

ASHE/LUMINA FELLOWS SERIES

TRACY LACHICA BUENAVISTA, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

# Examining the postsecondary experiences of Pilipino 1.5-generation college students

As higher education scholars and practitioners, we must revisit our understanding of “non-traditional” students to better consider the needs of 1.5-generation college students—students whose parents were college educated outside of the United States.

Institutions of higher education have been lauded for attempts to diversify the face of the academy by implementing programs and services specifically designed to conduct outreach and recruit “non-traditional” college students. Among those considered non-traditional college students are historically underrepresented Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation college students.<sup>1</sup> However, these categories need to be re-examined as they do not apply neatly to all students. In this essay, I will focus on U.S. Pilipinos<sup>2</sup> and how 1) their life experiences are often overlooked and misunderstood; 2) they remain underserved as a result of not being fully understood; and

3) the categories usually reserved for identifying underrepresented students, particularly education generational status, do not adequately reflect the experiences of U.S. Pilipinos. More specifically, I introduce the experiences of U.S. Pilipinos as “1.5-generation college students.” These are second-generation college students of Pilipino descent whose postsecondary experiences more resemble those of first-generation U.S. born college students, due to factors associated with immigration.

Various efforts, ranging from outreach and recruitment programs to institutional retention services, often target first-generation college students. Students are typically provided the opportunity to self-

identify themselves as first generation, through a myriad of college-associated forms (e.g., college applications) that request demographic data related to parent educational attainment. Failure to provide such information often leads to qualified students missing out on opportunities for resources, such as university support services or federally funded research programs, which are important to their access and retention success. However, in this essay, I argue that the methods colleges and universities employ to ascertain generational status are inadequate. The way students are typically asked to identify their experiences often prevents them from sharing contextual information that complicates how they are categorized in terms of education generational status. For example, second-generation college students benefit from social and academic capital such as college-going motivators,

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, “first-generation college students” refers to those students whose parents did not attend college. “Second-generation college students” encompass students whose parents attended college and received a postsecondary degree.

<sup>2</sup> The term “U.S. Pilipinos” refers to people of Pilipino descent residing in the United States. This term is used instead of “Pilipino American” in an effort to better consider those Pilipinos who are undocumented and/or politically dis-identify with the term “American” due to their status.

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culture, and college-going practices due to their parents' postsecondary experiences. However, 1.5-generation college students are less reliant on parental sources of information and support to develop such college-going literacies.

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of higher education experiences for students whose parents received postsecondary degrees in foreign countries. Due to various factors associated with immigration, namely occupational downgrading and under-employment, U.S. Pilipino youth often do not experience the benefits associated with high levels of parent educational attainment (Buenavista, 2007). Yet, institutional programs and services that target students with first-generation college student experiences often do not take the unique U.S. Pilipino family experience into account and treat these students as if they had all the social and academic capital needed to succeed in college. In the following, I describe U.S. Pilipino socio-cultural contexts in higher education to introduce the idea of a 1.5-generation college student experience. In doing so, education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers can better consider the complexity of education generational status and how it influences the postsecondary experiences of Students of Color.

### Education generational status

One significant factor proven to affect the educational attainment of Students of Color is previous exposure to people who have attended college, and the subsequent knowledge they gain regarding higher education (Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). More specifically, parents are often seen as integral in shaping student perceptions and college-preparation opportunities. Many Students of Color and/or low-income students are also first-generation college students—those whose parents did not attend college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). In general, first-generation college students are more likely than their second-generation counterparts to receive less support for college goals, be less academically prepared, and have lower rates of college retention (Pascarella et al., 2004). They also tend to rely on non-parental support systems such as older siblings, as well as non-familial community members during the college choice process (Ceja, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2006).

In contrast, second-generation college students, those with college-educated parents, are more likely to utilize their parents as sources of college information (McDonough, 1997). Higher levels of parent educational attainment have a positive influence on student aspirations for college, and opportunities to attend more selective institutions (Gonzalez, 2005; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Parent educational attainment is also a factor in student persistence because education is correlated with a broader

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concept of socioeconomic status, which has been found to contribute to degree completion (Terenzini et al., 1996). Second-generation college students therefore have greater access to economic and cultural capital, which facilitates easier transitions into college, as well as greater classroom engagement.

