers. As a result, there was a feeling of discomfort coming into a space that was both familiar, but also unrecognizable. This made me reflect upon how connected I was to the current environment. I wasn't sure I could accurately talk about the AASC in its current manifestation as a Center, or characterize what the "typical student" coming into the Center was anymore. My reference of what the AASC used to be was no longer a relevant measurement with new students, staff, programs, and student organization leaders. In many ways, I felt like I was living in the past, and not caught up to the current day. These were feelings that emerged early in the process. While they were concerning, I convinced myself that my perceptions would change, and the more time I spent on campus would ease these feelings. Unfortunately, I never felt this changed.

Similarly, Delia explained:

> In a perfect world, I would have liked to have more frequent meetings with students so that they could develop a collective group identity as a research team—I think this would have made the process very different in that they could have learned more from each other and engaged more around their own collective understanding about what it means to be Asian American on campus. I think the relationships felt very student–staff focused and that folks within the group had less of an opportunity to connect with each other. Some of the students knew each other from other contexts, but for the students who didn't necessarily come in with strong relationships, I didn't feel like they built new meaningful relationships. I think building the time to create that sense of having a mini-community would take more time and energy than I had to give.

The missed opportunity to develop a research team community also raised questions for OiYan:

> In my previous experiences with a PAR project, I lived in the same community and worked with the student research team. Although two of the students had taken a class with me several years before at [the university], I had no established connections with the students. As [Dian] and I would send out reminders to the research team members to blog about their reflections on the PAR project experience, we received very limited responses. Would the students have been more responsive and engaged in the process had I been more integrated in person? Is a virtual presence (via Facebook, Skype, etc.) insufficient?

Developing a sense of community with the student researchers when two key members of the research team were located in a different state proved to be a challenge that prevented prompt responses and student engagement.

In considering the feasibility of PAR, Kevin noted that a more successful PAR project would take "time, patience, and strong bonds

between the students and the practitioners. Without these bonds, conversations about being change agents can only occur on a superficial level." Moreover, in discussing systemic change as a goal of PAR, he explained:

> Advocacy is a priority for some students, but isn't relevant for others. As previously mentioned, some students did not see the point of change at [the university] because they see it as a place where everything is perfect. In order to use PAR as a means to both use students as change agents and produce data for advocacy, practitioners must first be able to have the conversation with students about why being an agent of change/advocacy is important. Some students will have an understanding of this importance, while others will not see any relevance.

In other words, the foundation to fruitful PAR projects requires intentional relationship and community building.

Discussion

Although we were unable to complete the originally planned PAR project, we still garnered several lessons from our autoethnographic reflection on the shortened process. These lessons suggested the importance of institutional support for integrating research into student affairs work, the critical nature of community development, and basic organizational stability (i.e., staffing), which is integral to the facilitation of community. As a Freirean model of education praxis and research, PAR requires the establishment of a strong community of stakeholders.

First, we identified the importance of a supportive institutional and organizational culture for research conducted by student affairs educators. Although research is a stated professional competency and standard of practice in the field of student affairs according to both NASPA and ACPA, the lack of institutional support for practitioners to engage in research is troubling. It suggests a lack of congruence between the aspirational language of professional associations and the structural realities of professional practice that inhibit practitioners from conducting research. We wonder if these organizations are committing student affairs professionals to research activities in their aspirational rhetoric without advocating for institutional supports needed to make scholar–practitioner work feasible. For example, many IRB processes require the approval of a faculty sponsor. Although Delia was able to submit the IRB for this project, approval was never obtained. This also speaks to the detrimental effects of barriers to faculty and staff collaborations. Additionally, it led us to wonder whether and how scholar–practitioner models of student affairs have been implemented and sustained outside of institutional research offices. There may also be continued questions around the understanding of PAR as a methodology of research and knowledge creation. For many student affairs practitioners, engaging in research may be a daunting task. In order for research to play a meaningful role in student affairs work, there must exist a culture on campus that values reflection, genuine innovation, and a commitment to social change.

The most important lesson gathered from this experience was the critical importance of community building. Aligned with a critical cultural and Freirean approach to research and social justice praxis, PAR requires the development of a strong community of stakeholders to be engaged in the process (McIntyre, 2008). The establishment of team cohesion is an important foundational condition to engaging in a process of problematizing social contexts and questioning the status quo. We suspect that more intentional efforts to develop community among the research team would have provided a stronger sense of commitment and engagement in the PAR process from students. Despite the challenges

faced by this PAR project, some evidence suggested that students found social research to be intriguing and personally relevant. The limited implementation of the project partially demonstrated the power of PAR as a culturally relevant and engaging approach to validating students' experiential knowledge (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). At the same time, PAR projects would benefit from more intentional planning for community development.

