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PIER Through A Critical Lens:

An Evaluation of a Student-Initiated, Student-Run Outreach Program

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Asian American Studies

by

Natasha Saelua

2012



ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

PIER Through a Critical Lens:

An Evaluation of a Student-Initiated, Student-Run Outreach Program

by

Natasha Saelua

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Keith L. Camacho, Chair

This thesis offers an evaluation of Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER), a student-initiated, student-run outreach project at UCLA. The purpose is to assess the programmatic impact on its intended audience, Pacific Islander high school students. The project relies on an oral history approach, and includes in-depth interviews with seven former PIER students. The research demonstrates that PIER offers high school students three core benefits: the creation of safe spaces within their educational environment; the presence of Pacific Islander college students who serve as role models; and the enhancement of higher education awareness. Ultimately, this thesis revealed that PIER made a positive impact in how Pacific Islander youth came to understand and appreciate the idea of access to higher education.

The thesis of Natasha Saelua is approved.

Victor Bascara

Paul M. Ong

Keith L. Camacho, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

Dedicated to UCLA's Pacific Islands' Students Association (PISA)  
and Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER)

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

As an undergraduate student at UCLA in the late 1990's my introduction to student activism was life changing. Paulo Freire's call for emancipatory education and critical consciousness, "[where] people develop the power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves"<sup>1</sup> guided much of my ideological growth as a college student and framed my attempts to change the conditions in my community. I expressed this growth in consciousness through involvement in UCLA's Pacific Islands' Students Association (PISA), and ultimately in the creation of Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER), a student-initiated, student-run<sup>2</sup> outreach project that targeted Pacific Islander high school students in Carson, California. The project was born out of my frustration over the lack of Pacific Islander students on UCLA's campus where they have historically been underrepresented. I used the project to provide educational resources and experiences, hoping to address the issue of access to higher education for this community. Now, twelve years after PIER received its first grant from the Student Initiated Outreach Committee (SIOC), what has been the impact of the PIER program? Similarly, what happens when Pacific Islanders are exclusively targeted and resources go into creating a positive educational environment for them?

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<sup>1</sup> Freire, Paulo. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2007), 83. Emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> The term "student-initiated, student-run" refers to the UCLA undergraduate students who initiate and maintain community projects.

<sup>3</sup> Aina, Sefa; Thornton, Meg et al. "Oral history of UCLA Pacific Islands Students Association." Monday, June 11, 2012. <http://www.socioeconomicjustice.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Oral-History-PIER-2012.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Aina, Sefa. Interview by author. Tape recording. Los Angeles, CA., March 15, 2012.

In order to begin answering these research questions, I conducted interviews with seven former PIER students in March 2012 and asked them to share their experiences with the program. Students talked about existing in an educational environment where Pacific Islanders are not deemed academically qualified and where stereotypes commonly influence the way teachers and peers treated them. My research indicates that PIER offers three core benefits: the creation of safe spaces within the educational environment; the interaction with Pacific Islander college students who become role models; and the enhancement of higher education awareness. These benefits challenge their prevailing attitude that college is inaccessible, reframing the students' attitudes toward higher education. In this thesis, then, I focus on student experiences as a way to reflect on the impact that PIER has had on the Pacific Islander community and also to give depth to the conversation on higher education for Pacific Islanders.

### Evolution of PIER

PISA's community outreach has been a central focus of the organization since at least 1992.<sup>3</sup> Early activities focused on targeting and bringing high school students to UCLA for half-day field trips. Eventually, these field trips were developed into a more extensive day-long conference, which featured speakers, workshops and activities. Since high school students were the main target audience the event quickly became known as a "high school conference." Through the 1990s, the program grew in size and reputation, eventually hosting as many as 600 high school students from ten southern California high schools.<sup>4</sup> This particular outreach activity

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<sup>3</sup> Aina, Sefa; Thornton, Meg et al. "Oral history of UCLA Pacific Islands Students Association." Monday, June 11, 2012. <https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1HMytjCYS6y3Ha4GIGasX7sZYIs5ERi3c5nFQ3q7HBul>.

<sup>4</sup> Aina, Sefa. Interview by author. Tape recording. Los Angeles, CA., March 15, 2012.

demonstrates PISA's intervention into higher educational access for the Pacific Islander community.

The high school conference was the primary outreach vehicle for PISA until May 1997, when the event inadvertently became a site of conflict between student participants from different regions, partially motivated by gang affiliations. The conflict quickly escalated and both the UCLA Police Department and the Los Angeles Police Department's Riot Squad were called in to address the situation. While the incident did not deter PISA's engagement in high school outreach, it did prompt serious discussion by PISA's leadership and advisers about making a long-term impact in schools. With a large annual event, conference organizers felt that they had failed to connect personally with any of the students that came to campus. In May 1998, one year after the conflict, a bitter disagreement broke out between PISA members over banning certain high schools from participating in the conference after intercepting rumors of possible violent activity. After the conference, half of PISA's membership left.

By that time, former PISA chairperson Sefa Aina had been recruited to work for the Asian American Studies Center in the Student/Community Projects division with Meg Thornton. He began teaching the Asian Pacific American Leadership Development Project (APALDP) class in fall quarter 1997. Troy Lau, a PISA member and APALDP student, used the class to focus on the issue of Pacific Islanders and education. He initiated a weekly after-school program for the Pacific Islander students at Carson High School through Los Angeles Unified School District's Asian Pacific American Commission. Troy was a tireless advocate for the youth; his energy inspired other undergraduate students to join him at Carson High School for tutoring and mentoring sessions. He established a network with Carson High School's administration, athletics personnel, community members, counselors, and teachers. Troy's leadership cultivated

a high level of personal investment among other PISA students, who continued the outreach project after he left the university to pursue other interests.

PIER gained a great deal of momentum with the support of Li'i Furumoto, a UCLA undergraduate student activist. Li'i had approached Sefa Aina in 1998 about possibly funding the project through a new source that students were organizing around, the Student Initiated Outreach Committee (SIOC). Sefa introduced me to Li'i in Spring 1999 (the year I succeeded Troy as project director) and she committed to working with PISA to develop a budget proposal. From May to December 1999, I worked with her and other students on budget proposals to the SIOC. These proposals were submitted in September 1999, and by early 2000, PISA's fledgling outreach project officially became part of the SIOC. Currently, the project serves the following educational institutions: Carson High School in Carson, California; El Camino College in Torrance, California; Long Beach Polytechnic High School in Long Beach, California; and Leuzinger High School in Lawndale, California. (See Appendix A for list of all PIER sites, outreach coordinators, and project directors)

#### Evolution of SIOC and Impact on PISA

UCLA students have struggled with the campus administration for decades, trying to maintain their voice and control over programs and services that impact them. Organizations such as the Afrikan Student Union (ASU), the American Indian Student Association (AISA), and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) were founded during the social and political upheaval of the 1960s, and began to advocate for their community's needs. During that period, the Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement, and global struggles for liberation, sovereignty and self-determination hugely influenced the political ideology of

undergraduate minority students. These principles naturally affected the way that students organized on campus, and the terms “student-initiated, student-run” soon became lingua franca for diverse student groups who chose to work together, build a coalition, and maintain their influence within decision-making entities. After fighting to maintain a strong student voice in the Academic Advancement Program, this coalition decided to create and fund a student-initiated, student-run retention center in 1990. This center would house four retention projects targeting underrepresented communities.<sup>5</sup> Student leadership decided to claim ownership of student retention issues by creating programs aimed at retaining and graduating communities of color, by students of color. Their struggle led to the development of the Campus Retention Committee, the first instance of student-led structural intervention solidified in a Memorandum of Understanding with the UCLA Chancellor.<sup>6</sup>

The Campus Retention Committee can be considered a predecessor of the current Student Initiated Outreach Committee (SIOC). The impetus for the creation of the SIOC came in the wake of the dramatic drop of underrepresented students in the UC system due to the passage of Proposition 209 and UC Regent Standing Policy 1.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, organizations from the historically underserved communities at UCLA (particularly, student organizations that had worked to establish the Campus Retention Committee) pressured the University of California Office of the President to allocate funding to all UC campuses for the creation of a funding source for student-initiated, student-run outreach programs. My personal activism around outreach grew as a result

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<sup>5</sup> Maldonado, David. “Toward a Student-Initiated Retention Organization Methodology: A Political History of Retention at UCLA” (PhD diss., University of California, 2010), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 92

<sup>7</sup> Enrollment of the African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic identified student population has steadily declined since the passage of Proposition 209. For example, in 1998, 176 American Indian/Alaska Native students were enrolled, compared to 106 enrolled in 2006. UCLA Admissions has been under heavy scrutiny after 2006, when it was revealed that only 96 Black students had enrolled, the lowest number in 30 years.

of perceived gaps in university-sponsored outreach programs. At Carson High School in 1999, high school students had to attain a minimum 3.5 grade point average to be an eligible participant of UCLA's Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP). Very few Pacific Islanders had the necessary grades to participate in EAOP or programs like it. Surrounded by like-minded students, I envisioned an intervention that would offer students from my community resources and information on going to college. I joined other students in pressuring UCLA administration to support our efforts.