Research on education generational status highlights the importance of parental educational achievement in the access and retention of students (Gonzalez, 2005; Kao & Tienda, 2005; Smith & Fleming, 2006). However, discourse on education generational status rarely examines the experiences of Students of Color whose parents are college educated outside of the United States. Such is the case for many U.S. Pilipino students.

### U.S. Pilipino contexts

Pilipinos are primarily an immigrant community. Roughly 54 percent of the 3.3 million Pilipinos in the United States are foreign-born (Census, 2008). They arguably comprise the largest Asian American ethnic group when one considers that Pilipinos are the most numerous undocumented Asian group in the United States (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2009). Narratives on Pilipino presence in the United States emphasize a common immigrant experience of socioeconomic-motivated migration, which often does not capture the systematic recruitment and exploitation of Pilipino labor that is involved

**Table 1. Highest level of educational attainment**

	Total U.S. population	Pilipino alone or in any combination
<b>Population, Age 25 years and older</b>	195,794,570	1,898,060
Less than high school diploma	15.5%	8.1%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	39.6%	16.7%
Some college or associate's degree	27.5%	29.3%
Bachelor's degree	17.3%	37.4%
Graduate or professional degree	10.1%	8.5%

Source: Census, 2008

in such movement (Chua, 2009; San Juan, Jr., 1992). Instead Pilipinos are often cited for achieving sought socioeconomic mobility, such as high rates of educational attainment and high rates of employment.

Pilipino adults in the United States exhibit higher rates of postsecondary educational attainment compared to their ethnic and racial counterparts. Table 1 summarizes the highest level of educational attainment for adults, ages 25 years and older for the total U.S. population, as well as for Pilipinos. About 37.4 percent of Pilipino adults have a bachelor's degree, compared to 15.2 percent of Whites and 17.3 percent of the total U.S. population (Census, 2008).<sup>3</sup> However, information such as this obscures the fact that the majority received their degrees outside of the

United States and remain relegated to low wage and/or service sector work (Census, 2008; Chua, 2009). While higher educational attainment has facilitated the ability for Pilipinos to immigrate, their education does not necessarily translate into social or material benefits, such as income. From 2006-2008, the per capita income

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<sup>3</sup> Data are obtained from American Community Survey 3-Year estimates for the total population, Pilipino alone or in any combination, Asian alone or in any combination, and white alone or in any combination. See Census, 2008 reference for url.

**Table 2. Student background information**

Student Name*	Mother Education	Mother Employment	Father Education	Father Employment
Andres	B.A. Accounting	Office Assistant	B.A. Maritime Studies	Temporary Worker
Bonifacia	A.A. Nutrition	Secretary	B.A. Business	Temporary Worker
Carlos	B.A. Nursing	Nurse	A.A. [Unspecified]	Office Clerk
Emilia	B.A. Accounting	Export Services	B.A. Accounting	Accountant
Gabriela	B.A. Accounting	Retail Clerk	B.A. Engineering	Sanitation Worker
Jose	B.A. Nursing	Nurse	Some College	Postal Worker
Maria	B.A. Business	Administrative Assistant	B.A. Philosophy	U.S. Navy
Pablo	B.A. Accounting	Temporary Worker/ Staff Accountant	B.A. Accounting	Temporary Worker
Renato	B.A. Engineering	Social Worker	N/A	N/A
Rizalo	Some College	Insurance Clerk	B.A. [Unspecified]	U.S. Navy
Rodrigo	Some College	Office Assistant	B.A. Engineering	Technician
Silanga	B.A. Accounting	Gaming Casino Clerk	N/A	N/A
Sison	B.A. Nursing	Nurse	B.A. [Unspecified]	Travel Agent/ Entrepreneur
Trina	B.A. Business	Administrative Clerk	B.A. English	Temporary Worker/ Entrepreneur
Vera	B.A. Nursing	Factory Worker	B.A. Mechanical Engineering	Factory Worker

\*Participants names have been replaced with pseudonyms  
Source: Buenavista, 2007

for Pilipinos was \$26,320, less than the per capita income of Whites (\$29,920) and the total population (\$27,470). Pilipino immigrant experiences can be characterized by trends of occupational downgrading and underemployment: phenomena in which Pilipinos are

employed in work that is vastly non-commensurate with their educational attainment and/or skill levels (Madamba, 1998; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2007).