The final lesson we drew from this reflection was the importance of stable organizational staffing to the development of a strong community for PAR. In addition to new staff transitions in the AASC, the director of the AASC was taking a personal leave in spring 2015. These changes in staffing left an unstable on-site leadership situation for the PAR project. PAR projects often span over long periods of time, making the shift in AASC leadership a potential (and realized) liability to the sustainability of the project. Given the temporary fluctuations in staffing, it may have been wise to not proceed with the project as planned in fall 2014. The ability of the staff to facilitate team and community cohesion through a sustained, long-term project is somewhat dependent on the stability of the office staff to provide adequate support.

Additionally, carrying out research was not built into the job descriptions and responsibilities of the staff members involved. Although assessment and evaluation are typically found in director and coordinator job descriptions of multicultural offices, there is often little support from divisions of student affairs to carry out such projects. This is evidenced by reflections on the lack of time and support to complete the project.

An example of divisional support for assessment can be found at the University of Georgia, a large, public research university. Every year, its division of student affairs' assessment office engages staff from different units in an ongoing, year-long assessment of their respective areas. Those who partake in the opportunity are guided through best practices by the student affairs assessment office and have complete agency in determining the method and goals of their own assessment project. Such an initiative achieves goals set forth by divisions that seek to conduct comprehensive assessments of their units and attempts to not drain the resources of individual departments in coordinating these efforts. Within the field of student affairs, assessment is often most closely connected to measuring student learning and progress on other learning outcomes (Hamrick & Klein, 2015). Assessment within student affairs has been framed around accountability and determining "how we are doing" (Sandeen & Barr, 2014). This differs fundamentally from the more specific goals of PAR that focus on the coconstruction of knowledge, critical awareness, and social change. In reflecting on the particular challenges with implementing a PAR project within the context of student affairs, the mismatch between the goals of PAR and the articulation of the role of assessment in student affairs practice emerges as an area of concern. Although assessment focuses on institutionally determined learning outcomes and revising programs to more effectively achieve these goals, PAR requires a more critical self-reflection about student experiences, with an openness to more radical transformation cocreated with student voices. We wonder how open colleges and universities are to staff and students engaging in a counterhegemonic research, reflection, and transformative action.

Because we were unable to complete the PAR project, we hope to revisit a more thoughtful planning process for a more intentional PAR project that integrates community development, realistic planning, and integration of additional institutional supports. Working well in advance of project implementation to

propose a PAR project as a student fellowship program with outcomes in student engagement, leadership, and critical thinking skills might position such a project positively in a student affairs unit. Seeking partnership with a faculty partner on campus might also help facilitate the completion of a PAR project. In the end, the involved nature of PAR requires long-term, intentional planning and careful implementation.

Conclusion

PAR may offer a method of proverbially feeding two birds with one seed in meeting professional expectations. In addition to being a research method whereby community stakeholders cooperatively identify a research problem related to their everyday lives, articulate research questions, and select and execute data collection and analysis, a key component of PAR is in the collective civic action for systemic change that follows because of its grounding in critical perspectives (Morrell, 2008). Such an engaged research process counters "the intellectual void that occurs when people's voices are left out of the research and thus policy decisions that affect their lives and opportunities" (Canella, 2008, p. 205).

PAR offers social justice oriented student affairs practitioners an innovative, social justice grounded method of working with college students. It is often difficult for student affairs practitioners to continually conduct student needs assessments, produce high-quality programs for students, evaluate on-going programs, and advocate for student needs within the university hierarchy. It is in this context that scholars and faculty in the field of student affairs and higher education have advanced the notion of the scholar–practitioner (Schroeder & Pike, 2001) or practitioner-as-researcher model (Bensimon et al., 2004), encouraging busy practitioners to add research to their daily work responsibilities. Moreover, the two major student affairs professional associations have identified research inquiry as a key competency and component of good practice (ACPA & NASPA, 1997). However, few have confronted the realities in barriers to conducting research for student affairs professionals. Although PAR may offer an innovative approach to scholar–practitioner work, there remains a need for more tenable working conditions that would allow for scholar–practitioner work.

Although PAR offers an exciting model for student affairs practice, student affairs educators must proceed with careful planning and intentionality when implementing a PAR project. This study suggests that intentional planning would require an eye toward relationship and community development among research teams consisting of students, staff, and faculty. It also recommends that such an ambitious endeavor is not taken on lightly. With careful planning and intentionality in engaging in PAR, such an approach may offer student affairs professionals a radical and transformative means to achieve ideals of scholar–practitioner work.

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Appendix A

Project Timeline

NU Asian American center called for participant–researchers (students) to engage in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project to assess Asian American student needs.	August 2014
Participant–researchers (students) engaged in biweekly research meetings and wrote reflections about the meetings.	September 2014–February 2015
Participant–researchers (students) completed Institutional Review Board (IRB) training, and IRB materials were submitted by Delia Cheung Hom for approval.	September–October 2014
Project halted due to lack of IRB approval and lack of response from IRB office.	February 2015
We embarked on an autoethnographic study of the PAR process at Northside University (NU).	March 2015–present