As a result of this pressure, the SIOC was created on the UCLA campus.<sup>8</sup> Li'i Furumoto's leadership during the establishment of the SIOC was crucial. As chair of the SIOC she worked to forge a coalition between six organizations around student-initiated outreach: the Afrikan Student Union, American Indian Student Association, PISA, MEChA, Samahang Pilipino, and the Vietnamese Student Union. Her support of PISA's outreach project culminated not just in the establishment of the PIER project, but also in the permanent introduction of PISA students into the student coalition known colloquially as "the mother organizations."<sup>9</sup> PISA had previously collaborated with AISA and MEChA on programs such as Indigenous People Day and Sovereignty Forum but had never been exposed to the wider world of campus politics.

PIER's development as an outreach project was unique because it was so closely linked to the creation and establishment of the SIOC. In June 2000, after some initial hesitation, I accepted a leadership position on campus and became the second SIOC Chairperson after Li'i,

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<sup>8</sup> "History and Philosophy of Student Initiated Access Center," website accessed on July 13, 2012. <http://apexwebsite.com/uclacpo/StudentInitiatedAccessCenter.php>.

<sup>9</sup> The mother organizations, known as The Students First! Coalition in 1999, at that time was comprised of the following: the Afrikan Student Union, the American Indian Student Association, the Asian Pacific Coalition, the Latin American Student Association, La Familia. Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, the Muslim Students Association, Samahang Pilipino, and the Vietnamese Student Union.

residing over the permanent coalition<sup>10</sup> that funded, evaluated, and advocated for the SIOC projects. As chair, I was exposed to the Campus Retention Committee, the student coalition, and the world of community organizing, particularly when the student coalition organized a rally and protest on March 14, 2001 to repeal UC Standing Policies 1 and 2 (SP 1-2).<sup>11</sup> Thus, PIER's establishment enhanced PISA's prominence within UCLA and gained greater recognition within the Pacific Islander community. PIER is the first University sponsored, student-initiated outreach program in the state. More importantly, it is one of a handful of institutionalized intervention efforts for the Pacific Islander community in the continental U.S.

### Literature Review

There is a growing body of descriptive literature around the issue of access to higher education for Pacific Islanders. The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) has released three reports providing information on higher education attainment. The 2011 CARE publication, "The Relevance of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda," compares Census data on educational attainment and also provides summary information on the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) federal program. The report acknowledges AANAPISI as "one of the most significant investments ever made for the [Asian American and Pacific Islander] AAPI college student population by the federal government."<sup>12</sup> AANAPISI programs offer larger-scale institutional intervention at the postsecondary level and several

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<sup>10</sup> Maldonado, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Standing Policies 1 and 2 had been implemented by the UC Board of Regents in 1995. These issues were strongly supported by Regent Ward Connerly, whose conservative agenda led to a wave of national legislation (including CA Proposition 209) and court cases (such as Gratz v. Bollinger at the University of Michigan) attacking affirmative action.

<sup>12</sup> Teranishi, Robert; Nguyen, Tu-Lien et al. "The Relevance of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda," *National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education*. 2011, 12.

campuses with large Pacific Islander populations (including De Anza College in San Jose, California and the City College of San Francisco) have used the federal funding to support student services and enhance curriculum.

In 2008, the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA) conducted a needs-assessment focused on higher education with Pacific Islander young adults as part of the Pacific Islander Health Careers Pipeline Program.<sup>13</sup> The report also offers a clear program model for supporting Pacific Islander youth, and integrates the voices heard from the key informant and focus group participants of the Pipeline report.<sup>14</sup>

*“Pacific Islanders Lagging Behind in Higher Education,”* released in 2006, offered statistics from the 2005 American Community Survey to offer information on educational attainment for Pacific Islanders in the continental U.S.<sup>15</sup> This report highlights data such as income, household size, and language, and how they may impact paths to higher education.

Shirley Hune, professor in the College of Education at the University of Washington, has likewise published several articles on Pacific Islanders and the achievement gap, focusing specifically on the community in the state of Washington (also home to a large Pacific Islander community).<sup>16</sup> Her works shed light on the need for further disaggregated data on Pacific

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<sup>13</sup> Tran, J.; Wong, M. et al “Pacific Islander Health Careers Pipeline Program,” Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Tran, Jackie; Fa’avae, Joe et al. “Understanding a Pacific Islander Young Adult Perspective on Access to Higher Education,” *California Journal of Health Promotion*, Vol. 10, 2010, 14.

<sup>15</sup> UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Census Information Center, and University of California Asian American and Pacific Islander Policy Initiative. “Pacific Islanders Lagging Behind in Higher Education – Analytical Brief of New Census Data.” Los Angeles, CA (November 14, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Takeuchi, D. and S. Hune. (2008). “Growing Presence, Emerging Voices: Pacific Islanders and Academic Achievement in Washington.” A report submitted to The Washington State Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2008.



Islander subgroups, and calls for more qualitative research on these groups to determine the types of interventions needed for the community.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Tsutsumoto, a 1998 graduate of UCLA's Masters of Arts program in Asian American Studies, provided a compelling narrative on higher education awareness for Samoan students in his Master's thesis. He interviewed several Samoan students and offers key recommendations on the kind of intervention required to make colleges like UCLA more accessible. He points unequivocally at the content of education: "Teachers need to be more aware of Samoan and Pacific Islander culture. At the high school level and earlier, teachers who work at schools with significant representations of Pacific Islander students need to be training to help serve those students better."<sup>18</sup>

While there is an ample supply of descriptive literature on the issue of access to higher education for the Pacific Islander community, there is very little available on intervention efforts. I found no research on interventions specifically created for this community, yet anecdotally I am aware of community-based and faith-based efforts that exist. For example, several Samoan churches in Carson, California, offer after-school tutoring, and an Pacific Islander-themed charter school was recently opened in Salt Lake City, Utah.<sup>19</sup> There is no literature that talks about the kind of education system, or method of intervention, that would actually make a difference or that has been created specifically to address this issue in the United States.

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<sup>17</sup> Shirley Hune, "How do Pacific Islanders Fare in U.S. Education? A Look Inside Washington State Public Schools with a Focus on Samoans." *AAPI Nexus*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2010)

<sup>18</sup> Tsutsumoto, Thomas. "Higher Educational Perspectives: Through the Narratives of Samoan College Students." (MA Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Pacific Heritage Academy website, accessed October 30, 2012. <https://www.phlearning.org/index.html>

## Methodology

We see from the literature that while there is acknowledgement of the significant achievement gap for Pacific Islanders there is a lack of systemic intervention for this community. Given the resources that go into PIER each academic year, it is important to gauge the project's impact on its students and community. What happens when support systems are created specifically for Pacific Islander students? What level of impact does student-initiated intervention have? Is this particular intervention (PIER) best suited for this work? How does PIER's work, and the student experience, inform us while furthering our understanding of interventions for this community?

I seek to understand PIER using Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness<sup>20</sup> on how the high school students perceive and act upon college student intervention. Freire, a Brazilian educator, used literacy programs to reveal how education can be used to liberate the oppressed by giving them the tools they need to both identify their conditions and also act upon and change those conditions. He called this process of action and reflection *praxis*,<sup>21</sup> through which a critical consciousness can emerge. "A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control."<sup>22</sup>

Using this lens, I chose to collect student feedback on their experience in PIER in order to capture their interpretation of the world, and PIER as a transformative phenomenon. It is important to hear how they viewed themselves within the world, what they knew about PIER's

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<sup>20</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 85.

intentions, and whether or not they saw those intentions realized in the course of their time with the project. Furthermore, using the oral history approach to this work gave me the opportunity to place emphasis on student voice, rather than other measures of impact available for consumption. Student narratives comprise the bulk of the research used in this thesis. I decided to make space in the literature that would prioritize their thoughts, perceptions, and feedback.