While greater attention is paid to the experiences of Pilipino adults, the educational issues of U.S. Pilipino

youth are often neglected by education discourse that tends to highlight the academic achievements of Asian American students. Studies that examine U.S. Pilipino educational issues reveal that this cohort suffers from a range of educational disparities, among

them: high secondary “push out” rates (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2007), negative interactions with high school counselors and personnel (Teranishi, 2002), overrepresentation in community colleges and less selective four-year institutions (Chu, 1991; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004), and patterns of high postsecondary attrition (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Okamura & Agbayani, 1997). As previously mentioned, underemployment, or the phenomenon of parents employed in jobs non-commensurate to their education and skill level, has shaped U.S. Pilipino postsecondary experiences (Buenavista, 2007; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2007). Youth often have an added pressure to work to contribute to their family incomes, which often translates to less time focused on education (Teranishi, 2002; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2007). Such characteristics and disparities are prevalent among U.S. Pilipino youth, including those whose parents have degrees from colleges and universities in the Philippines.

### *U.S. Pilipino narratives of access and retention*

In the following, I use the narratives of U.S. Pilipino college students to capture the complexity of their experiences as they are shaped by their sociocultural contexts. During a one-year ethnographic study of a Pilipino student-initiated organization,<sup>4</sup> 12 students (see Table 2) participated in and completed a three-part interview protocol. An

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additional three students participated in the project but only partially completed the protocol. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours. The Pilipino college students were educational advocates in a student-initiated organization focused on the recruitment and retention of Pilipino students in public four-year universities in the California San Francisco Bay Area. Thus, the participants were informed by their personal experiences as students and advocates for Pilipino college student access and retention. Interview data revealed that every student had at least one parent who was a college graduate. The vast majority of parents had bachelor’s degrees, and all parents had some college experience from Philippine institutions. As such, I focus on the role that parent educational attainment played on the postsecondary experiences of the students.

U.S. Pilipino college students operate within a sociocultural context of contradictions (Buenavista,

Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009). In terms of education generational status, contradiction is predicated on a gap that often exists between parental encouragement for higher education and the transmission of knowledge related to the mechanics of becoming college-ready. It is this gap that students identified when describing the liminality they occupied in being considered a second-generation college student, yet not necessarily experiencing the expected benefits associated with such a status. The students discussed their college preparation and retention activities, and subsequently expressed a commonly held belief that students with college-educated parents should be better prepared to attend and complete college. Yet, they often challenged this underlying idea through their narratives of access and retention.

### *Complications with educational generational status*

Pablo, a fourth-year student, discussed how Pilipino contexts complicated notions of education generational status:

People who are second-generation college students have it easier because their parents went through the college experience, they have resources available, they have their parents available to guide them through the process of college applications and even going through college ... it’s definitely an advantage over people [whose parents] may have gotten their college degrees in another country, and then you are

<sup>4</sup> Student-initiated organizations are student-established, student-run, and primarily student-funded entities that promote social justice and community empowerment through higher education (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005).

going to college and you are having that full “American” college experience for the first time than any other generation in your family. So like somehow your parents were touched by college, but not in the way that they’re expected to.

Pablo highlighted that there is an assumption that all college students with college-educated parents similarly experience college. Upon postsecondary enrollment, the children of college-educated Pilipino adults are often deemed “second-generation” college students, though Pablo explains how they are the “first” generation in their family to have an “American” college experience. He differentiated traditional second-generation college students from Pilipino college students with foreign-educated parents: the latter experiencing a disadvantage based on a lack of access to and parental familiarity with valued college navigation information and resources.

Andres, a sophomore, reiterated Pablo’s point. In discussing the lack of direct involvement his parents played during the college choice process, he expressed:

I think the whole second-generation [college student] thing makes sense if you are only talking about parents and kids in America, but I know for a lot of Pilipinos, we’re kind of “irregular.” Because I know a lot of us, our parents have college degrees, but it’s like our parents might as well not have those degrees because [degrees] from the Philippines don’t result in

the same type of advantages that “regular” second-generation [college students] get here. So, they worked too much, and I couldn’t just ask my parents to help me because they were just as busy and as clueless as I was!