I relied on the snowball sampling method in order to recruit interview subjects. In January to March 2012, I interacted with current and former PIER staff (Appendix B and C) and solicited contact information of former PIER participants over the age of 18. This initial group of contacts was comprised of people I knew through my time as a both project director of PIER as well as staff at the Community Programs Office. I obtained interviews with four students in this way. The remainder of the students were solicited with the support of these students, who referred me to other potential interview subjects that they knew. I was able to interview (Appendix D) a total of seven students between March 1 to April 15, 2012 in Carson and Long Beach. Their ages range from 18 to 26.

### Significance of Research

Student-initiated, student-run programs reflect the endurance of student movements that led to the creation of relevant education programs such as ethnic studies. As such, I acknowledge the critique – and response – that these programs pose to public education. Given the fact that only a small fraction of Pacific Islander students graduate from California high schools competitive enough to attend UCLA, it is vital that we analyze one of the few institutional interventions for this community. My research can directly inform local and state

educational agencies on models of intervention that support Pacific Islanders graduation rates and matriculation into higher education.

Using student narratives, I argue that PIER's institutionalized intervention produces a shift in the way students think about the idea of higher education. My research articulates how students understand the PIER project's intentions and efforts to increase Pacific Islander access to higher education. My thesis also adds to the growing array of literature that exists on urban Pacific Islanders and the issue of access to higher education. Finally, I offer an analytical model for PIER and other student-initiated programs to satisfy the needs of traditional outcomes-based evaluation efforts<sup>25</sup> while maintaining a critical analysis of their work.

### Student Introduction

All of the interviews inform my research, but I will rely on the narratives of five students in particular to present my research findings. All five of the students were active PIER participants while in high school, engaging in all five components (peer advising, tutoring, field trips, parent engagement, and higher education awareness). Charlie,<sup>26</sup> a second-generation Samoan man, is a 2006 graduate of Carson High School and is currently employed at the STAPLES Center in Los Angeles, California. He was involved in PIER for five years as a student in Carnegie Middle School as well as Carson High School. Mary, a second-generation Tongan woman, is a 2011 graduate of Leuzinger High School and is currently in her third year as an undergraduate at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She was involved in PIER

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<sup>25</sup> Student Initiated Access projects at UCLA participate in a campus-wide collaborative, the Academic Preparation and Educational Partnership (APEP). APEP, a joint initiative of UCLA Student Affairs and the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, offers evaluation activities to all outreach programs based at UCLA through the division of Social Research Methodologies (SRM).

<sup>26</sup> I received consent from all participants to identify them by name in my thesis. I chose to use an alias in lieu of their real names in order to preserve their privacy. See Appendix D, consent form for research participants.

during her junior and senior year in high school. Mia, a second-generation Samoan woman, is a 2012 graduate of Carson High School and is currently in her first year at El Camino College in Torrance, California. She was involved in PIER while a student at Carnegie Middle School as well as Carson High School, for a total of five years. Patty, a second-generation Samoan woman, is a 2009 graduate of Long Beach Polytechnic High School and is currently a student at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). She was involved in PIER during her senior year, while also president of the Polynesian Club at her high school. Finally, Sina, a second-generation Samoan woman, is also a 2009 graduate of Long Beach Polytechnic High School, and is currently a student at Long Beach City College in Long Beach, California. She was involved in PIER during her senior year in high school.

### Outline

In this MA thesis, I will examine how involvement in the PIER program impacted its student participants, relying on student narratives as the foundation of my research. In Chapter 2, I will provide background information on the Pacific Islander community and the educational environment that students experience outside of their involvement in PIER. I will share student experiences as Pacific Islander high school students in urban Los Angeles, including the presence of stereotypes and lack of relevant material on their communities. In Chapter 3, I will introduce the PIER project, and share details on its core components: peer advising, tutoring, workshops, field trips, and parent engagement. I will also analyze student narratives and share the three primary benefits of the project: creation of safe spaces, the presence of role models, and increased awareness of higher education. These benefits are the source of the primary impact of PIER on students, which will be revealed in Chapter 4: a shift in their attitude about higher

education. I will argue that because of this shift in attitude, the idea of higher education no longer seems unattainable. I will then conclude with a summary of the findings regarding the impact of the PIER program. Finally, I will offer short- and long-term recommendations for the project, as well as suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2

### School, Family and Community Context

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the high school environment for Pacific Islanders in southern California, prior to their introduction to the PIER program. First, I address how the context of an urban environment shapes the lives of the students and their academic experiences.<sup>27</sup> I then introduce the students featured in this chapter and whose narratives will be featured throughout. These narratives offer a glimpse into how they have developed a critical awareness their social reality through action and reflection.<sup>28</sup> Through their migration stories, they offer compelling insight on their family's motivation for moving so far from home. Finally, I share their stories of living in an urban environment and attending inner-city high schools.

U.S. high schools in urban areas have a notorious reputation characterized by high dropout rates, low matriculation to college, and gang violence. Feature films such as *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Freedom Writers* (2007), and *Lean On Me* (1989) rely on the trope of troubled inner-city high schools featuring minority and low-income students who must be uplifted by freethinking, compassionate adults. In reality, urban educational environments, such as those found in this thesis, carry a great deal of promise and potential regardless of their reputation. These schools are rich in diversity, culture, and school pride. This thesis expands the scope and

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<sup>27</sup> For this thesis, I use the word “urban” in accordance with the 2010 Census designation which states: “For the 2010 Census, an urban area will comprise a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, along with adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses as well as territory with low population density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core. To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters.” <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html>, accessed on Oct. 1, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 109.

dearth of narratives surrounding urban public schools in Los Angeles by bringing Pacific Islanders from the “margins”<sup>29</sup> of discourse to the foreground.

In an era of increasing budget cuts to the field of education, the national conversation on school reform has become dominated by financial accountability and oversight. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education produced an ominous report entitled *A Nation At Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform*. Written during a particularly tense period during the Cold War, the report took a hard stand against waning American international dominance: “Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.”<sup>30</sup> The narrative of “failure” continues to dominate both federal and state conversations on school reform. In California, this narrative has impacted the way schools are evaluated, funded, and administered.

In 1960, California adopted its Master Plan for Higher Education promising that every single young person had the right to achieve higher education. Despite its best intentions to support all students, it has failed Pacific Islanders. The Master Plan 2011 revision states: “Since 1960, even under severe budgetary constraints, UC and CSU have continued to admit and offer a place to every eligible California high school student who is eligible, and the Community Colleges have offered places to all high school graduates and adults who wish to attend.”<sup>31</sup> Yet a cursory glimpse at the educational achievement of Pacific Islanders in the state offers only a dismal outcome for this community. According to Census 2010 estimates, 33% of Pacific

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<sup>29</sup> Okihiro, Gary. *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*. Washington, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> National Commission on Excellence in Education. “*A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.” A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education. 1983, 1.

<sup>31</sup> “*The California Master Plan for Higher Education in Perspective*,” <http://www.ucop.edu/acadinit/mastplan/mpperspective.htm> accessed on October 1, 2012.



Islanders over the age of 25 years had a high school diploma or equivalent, whereas only 14.7% of the same population hold a Bachelor's degree.<sup>32</sup> The Carson High School class of 2010, for example, experienced a 35.7% dropout rate among Pacific Islanders, the highest dropout rate for any ethnicity at that high school.<sup>33</sup> Without institutional support specifically targeting this group of students, schools are often unable to adequately prepare this population for matriculation into state colleges and universities.

When considering Pacific Islander educational attainment, federal, state and local contexts must take into account the impact of colonization, globalization, and migration. In the following section I analyze student understandings of migration, education, and work to examine how these forces have shaped their lives. There are three common themes that surface in the student narratives: a) migration to the United States and family struggles to survive in a new environment; b) community and neighborhood conditions, especially with respect to gangs; and finally, c) oppression, expressed through the internalization of racist stereotypes. Each theme presents an opportunity to interrogate the complexity of growing up as a Pacific Islander in an urban setting offers an alternative, more nuanced narrative to the conventional discourse around urban school reform.

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<sup>32</sup> "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone or in combination with one or more other races in California," American Community Survey 2010, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

<sup>33</sup> California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), Cohort Outcome Data for Class of 2009-10, Carson Senior High School. <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dataquest.asp>.

## Migration to California

The Pacific Islander community in Los Angeles is one of several concentrations in the world, similar to Auckland and Honolulu in size.<sup>34</sup> Nearly half of all Pacific Islanders in California live in southern California.<sup>35</sup> There is no simple explanation for the presence of Pacific Islanders in California. The ocean has always been a connecting body for people of different islands, and travel between the islands remains common. According to social historian Paul Spickard, “European and American colonialism had the effect of channeling migration along the sinews of trade and empire.”<sup>36</sup> Census 2010 data reveals that California is now home to an estimated 289,873 Pacific Islanders. Almost a quarter of this community (23.8%) is less than 18 years of age. The population is overwhelmingly born outside of the state, with over 57% reported being born in Oceania. Finally, for the population age 5 and over, over 40% indicated speaking a language other than English at home.<sup>37</sup>

For the Samoan community, it is possible to trace their migration to the continental U.S. by recounting the history of U.S. imperialist policies. The discourses of “Manifest Destiny” and the “White Man’s Burden” led to aggressive American expansions across the Pacific. Annexed by the United States in 1899, as part of the Tripartite Treaty following the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, American Sāmoa enjoyed “benign neglect”<sup>38</sup> until the onset of World

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<sup>34</sup> John Connell, “Paradise Left? : Pacific Island Voyagers in the Modern World” in *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific*. ed. Paul Spickard et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), 69.

<sup>35</sup> “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone or in combination with one or more other races in California,” American Community Survey 2010, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

<sup>36</sup> Spickard, Paul, ed. *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), p. 16

<sup>37</sup> “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone or in combination with one or more other races in California,” American Community Survey 2010, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

<sup>38</sup> Janes, Craig. “From Village to City: Samoan Migration to California” in *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific*. ed. Paul Spickard et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 118.

War II. After that point, U.S. colonialism shifted the cultural paradigm completely and irrevocably for Samoans. Samoan migration has been fueled by “not just military experience, education, or employment...”<sup>39</sup> but by the belief that the future laid beyond the island’s shores. Mia, one of the students interviewed from Carson High School, recounted both her mother and father’s journey to the U.S.:

My mother was very young, and my grandmother was in her early 20’s when she came here as well...my father was born here...my father’s mother came here when she was a young teen. They came from American Sāmoa, both mother’s and father’s side. My grandmother’s from there; on my dad’s side, I’m not quite sure, because they’re from Western (Sāmoa), but they migrated to America and then came here.

Similarly, the Tongan diaspora has carved a direct path to southern California. Anthropologist Wendy E. Cowling describes the diaspora as an “invisible trapezoid-shaped movement across the Pacific” with lines running to and from Tonga to Apia (Independent State of Sāmoa), Pago Pago (American Sāmoa), Honolulu (Hawai‘i), Los Angeles and San Diego (California) and Salt Lake City (Utah).<sup>40</sup> Unlike American Samoans, Tongans do not have a history of colonization or territorial status, making it more difficult to gain access or citizenship status. Cowling points out the difficulties faced by individuals and families who leave home, unsure of what they will encounter. Yet she clearly articulates that primary motivations for Tongan migration to metropolitan areas include health, safety, and vitality supposedly provided for their families.<sup>41</sup> Mary, a PIER participant from Lawndale, CA talked about how her parents and grandparents were able to successfully navigate this route from Tonga, obtaining green cards and visas and establishing a new home in southern California.

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<sup>39</sup> Janes, “From Village to City”, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Wendy E. Cowling, “Motivations for Contemporary Tongan Migration,” in *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific*. ed. Paul Spickard et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), 109.

<sup>41</sup> Cowling, “Motivations for Tongan Migration,” 99.

My parents, both of them moved...about 35 years ago...my mother, she went to training school in Tonga to become a teacher. She was a teacher for a couple of years until she came to the States...they came for a better life, basically. My father, he played rugby back in Tonga so he traveled a lot, and then when he came to the States...he decided to stay here, so did my mother. My mom came out here with her dad, seeking a better life.

Patty, a student from Long Beach, California shared yet a different perspective, relating her father's responsibilities to the family's land and properties on the island before coming to the United States:

My dad was born in Western Samoa, in Falealili...what they did, my grandparents came with most of the kids...about 12-13 kids...My dad didn't come until he was 19, he was back on the island taking care of the store...and the land.

For Patty's family, it was important to maintain a close tie to their lands and possessions back on the island – so much so that, despite the lengthy distance, family separation became a viable option. Eventually, however, her father journeyed to the U.S. to join the family. Due to his service to the family, he holds a place of honor and respect amongst his siblings: “My dad didn't finish middle school, I would say – that's why, when coming to America, all my dad's siblings looked up to my dad.”

John Connell, professor in the School of Geosciences at the University of Sydney, also points out that the “major influences in international migration are economic, even when social influences are also significant...But social influences on migration are also important, such as the desire for access to education and health services, and also as one element of the rite of transition to adulthood.”<sup>42</sup> The students spoke knowledgeably about their parents' or grandparents' motivations for leaving their homeland. In doing so, they not only shared important family histories with me, but also demonstrated their loyalty and pride to their families. They were completely informed of their family home villages, the names of their

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<sup>42</sup> Connell, “Paradise Left?,” 74.

ancestors, important cultural events and dates, and personal stories, among other topics. By sharing these stories, they were invoking identities hardly ever valued at the students' schools in the U.S. They were sharing family narratives to reaffirm their island heritages. Mary, Mia and Patty's narratives complicate the conventional image of the Pacific, often depicted in the media and Hollywood feature films as an idyllic paradise offering good living. However, their pursuit of the American Dream, particularly through the mythical "educational ladder" for which many of them have left home, has not always been successful.

### Work Experience and Educational Background

All of the students answered questions about their parents' work experiences. Their parents represent a wide range of the workforce, including education, technology and the military, although most of them indicated service labor (e.g., warehouse, security, recycling).

Sina, a student from Long Beach, California, shared her father's early experiences trying to make ends meet:

My dad, his first job was – it was kind of funny – all his family, they didn't have a job, so first thing they did was to pick up cans...each year they got by with just picking up cans, so that's how they'd eat, you know, with cans. And so...my grandparents didn't work, and with twelve kids...my dad quit school to take care of everybody, so basically when he'd go to school and take the kids to school...they had to pick up cans at their school. My dad told us a story; they'd wake up around 3-4am to start picking up cans, so as not to distract the neighbors. So that's how they lived. And then, started going to carwash, washing cars, and the years went by, and then he started washing trucks, and then he went to truck school. So that's how he made a living.

Mia shared her grandmother's work experience in relation to her lack of formal education:

Now she works at L3 Communications. Although she doesn't have an education as high as other people do, where she works there are lots of people with Master's degree or Bachelor's degree, and even though she doesn't, she's able to – a quick learner, I believe.

Mia's grandmother, like many first-generation Pacific Islanders, did not experience a college education. However, she offered her grandmother's perspective on the role of education here in the United States:

My grandmother did not attain a high school education. Back in the islands, she said all they needed was a strong back in order to work in the plantation, that's all you needed. When she came here, she learned that you can't just only have a strong back, you also need an education to back you up.

Her grandmother's choice demonstrates how different her new home was from the islands. In the U.S. a "strong back" didn't necessarily equate to survival. An education, on the other hand, offers a chance to thrive – strength found not in physical labor, but in the pursuit and acquisition of a college degree.

These narratives indicate that the students are critically conscious of the difficulties their parents faced in finding success in the U.S. and the importance of pursuing higher education. The students see themselves as coming from a position of little strength since they associate coming from a familial background of higher education is a source of strength. Family educational backgrounds play heavily into understandings of, and perspectives on, the feasibility of attaining higher education. While many of the students hear and believe the message that education is a priority, there is a significant lack of guidance from their parents or larger family. One student made this very clear: "My parents, none of them went to college, so I never got the idea...if college would happen." These families experienced severe poverty that continues to define the Pacific Islander community. In California, the poverty rate for the Pacific Islander population (15.7%) in 1999 was twice as much as that for the non-Hispanic white population (7.8%). In Los Angeles County, over 1 in 4 Samoans (26.8%) and 1 in 4 Tongans (28.5%) lived below poverty level.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tran et al, "Pacific Islander Young Adult Perspective," 24.

Because most Pacific Islanders come from working class and even poor backgrounds, very few choose to pursue higher education.

### Community Conditions

I subsequently asked questions related to the history of PIER at each respective students' high school. Their responses yielded a wide range of insights about the PIER outreach program and their community. Many of them immediately expressed the presence and influence of gangs on their environment. Patty and Sina shared their perspective on the environment surrounding Long Beach Poly High School:

Usually, especially in our area, there's a lot of gangs, and everything, and if you dig deep...I always look back on *Freedom Writers*, that question about how many people lost a friend, brother, from a gang shooting, and four out of five students would raise hands. Still happens today...If I really want to get out of the ghetto, or the mentality of the ghetto, I got to study my butt off, work hard, get that degree...to move my family out of the ghetto.