Like Pablo, Andres made a clear distinction between “regular” second-generation college students and U.S. Pilipino college students with foreign-educated parents, “irregular” second-generation college students. It is important to note that while he explained the limitations of his parents’ knowledge regarding U.S.-specific college choice information, he simultaneously provided a critique that such limited involvement was constrained by his parents’ degrees not being afforded the same cultural capital in the United States. Andres’ mother and father had degrees in accounting and maritime studies but worked as an office assistant and temporary laborer, respectively. Andres was not always able to ask his parents for assistance because they “worked too much”—a result of occupational downgrading and working beyond the traditional 40-hour work week for financial stability.

### *The disconnect between parent and student realities*

The students I interviewed were not the only ones to experience issues reflecting a disconnect between parent educational attainment and student realities. As staff members in a student-initiated organization, their peers relied upon them for academic advising and mentorship. In one instance, Vera, a sophomore, described a situation in which one of

the students she advised was having difficulty sharing his academic difficulties with his family. She explained how her mentee’s attempt to discuss his struggle with the rigor of his college course load led to a frustrating confrontation with his mother. She recalled:

I think people overlook that there are differences, even the minutest thing. I know in the Philippines, the units are a lot different than here because I remember my friend [said], “My mom says that my cousin is taking 25 units in the Philippines and how come I’m not taking 25 units here?” And he was going through it and having a hard time. And he tried explaining to his mom that the units are much different here than the Philippines and she’s like, “No, but it’s 25. It’s 25 ... and you’re struggling with 13!” Even though some parents went to college, it just shows how different it is.

Vera highlighted the tension that could arise between students and parents when there lacked a mutual understanding of the logistics of enrollment. In her narrative, she used her friend’s story to demonstrate that even when parents attended college and/or had other family members who attended college in the Philippines, it did not make sense to use the Philippine experience as a basis of comparison to what students were going through in the United States. She portrayed how even when students tried to garner college support from parents, parents often miscontextualized or were unfamiliar with American enrollment practices.

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While Vera described how some students were unable to effectively communicate with parents for support, more often than not, students developed a practice of non-disclosure regarding their retention issues. Every student provided an example of how they or one of the students with whom they worked, withheld information that exposed struggles related to college. The decision not to seek help from parents was demonstrated by Pablo, who characterized his entire senior year as a constant internal battle to remain enrolled in college. He expressed:

You can’t really go home and tell your parents ... honestly, how can I complain to my parents about [my retention] when they’re working two jobs just so

I can go to school?... Honestly, I was just so depressed and I didn’t know what to do ... so many times I’ve thought like I’ll just quit, but then that whole parent thing comes in, so I stick it out and deal with it, and it’s hard.

The “whole parent thing” to which Pablo refers are the personal and economic sacrifices manifested by the occupational downgrading experienced by his parents, and many college-educated Pilipinos overall. Pablo’s parents both earned accounting degrees and were certified accountants in the Philippines. However, in the United States, his mother was a temporary worker for several years before attaining a position as a staff accountant with the local utilities company, while his father often held multiple temporary jobs, mainly working in manufacturing factories. Pablo revealed he experienced feelings of depression that affected his attitudes toward school, but because he believed that his persistence issues did not compare to those associated with his parents’ struggles to provide for the family, he made the decision to remain silent. Throughout Pablo’s narrative, his exposure to his parents’ underemployment led him to question the supposed benefits of his education generational status.

#### *Intangible parental contributions*

While parents were often unable to provide college-going advice and tangible, direct support in the form of financial and academic resources, the sole fact that parents had attended college appeared to have an intangible,

yet critically important impact on students taking advantage of higher education opportunities. In discussing how she self-initiated taking college preparatory curriculum, the SATs and researching colleges, Silanga—a second-year student—explained:

[Parents] didn’t pass anything on to us in terms of information on how to get to colleges here because I know for me, my mom didn’t know anything about [college] here and so I had to basically figure out what I needed to do in high school.... I think what they did pass on to us, was wanting to get into higher education and wanting to do well and that’s what matters more.

Silanga’s mother, an accountant in the Philippines, had limited knowledge of U.S. colleges and even more limited time due to the graveyard shift she worked at a gaming casino. Thus, Silanga shared how she independently navigated the college choice process because her mother was unfamiliar with how to help her become college-ready. Yet, she simultaneously attributed her postsecondary aspirations to the desire her mother fostered in her to academically excel and participate in higher education: a college-going factor that she perceived could not be matched by any other contribution.