They were like, where's the other students? And that's when we opened our big mouths and said, 'Oh, girl got pregnant...oh, there's a fight across the street.' There's a lot of stuff coming up from school, but I just noticed, [other] past Pacific Islanders that went to (Long Beach) Poly – gangs. You had so many...Crips and Blood...I mean, my parents don't know, but I was in a gang, the Bloods, but I dropped – I didn't want to get put on no more, because my brother died.

These students are intensely aware of their surroundings. They can name their environment for exactly what it is, and have been personally – even profoundly – affected by it. Mayeda et al indicate that in Hawai'i, “gang involvement is a particularly prevalent problem within the Samoan community.”<sup>44</sup> The existence and popularity of gangs in Pacific Islander communities is a complex and closely related issue with regard to low higher education attainment rates that bears further investigation.

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<sup>44</sup> Mayeda, David; Pasko, Lisa; Chesney-Lind, Meda. “You got to do so much to actually make it: Gender, Ethnicity and Samoan Youth in Hawa'i.” *aapi nexus* 4:2. 2010, 72.

## Stereotypes in the Schools

Bobbie Harro's "cycle of socialization" offers a useful framework to understand the students' reflections on racism and stereotyping in their schools.<sup>45</sup> Institutional and cultural socialization plays a fundamental role in how young people are taught to perceive themselves and others. Several students mentioned the word stereotyping, and gave examples of how they saw it play out towards Pacific Islander students. Mia from Carson High School was particularly passionate about racist stereotyping towards herself and other Pacific Islander students:

I have an AP Economics teacher, Mr. Aquino. He thinks it's funny to make racial jokes. Such as, when I raise my hand, he'll ask me, 'Mia, do you want a green banana or yellow banana?' And I find that offensive because, you know...I'm being targeted for my race and he looks at me as a Samoan. I know I am Samoan, and I'm very proud too, but that's not who I am in the classroom, I'm a student and I want to learn. So at times I'll raise my hand or another Samoan student will raise his hand and he'll say, 'Oh, do you want me to do a *haka*, do you want me to act like a savage?' Things like that. So just knowing that those stereotypes are still brought up today, I feel like I just need to prove them wrong...not give them any [affirmation.]

Mia's negative experience in the classroom affected her ability to learn. School becomes a hostile environment when teachers make jokes about Pacific Islanders, their food, dance or cultures, and when they rely on stereotypes of Pacific Islanders as "savages." Mia continued in her discussion of stereotypes:

...I feel like I just need to prove them wrong...not to give them any [credit], because a lot of Samoans, they oppress themselves, they'll say, oh, I can't do this, or I can't do that, because I'm a Samoan. And just to hear that hurts me because we're so much more than that. I'm in Students Run [Los Angeles], SRLA, and everyone says, you're Samoan, Samoans don't run marathons! And I say, yes they do, Samoans can do anything they want! So it's just little things like that, that really gets under my skin.

Charlie mentions both the negative and positive stereotypes that exist about Pacific Islander students.

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<sup>45</sup> Haro, Bobbie. "The Cycle of Socialization." *Readings in Diversity & Social Justice*. Routledge: New York, 2000,15-20.



There were actually a few teachers that kind of thought of us that way, football players, Polynesian kids. Thought it was like, only thing we're good at is sports. There were those that did know things about Polynesians...they don't want to be the troublemaker teacher, but (they would say) 'We have Polynesian kids, and we kind of know what you guys are about, and we know that you guys are all about respect.' Some teachers used that, and some kids took that serious.

Another student from Carson shared his perspective on the urban environment and the presence of gangs in their neighborhoods and on campus:

Yeah, I definitely needed the support...I guess that, the neighborhoods that we grew up in, the surroundings that were always around us, [there] was always a negative kind of vibe that we got from outside of school, and PIER provided that positive vibe that we needed.

Even more serious, it is clear that internalized oppression had a big impact on the way the students viewed their own community's ability to pursue higher education. One student's perspective of other Pacific Islanders at his former school serves as an example, played out in his assessment of current high school students:

Well, kids are troubled at Carson, that's the problem. They cause trouble... these kids, they don't know nothing about like, educational stuff; they think everything needs to be handed to them...they don't believe they need to work hard for what they want.

In the cycle of socialization, stereotypes that remain unchallenged become prejudice: "a conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and the individual members." Internalized oppression completes the cycle; "by participating...we reinforce stereotypes, collude in our own demise, and perpetuate the system of oppression." For these students, their recognition of the environment, naming it for what it is, represents the first step towards critical consciousness.

## Conclusion

Ira Shor, a leader in the movement for critical pedagogy, points out that “traditional education...fails to acknowledge the strengths and cultures and prior knowledge of the students.”<sup>47</sup> Charlie, Mia, Patty and Sina shared stories above that certainly indicate a strong community: strong in the sense of survival, labor, and sacrifice. We’ve heard them tell us about families that made huge leaps of faith for the sake of the future; parents who work tirelessly, at low-paying positions, to make a living and support their families; children who regularly witness violence, yet celebrate their family, their culture, their lives. They embody the kind of strength, spirit and diversity of experiences that should be honored in an American school curriculum. Yet this is not the case at all.

It is at this nexus of race, class, and urban education that PIER enters the students’ high schools. They arrive armed with some knowledge of the history and context related above. As college students at a large research institution, they have access to the theory, language and skills needed to support their ideas. Their own experience developing critical consciousness fuels their passion for providing the pedagogical space needed to support and engage the Pacific Islander community. In the next chapter, I will examine the PIER experience as perceived by students, and consider the environment created by PIER’s program activities.

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<sup>47</sup> Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey M.R. and Morrell, Ernest. “The Art of Critical Pedagogy,” *Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education* 285 (2002), 29.

## Chapter 3: The PIER Experience

### Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the student experiences of the PIER program. I first provide an overview of the project structure as a way of introducing the core project components. I highlight how planning is organized, what activities are set up, and how each component is managed. After that, I shift to student perspectives and narratives, and tease out the major themes that came up repeatedly during the interviews. The students reveal meaningful insights about each component, particularly about the kind of environment that is created and sustained. In conclusion, I then display the “PIER experience” and discuss how students view the project’s impact on their higher education aspirations.

PIER staff is comprised of four roles: project director, component coordinators, tutors, and peer advisors. It is important to note that staff and volunteer roles within the project are very fluid. Paid staff positions are filled with currently enrolled UCLA undergraduate students, with the exception of project director (a full-time position with minimum requirement of Bachelor of Arts). Additionally, volunteer tutors are recruited both from the UCLA undergraduate population as well as from other campus organizations.<sup>50</sup> Project staff often assume different roles as needed. For example, a peer advisor may go to the high school and tutor students, or a math tutor may be assigned to help run a workshop. This flexibility is required by the limited number of volunteers and project staff on hand to accomplish project objectives. While the components below are grouped in a distinct and methodical way, project staff have adopted a flexible and dynamic management style in order to deliver project services with limited resources.

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<sup>50</sup> For example, students from California State University, Long Beach Pacific Islander Association and the University of Southern California Pacific Islander Student Association have participated as PIER tutors.

Students from Carson, Long Beach Poly, and Leuzinger are invited to participate in all PIER activities at the start of the program. Activities are conducted at a classroom sponsored by the site contact. Students participate in site activities from approximately 3:15pm to 5:00pm. However, the program structure is less formal than the traditional classroom setting, with desks rearranged depending on the activity. On a typical day at site, students are admitted to the space and immediately select which one of PIER's three core component activities they would like to participate in: peer advising, tutoring or workshops. The following section provides an overview of these three core components, as well as field trips and the parent engagement component.

### Peer Advising Component

The peer advising component is the axis of the entire PIER project. Peer advising is widely considered to be the best practice for any outreach project, particularly those targeting minority or underrepresented communities.<sup>51</sup> All other services revolve around information gleaned from peer advising sessions and insights from the peer advisors. For example, themes that come up repeatedly in peer advising sessions are used as a basis for workshops offered later in the year. Project philosophy, purpose, and goals are first introduced to high school student participants in one-on-one peer advising sessions. Students are assigned to a peer counselor based on interest, background, or experience. The process of assignment is intentional, designed to maximize the potential for a promising mentor/mentee relationship. Peer advisor/student pairs go through an introductory process that includes filling out personal and academic information,

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<sup>51</sup> McConnell, Peggy J. (2000). "What community colleges should do to assist first-generation students." *Community College Review*. 28(3), 75-87.

as well as a “student empowerment packet.”<sup>52</sup> An important element of peer advising is the promise of confidentiality for all peer-advising sessions, except in specific cases.<sup>53</sup>

Peer advising sessions are conducted one-on-one during PIER site activities on school property. Sessions are typically 20-40 minutes in length. Once the session is complete, the peer advisor completes a brief write-up of the session, which is then submitted to the project director as a record of the conversation. The project director holds weekly PIER staff meetings to discuss student progress, issues of concern, and areas to provide further support for the students. At the end of each quarter, the peer advising coordinator tallies up how many sessions were held and how many students participated. This information is then provided to the project director for inclusion in the quarterly evaluation. At the close of the academic year the peer advisors gather feedback and recommendations from students on the peer-advising component. The peer advising coordinator compiles student feedback and makes recommendations to incoming staff for the following academic year. The cycle is then complete for that academic year.

Students were mostly positive in their reflections when asked about their experiences. They saw their peer advisors as sources to “vent,” individuals who would listen to them, and sources of encouragement and support. “Those were the best things I loved about PIER, the one-on-one sessions,” explained Charlie. “It kind of relieved stress I was going through during the school year every day, through the every day times.” Mia agreed, and mentioned the importance of consistency: “Knowing that they care, showing that they continued, they weren’t flimsy...because a lot of things in our lives are not stable, so just knowing that they were coming

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<sup>52</sup> The student empowerment packet is a document completed by both student and peer advisors at the beginning of their interaction. It is a tool used to facilitate initial conversations. Peer advisors frequently refer to it as they work closely with their students.

<sup>53</sup> Peer advisors must notify the project director as well as site contacts when there is reason to believe that the student is experiencing any kind of abuse or talks about suicide.

Monday and Wednesday, that no matter what, they're always there. I guess that's what we all needed." She shared how her peer advisor helped her see her own potential for college:

"Whatever people think of me, I push myself down to [those expectations]. But she didn't...seeing my grades, she said I can actually apply [to college] so I said 'Okay, I'll give it a try.'"

Students from Long Beach Poly High School had similar observations about peer advising. Sina revealed how peer advising provided her a space to cope:

...the one-on-one sessions, knowing more of what's going on your life... releasing all of the stuff I was going through during senior year, it helped a lot, you know. Because – gangs. I mean, my parents don't know, but I was in a gang, the Bloods, but I dropped (it)...my brother died...I got to talk to her about everything I was going through, you know, it's like therapy...you got to release all of that stuff that's been holding you back.

Most of the students identified their peer counselor as a member of the family – using words like “big sister,” “companion,” and “friend” to describe them. It was important that these were people who came from very similar backgrounds. Mia fondly recalled conversations with her peer advisor:

She was able to help me, give me feedback, because she was more experienced than myself. So she could relate in a different way and give me feedback. And just hearing things in her life that she also faced, and I could relate back to those, it was something so great. ‘Wow, this happens in your life, too?’ I'm not the only one facing that.

But they also pointed out that building a relationship with one of the PIER staff meant the student would lose someone personally important to them when their peer advisor graduated from UCLA. Mia shared how difficult it was during her senior year, when she had a new peer counselor: “It's very hard to move on from having her as a peer counselor, almost three years of my high school [career]. It's hard to reconnect [with a new counselor] on the same level.”

## Tutoring Component

Like peer advising, tutoring is a mandatory component of any SIAC project. PISA's earliest outreach efforts were centered on academic support. When the project first received funding from the SIAC, it was called "The Carson High School Tutoring/Mentoring Program."<sup>54</sup> However, over the years, tutoring has declined as a major project emphasis. This is due to the emergence of the peer advising component as the most popular project component.<sup>55</sup> Today, the project offers tutoring in all subject areas. PIER specifically recruits volunteers with expertise in English language/literature, math, social studies, and Spanish. Tutors are trained at the beginning of the academic year, with a curriculum that covers basic principles of tutoring and how to manage potential scenarios that might come up with students.<sup>56</sup>

The tutoring component operates similarly to the peer advising component. Tutoring sessions are conducted both one-on-one and in groups during PIER site activities, and usually last 20-40 minutes in length. Coordinators connect project volunteers to students based on their respective majors, and actively recruit volunteers from specific disciplines based on the needs of the students. One recurring phenomenon among project volunteer tutors is the significantly higher representation of "North Campus" (humanities, social science) majors over "South Campus" (science, technology, engineering or math) majors. Tutors provide support on two levels: homework help, which addresses immediate classroom activities, and academic skills building, going over fundamental concepts. Support varies depending on individual student's needs and ability level.

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<sup>54</sup> Academic Year Budget Proposal, 1999-2000. Submitted to the SIAC for funding consideration by PISA Chairperson Natasha Saelua.

<sup>55</sup> Analysis of PIER Annual Evaluations from 2004-2010, which indicates a steady decline of students participating in tutoring activities. In the same time period, peer advising has steadily increased in popularity.

<sup>56</sup> The most common scenarios that tutors receive training for: classroom management, group tutoring methods, and academic skills building activities.

Several students credit grade improvements due to the support of tutors from PIER. Mia mentioned how her tutor helped her:

He always helped me with math, breaking it down to me and making it clearer, because I just didn't understand it in class... Sometimes I wouldn't need help, just being able to do my homework in that environment. I still attend.

Feedback on the tutoring component was overwhelmingly positive. However, students also commented that there were some tutors who were not helpful, and provided wrong information to the students.

Finally, tutors complete brief write-ups after each session and submit them to the project director for review and filing. During weekly staff meetings, tutors discuss student progress, issues of concern, and areas to provide further support for the students. At the end of each quarter, the tutoring coordinator tallies up how many sessions were held and how many students were met. This information is provided to the project director for inclusion in the quarterly and annual project evaluations.

### Workshops

For PIER, a “workshop” describes any guided activity addressing a specific topic. Workshops are typically created with a goal, agenda, group activity, discussion, and evaluation, and last 45 minutes to 1 hour. While there may be a workshop curriculum created by project staff before the start of the academic year, workshop topics can adapt in response to relevant issues taking place at specific sites, or to address a particular audience. Often, workshops are grouped into quarterly themes: for example, fall quarter will be dedicated to “Pacific Island history,” or winter quarter will look at “Community Conditions.” The workshop component of the PIER project is an opportunity to engage students on a wide range of topics not traditionally



covered in their high school curriculum, including culturally relevant information, history, and current events.

Workshops prepared and facilitated by project staff are intermittently conducted throughout the week. However, students at both Carson and Long Beach Poly High School immediately mentioned how unpopular workshops were. Several students recounted how their friends would get up and leave the classroom as soon as any of the PIER staff uttered the word “workshop.” One in particular laughed at how her friends avoided PIER site on the days they knew that workshops would take place. When asked why there were such strong reactions to site workshops, Mia laughed and offered this perspective:

I guess a lot of students associate the word ‘workshops’ with ‘work,’ that they’re going to do work...they’re looking for the nearest door, they jump. I don’t think ‘workshop’ is the best word, maybe activity or gathering, some other word other than ‘workshop.’

Nevertheless, workshops are a major element of another project component, field trips, particularly for campus visits to UCLA. When prompted to share their memories of workshops, students immediately identified the workshops that covered issues of identity, culture, and history. A few students expressed how important it was to hear positive reinforcement about higher education and that people believed in their abilities as students. The students pointed to off-campus workshops as a great source of information on financial aid or admissions policies, as well as a place to hear about Pacific Islander history. At the end of every workshop (both campus-based and during field trips), PIER staff then collect evaluations from the students in order to assess and improve the quality of the program. Workshop evaluations are summarized and sometimes included in quarterly and annual evaluations. Overall, while there was positive feedback on workshops offered during field trips and retreats, there was a negative reaction to the workshops offered during the regularly held after-school site.

## Field Trips

From its earliest days, PISA brought high school students to the UCLA campus for tours, activities, and information.<sup>57</sup> Field trips were seen as a way to get Pacific Islander students to a college campus and reinforce the idea that college is an opportunity available to all. Sefa Aina, a former PISA chair, commented on the idea of bringing youth to college:

We realized that, for a lot of these youth, they had never even been outside of their own city: for example, kids from Carson had never been to USC or UCLA, which are only 20 minutes away by freeway. So exposing them to college campuses early on, and allowing them to walk around and feel at home, was a way to promote the idea that college really was an option.<sup>58</sup>

PIER has continued to offer field trips for the same reasons, but also as an incentive for students to participate in other project components. Although funding for the component has declined over the past five years, field trips remain a priority. Project staff find ways to keep at least one field trip per UCLA quarter on the calendar.