Similarly, Bonifacia, a sophomore, articulated a unanimous sentiment among students when she described the role of parental encouragement:

[T]he verbal support and the encouragement were definitely there, but I’d always be intimidated to ask my

**Table 3. Student characteristics by education generational status**

Background Characteristic	1st-Generation College Students	Pilipino 1.5-Generation College Students	2nd-Generation College Students
Student place of birth	U.S. and foreign born	U.S. and foreign born	Primarily U.S. born
Parental education	Parents did not attend college; low rate of B.A. attainment in the United States	Parents attended college in the Philippines; high rate of B.A. attainment outside of the United States	Parents attended college in the United States.; high rate of B.A. attainment in United States.
Parental employment	Parents primarily relegated to low-wage/service sector work	Parents suffer from occupational downgrading and relegated to work non-commensurate with educational attainment	Parents primarily employed in jobs commensurate with educational attainment
Family socio-economic status	Primarily low income	Primarily low income; some are middle income	Middle to high income
Higher education exposure	Students have little to no previous exposure to people who attend college	Students exposed to foreign college-educated parents, but lack access to people familiar with U.S. higher education	Students have significant exposure and/or access to people who attended college
College readiness	Students have little to no college readiness and/or college-going literacies	Students are motivated by parental education but have little to no college readiness and/or college-going literacies	Students have high college readiness and college-going literacies
Sources of college information	Students reliant on non-parental sources of support and college-going information	Students reliant on parental motivation, but less reliant on parents as sources of college-going information	Students reliant on parental and non-parental sources of support and college-going information
Student higher education experience	First in family to attend college	First in family to attend U.S. college or university	Family members attended U.S. college or university

Source: Buenavista, 2007

parents for help ... they were always like, "Yeah, we don't know. We don't know." But my mom has approached me and said, "I know that I haven't really helped you with homework and stuff like that ... but you know, I was always there for encouragement," and I think it helps. Like regardless of whether or not my parents helped me with a math problem or an essay,

that verbal encouragement is what really pushed me to keep going, even though they weren't able to help me with certain problems.

Bonifacia's parents held nutrition and business degrees, but worked as a secretary and temporary worker in the United States. Like Pablo, she was "intimidated" to seek direct help from

her parents, as she was conditioned to believe they could not adequately assist her. However, Bonifacia and her parents realized the centrality that encouragement played in shaping high educational goals. Bonifacia's mother in particular made it a point to share her support for her daughter, and did so because she perceived she could not offer direct, tangible support. This former point is

interesting because both mother and daughter acknowledged the lack of tangible support. Consequently, there was clarity with regard to the expectations of both parents and students as well as with the actions they viewed as standard in helping students to prepare for and persist through college.

### **Conceptualizing a 1.5-generation college student experience**

Many U.S. Pilipinos with foreign-educated parents represent what can be termed, “1.5-generation college students.” They exhibit an “irregular” second-generation college student experience of being highly encouraged to pursue higher education, but are not necessarily provided the tangible resources typically associated with such education generational status. I borrow the concept of “1.5” from sociologists Ruben Rumbaut and Kenji Ima’s (1988) study on 1.5-generation immigrant youth.

Rumbaut and Ima examined the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee youth who were born outside of the United States, but arrived in the United States as adolescents. They argued that due to the timing of their relocation, such immigrant youth experienced unique acculturation issues different than their adult first-generation immigrant counterparts, and their U.S.-born peers. Many language and literacy scholars have since focused their attention on “generation 1.5” immigrants who are enrolled in school and experience academic challenges related to English language acquisition and comprehension (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal,

1999). Scholars also have examined the bicultural identity formation of 1.5-generation immigrants, particularly how they navigate their everyday experiences as youth who demonstrate both immigrant and American cultural practices (Gonzales, 2009; Park, 1999). Similarly, I apply the “1.5” concept to describe the liminal position that Pilipino students described within the context of education generational status. In understanding this unique experience, it is important to distinguish that a 1.5-generation *college student* should be used within a specific educational context, and is different than a 1.5-generation *immigrant*, who is defined according to immigration status.