PIER students go on different types of field trips over the course of the academic year. College trips take place at least quarterly to UCLA, the University of Southern California (USC), University of California, Irvine; California State University, Long Beach; University of California, Santa Barbara; and San Diego State University.<sup>59</sup> School visits typically include a campus tour, meetings with Pacific Islander college students enrolled on that campus, presentations on admissions and financial aid, a class visit and lunch.<sup>60</sup> The visits are structured in order to provide a quality experience, share important academic information, and justify time taken away from school to attend the trips. PIER is cognizant that such weekday trips during

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<sup>57</sup> Aina, Sefa; Thornton, Meg et al. "Oral history of UCLA Pacific Islands Students Association." Monday, June 11, 2012. <https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1HMytjCYS6y3Ha4GIGasX7sZYIs5ERi3c5nFQ3q7HBul>

<sup>58</sup> Aina, Sefa. Interview by author. Tape recording. Los Angeles, CA., March 15, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> PIER Academic Year Budget Proposals, 2009-2011.

<sup>60</sup> UCLA policy requires that children who are under 18 on campus for more than four hours must be provided meals.

school hours must be justified to school administrators and parents before students can be authorized to attend them.

Other field trips include visits to community centers, cultural festivals, museums, and local events. The most popular field trip, the leadership retreat, takes place annually during the month of May. This three-day, two-night retreat is only offered to students who have been involved in the PIER project the entire year,<sup>61</sup> and focuses on building and maintaining a community of students from all PIER high school sites. Workshops offered at the retreat focus on personal, educational and community leadership; culture and history; and activism and empowerment. The retreat has become PIER's most popular activity.<sup>62</sup> Mia attributed much of the benefits gained from the project to their participation in this retreat.

So at the beginning of the three-day retreat, I guess your defenses are up, you don't know anyone, but by the end of that retreat, everything's let down, tears have been shed...you leave with this sense of satisfaction like, 'I know I can do it.' I guess that's what PIER retreats do for you, they allow you to bridge that gap between your culture and your academics, so just giving that to students, allowing students to have that for themselves. It's kind of beautiful and heartbreaking to know that other students don't see themselves or perceive themselves as intelligent. All they see [is how they] are compared to trash. Just to know that by the end of the workshops they see themselves, 'I can do this, and I can accomplish anything as long as I keep my mind focused.'

Several students spoke about the experience of meeting people from other high schools, and the opportunity to dismantle years of negative attitudes towards others from different high schools, regions, religious backgrounds, or ethnicities. They commented on the relief they felt, leaving the confines of home, exploring a new environment, and enjoying the freedom that was given to them. Charlie spoke at length about the impact of one of the workshops, "Cultural

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<sup>61</sup> Eligible students are expected to have participated in a minimum of one component over the year; however, this expectation is flexible. At times, students are allowed to participate in the retreat that have not been involved in PIER but are thought to possibly benefit from the experience. (Information from PIER project staff during informal conversation, Thursday, March 8, 2012, 3pm).

<sup>62</sup> PIER End of Quarter Evaluations, 2002-2008, retreat evaluations.

Values,” on the group, recalling the strong emotions evoked and how it made him realize that his priorities did not match his values as a Pacific Islander. “ I realized that although I said a lot about my values, when I took a look at what I was actually doing with my life, I really wasn’t prioritizing those values. I had let them go.” Other students echoed his feedback about the overall retreat and praised the workshops in particular, emphasizing how much of an impact the entire experience had on them personally. Like other components, at the end of each retreat or field trip, evaluations and feedback were collected from the students in order to assess the program’s success and effectiveness.

### Parent Engagement

The parent engagement component consists of two activities: quarterly parent meetings held at the high schools in the afternoon or early morning; and home visits, where PIER staff meet parents at home for more personal interaction. Outreach takes place in several ways: phone calls to the parents, flyers given to students to take home, and also mail-outs to the homes.<sup>63</sup> At parent meetings, parents are given project updates, information on various aspects of higher education such as college admission or financial aid, and get to meet PIER staff. Parent meetings usually last 45 minutes to 1 hour, and are facilitated by the project director and PIER staff. Home visits are coordinated between peer advisors, students and their parents, and usually take place in the evenings after school.

There was a division between students who were actively engaged with the parent component and those who were not. This corroborates data from PIER annual evaluations, which detail the number of parents who participated in meetings or home visits: out of 63 PIER

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<sup>63</sup> PIER End of Year Evaluations, 2009-2011.

students, only 15 families took advantage of this component during the 2010-2011 academic year.<sup>64</sup> For some of the students, however, the parent component proved significant and deeply increased their families' understanding of the college process. A few of them mentioned how their parents or guardians developed their own relationship with their peer advisors, welcoming them eagerly into their homes and making them a part of the families. For PIER staff fluent in Pacific languages, interaction with parents who spoke English as a second language was very important. Students spoke about how comfortable their parents felt, being able to ask questions in their native tongue, and also the joy in meeting college students of Pacific Islander heritage.

The parent engagement component has significantly declined in importance for project staff over the past few years. In 2011-2012, the component lost funding and the PIER project director, Terisa Siagatonu, made a decision to take over responsibilities for contacting parents. She found that this responsibility was not in her capacity, however, and had to focus on other aspects of the project.<sup>65</sup> This has not escaped the attention of the students. Many of them commented on how their parents mentioned not hearing from PIER staff anymore, wondering what happened to that activity. Mia commented that her grandmother would constantly ask her about a former peer advisor, who had since graduated from UCLA. "My former peer advisor was very close to my grandmother...my grandmother knows the old PIER, from my freshman year, she doesn't really know the new ones." While explaining that the peer advisor had graduated, she noticed that her grandmother could remember very specific details about that person, and had felt very close to them. "My grandma asked, 'why aren't they calling me? Where are they?' I said, 'Oh, the one that used to call you, she's not at UCLA anymore.'" She

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<sup>64</sup> PIER End of Year Evaluation, 2009-2010, p. 42.

<sup>65</sup> PIER Review Committee, February 25, 2012 (author was invited to participate in the committee).

lamented that the project had not continued such conversations with her grandmother. Thanks to that early engagement, though, she acknowledged that her family was well aware of her involvement in PIER and supportive of her academic goals.

### Educational Environment

Young people do not experience school in a vacuum; their high schools are situated in layered contexts of street, city, county, state and nation. Students were asked to talk about their educational environment, and they were open about the factors that impacted student success. Their responses were invaluable and provided a much more nuanced and complete portrait of their community environment. All of them knew about the barriers to higher education for Pacific Islanders and the need for a project like PIER. Mia had a very precise analysis of the academic barriers faced by Pacific Islanders:

So, academically, Pacific Islanders are...I would say that they've not reached their full potential, one being that a lot of them are not motivated, being that where they come from, their home settings...because you know, being Pacific Islander, the biggest thing, other than our families, is church, so a lot of them don't get that emphasis on education, so therefore they don't perform well in school.

The home environment is a critical element for student success, and this student points out how, in her community, education often competes with other priorities. Another student shared how lack of family support resulted in him leaving his community college:

I think for me, the main thing was I didn't have that support system...at first, I'd ask them (for rides to campus), but they'd always give me attitude, and as the months went by I didn't feel like asking my family for anything...like books, money for stuff like that.

### The PIER Environment

The interview subjects articulate three core benefits that PIER offered them, as individuals and as a community: a safe space, interaction with role models, and higher education

awareness. In the next section, I provide more detail on these three elements. I share what the students had to say about the PIER environment, and what they gained from being part of PIER. Although most of their feedback was positive, they also had concerns about certain aspects of PIER that I will highlight.

### Safe Spaces

Building safe spaces is crucial for any effort that embodies and cultivates a critique of the status quo. PIER's very existence is attributed to a failing public education system and stringent University admission policies.<sup>66</sup> PIER transforms a negative educational environment into one that validates the lives and histories of Pacific Islander youth. Students shared their appreciation for a space that was created by, and for, Pacific Islanders. When asked to compare the impact of widely recognized outreach programs such as EAOP or Upward Bound with the PIER program, students immediately pointed out the importance of a racially specific focus. Mary, from Leuzinger High School, shared her perspective:

[As a Pacific Islander] it was more focused towards my culture, my beliefs, and I felt more understood...it just made it mean a lot much more because I felt understood and because they were people of my culture, and just...the fact that they are just like me says a lot, and I know it said a lot to many other students. Because it is discouraging to many high school students when they're receiving help from people that don't look like them or they don't relate to, so to be able to have individuals in which they do relate to and do look like them definitely helped a lot more in the process of trying to encourage students to obtain a higher education.