The participants in this study often described how their experiences better paralleled those of first-generation college students and hesitantly categorized themselves as second-generation college students. They were cognizant of the assumptions that came with the latter category and the inapplicability of these assumptions to their actual educational experiences. As such, I define 1.5-generation college students as second-generation college students (based on their parents’ college degree attainment) whose educational experiences actually resemble those of first-generation college students due to factors associated with immigration, such as familial socioeconomic difficulties connected with occupational downgrading and a lack of a U.S.-based, college-going literacy. Table 3 presents the differences among first generation, second-generation, and Pilipino 1.5-generation college students.

Pilipino parents communicated to their children how possession of a postsecondary degree facilitated their ability to immigrate. However, subsequent to immigration, many college-educated Pilipino adults experienced the phenomenon of occupational downgrading. Nonetheless, U.S. Pilipino 1.5-generation college students held high educational aspirations given that a college education afforded their parents an easier immigration process. Considering the sociocultural context of parental underemployment in the United States, 1.5-generation college students also often lacked the opportunities and/or frequent interactions with parents to co-develop a strong college-going literacy that equipped them with the technical knowledge and tools to facilitate their access and retention. Therefore, 1.5-generation college student experiences represent the complexity of education generational status for students from immigrant families: they are simultaneously afforded the intangible college-going motivation and hindered from developing a tangible college-going literacy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

U.S. Pilipino 1.5-generation college student experiences present a unique opportunity for higher education practitioners to better consider the increasing diversity of college students. The following are some initial recommendations for practitioners that begin to address 1.5-generation college student issues:

**1) Current information and data collection methods narrowly define education generational status within a U.S.-based context.** Institutions of higher education should provide better opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to indicate detailed demographic information related to generational status on college applications and institutional retention program intake forms. More specifically, in addition to parent educational attainment levels, questions regarding institutional location (e.g., country), as well as institutional type (e.g., research or vocational institution) may reveal nuanced information that may indicate differences in exposure to U.S. college-going information. These minor changes might capture 1.5-generation college students for targeted services, as well as introduce a mechanism for collecting statistical information that actually indicates the number of college students with foreign-educated parents.

**2) Access and retention studies increasingly identify parents as significant players in the college-going process.** Outreach efforts

should target parents with diverse educational experiences to inform them of the mechanics of postsecondary processes in the United States. For example, on many institutional Web sites, navigation links are available for targeted audiences, including “parents” and/or “parents and families.” Under such links, institutions can include tangible college-going practices plus tips, advice, and/or guidelines on how foreign-educated parents may assist their children in accessing college-going information.

**3) Due to lack of awareness and recognition of 1.5-generation college student experiences in education discourse, higher education practitioners often do not acknowledge and/or validate students with such experiences.** Thus, student affairs practitioners, admissions officers, and faculty should receive professional development and training that makes them more aware of issues related to 1.5-generation college students. Often eligibility for university-sponsored outreach and retention programs are left to the discretion of practitioners who oversee the operation of such services. Practitioners who are more informed regarding the complexity of education generational status can better advocate for 1.5-generation college students to participate in such outreach and retention efforts.

While more research needs to be conducted to determine the applicability of the “1.5-generation” term to

other students with immigrant family narratives, U.S. Pilipino student experiences demonstrate the need for these students to have advocates who will guide them into college and assist them to persist toward graduation. For example, college faculty and student affairs administrators can develop retention programs tailored for 1.5-generation students. Research also is needed to account for the relationship between immigration and parent educational attainment on college student access and retention.

Special thanks to: Laura Rendón, José Cabrales, Jordan Beltran Gonzales, Dimpal Jain, and my research participants for their insight and contributions to this essay.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Tracy Lachica Buenavista was an ASHE/Lumina Fellow in 2005. She earned her Ph.D. in Education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where her research focused on the college access and retention of U.S. Pilipinos. Currently, she is assistant professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge, where she continues to teach and conduct research on race and racism, and Asian American educational experiences. “Examining the postsecondary experiences of Pilipino 1.5-generation college students” is a critical essay based on her dissertation, “Movement from the middle: Pilipina/o 1.5-generation college student access, retention, and resistance.” You may send inquiries about this essay to [tracy.buenavista@csun.edu](mailto:tracy.buenavista@csun.edu).

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### Suggested Citation:

Buenavista, T. L. (2009). Examining the postsecondary experiences of Pilipino 1.5-generation college students. (ASHE/Lumina Policy Briefs and Critical Essays No. 8). Ames: Iowa State University, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

ISSN 1938-7830 (print)

ISSN 1938-7946 (online)