Mia provided similar feedback:

All of those are great programs – AVID, Upward Bound, many programs the ones I was involved in. I never really felt that was for me, because it was always a general feel, I never felt like someone took the time to get to know myself, who am I...it was always just, this is A, B and C, how to get there. They gave me a route. But what PIER did, they told me I could go to A, or Z, or M, or wherever I go, as long as I keep my eyes focused

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<sup>66</sup> PIER Academic Year Budget Proposal, 2001.

and my mind...on what I want...I can attain it, so long as I stay motivated and determined. So that's what PIER does for me.

Students at Long Beach Poly related how they felt that mainstream outreach programs focused on certain racial groups:

We were in...Educational Talent Search, and basically we got to go to different campuses...but with PIER, I'll say, it was like, our own people...I felt more comfortable, because we got to learn about our history...with ETS we only talked about the African Americans, Native Americans, but we'd never talk about people like us...

Building safe spaces for Pacific Islanders is clearly one of PIER's legacies at all three high schools. Just as students of color enjoy the benefits of Ethnic Studies programs at UCLA, Pacific Islander students enjoy and even come to rely on the support, comfort, and relevance that PIER maintains on their campuses:

I would walk into a room and I would see all my friends doing their homework and they were being helped by other Pacific Islanders, and I thought, 'This is pretty awesome, I guess I'll stay here.' And the biggest thing for me wasn't that I was being helped with my academics, but that I was comfortable, and I knew these people, and I knew that what they wanted to do was to help me, and that's why I stayed involved in PIER throughout high school as well, because bottom line was that those were my people, and they were helping me, for the betterment of our people.

Students thus found PIER to be a supportive and affirming environment wherein they could focus exclusively on their cultural communities.

### Role Models

PIER also provided role models for the students to look up to. Students articulated the importance of seeing people of their own community taking the time to come and work with them. The college students were a positive influence and constant reminder that higher education was attainable. Further, in developing personal relationships with their college mentors, the high school students saw their mentors not simply in the context of the outreach



project but as individuals with their own struggles. Sina from Long Beach Poly shared how she grew close to her peer advisor:

You know, she was like a big sister. I got to talk to her about everything I was going through... it's like therapy and stuff but you got to release all that stuff that been holding you back. I know she was going through a lot of stuff with her grandma, and I was going through [my sister running away.]

Her case was not unusual in that mentors and mentees often supported each other. For another student from Long Beach, the college students offered a perspective on her life based on their experiences. Sina found their insight valuable in making decisions:

What I liked about PIER was, they can relate to other Pacific Islanders because they were also high school students once in their lifetime. It was good to see someone older than me going to college, someone to look up to, you know, 'Oh! I can be like you and go to college, too.'

Aside from the individual support from their peer advisors, students gained an entire support system and network that also offers tutoring and workshop facilitators. Interviews with students revealed that this network was sustained by the project's consistency and dedication to the students.

### Higher Education Awareness

The third benefit provided to high school students by the PIER project is higher education awareness. Students expressed how they came to consider college a feasible option for the first time with the support and encouragement of the PIER network. More importantly, they learned skills and tools they could use to pursue academic goals. Several students shared how important it was to get help with their personal statements, while others were inspired by the presence of others who shared her philosophy on higher education. Other students revealed the information they received, including financial aid, the transfer process, and the difference between an

Associate's degree and a Bachelor's degree. One student in particular received a lot of support with the college application process from her peer advisor. Prior to participating in PIER's program she planned on working after high school and not applying for college. She subsequently received acceptance letters from six colleges and universities.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on PIER program's activities and shared student narratives about each component. They revealed meaningful insights about each component, particularly about the kind of environment PIER created and sustained. The project is shown to provide three core benefits to its students: safe spaces, the presence of role models, and higher education awareness. PIER creates a transformative, empowering space for young Pacific Islanders by promoting deep connections between college mentors and high school students. In doing so, the project encourages Pacific Islander youth to access higher education. However, what is the nature of that impact? How many students have gone through PIER and on to college? How many of them have completed their degrees? In the next chapter, I will highlight post-high school life for these students and their experiences in pursuing college degrees.

## Chapter 4: Long Term Impact of PIER

### Introduction

PIER received its first funding from the Student Initiated Outreach Committee (SIAC) in 1999<sup>67</sup> and became part of the inaugural group of student-initiated outreach programs at UCLA and the wider University of California system. Since its inception in 1999, the SIAC has allocated over half a million dollars to the project.<sup>68</sup> Have PIER staffs accomplished the goals of the project? More importantly, did the students experience an increase in their ability to access higher education? In this chapter, then, I provide information on students who have participated in the PIER program. I examine the responses of the interviewees and pay close attention to the way they describe their lives after high school. By examining the student narratives, I uncover answers to my questions and conclude the chapter with key understandings about the project's impact on its service recipients.

One of the simplest ways to answer these questions is to determine whether or not PIER students attend college after completing high school. The project currently does not collect that information. PIER annual evaluations track the intended progress of seniors, noting where they were accepted and detailing student post-graduation<sup>69</sup> intentions. However, project staff do not track whether or not students complete their academic goals and earn the degree of their choice. Over the years, there have been attempts to implement a tracking program for this purpose,<sup>70</sup> but the SIAC has never seriously invested funding or planning in this effort.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Student Initiated Outreach Committee Allocation letter to the Pacific Islands Students Association, October 1, 1999.

<sup>68</sup> SIAC Administrative Records, Community Programs Office, UCLA.

<sup>69</sup> PIER Empowerment Packets, developed in 1998, revised annually by PIER administrative support.

<sup>70</sup> Conversation with Community Programs Office staff and former SIAC advisors, May-July, 2011.

## Community College

According to the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) report released in 2011, “the largest sector of AAPI college enrollment, at 47.3 percent, was in the community college sector in 2005.”<sup>72</sup> The research reveals a gap in matriculation for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and urged policy makers to increase support for a community of students commonly judged by the “model minority” myth of educational attainment. For the Pacific Islander community, however, the report confirms that the community college pipeline is one of the most readily available and accessed resources by high school graduates.<sup>73</sup>

According to a recent policy report commissioned by California Assemblymember Mike Eng, Pacific Islanders represent 1% of California’s community college students. The research reveals stark statistics for the community. The report indicates that “a lower percentage of Pacific Islanders are retained overall in California community colleges and...across student enrollment statuses compared to most other racial/ethnic groups.”<sup>74</sup> Pacific Islanders show much lower passing rates for courses when compared to other racial groups.<sup>75</sup> So while the students in community college have chosen a relatively more popular path for higher education, it is set in

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<sup>71</sup> This is based on my own interaction with the SIAC as administrative representative and advisor, from March 2009 – August 2011. Despite several attempts to provide SIAC a feasible tracking system, these efforts are never seriously implemented in project planning and execution.

<sup>72</sup> National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, “Federal Higher Education Policy Priorities and the Asian American and Pacific Islander Community.” 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>75</sup> Chang, Mitch; Fung, Gordon; et al. “The State of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Education in California,” Prepared for the Honorable Mike Eng by the University of California Asian American and Pacific Islander Policy Multicampus Research Program. 2010, 19.

an educational environment that has not proven totally supportive of other Pacific Islander students who have not been able to find academic success. Has their participation in PIER prepared them to push through community college and complete the transfer cycle? What are the attitudes, knowledge and skills they've gained? How do the students fare without the weekly presence of a peer advisor, tutor, or academic success workshops? Students interviewed for this thesis reflected on these questions.

At the time of my interview with Mia in Carson, California, she was making preparations for prom and contemplating life after high school. In response to my question about her plans, she shared with me the conversations she'd had over the years with her peer advisor. With that person's support, she knew all of the information needed to pursue higher education, but more importantly, she understood the importance of setting goals for herself:

She would always place emphasis on how important the action plan was and that, no matter what, you always need to have a plan...so after high school, and I plan to attend a university. I really want to attend UCLA but I can't just go on that, so I have to have a backup plan. So I guess if I'm not satisfied, or I don't want what I've got accepted to, I guess I might be planning to attend a two-year university because that's how much I want it – UCLA.

Mia had already received notice that she had been accepted to several universities she had applied to, including California State University, Northridge (CSUN); California State University Polytechnic in Pomona; California State University, Sacramento; San Francisco State University; University of California, San Diego; and one out-of-state school, Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. However, she would enroll in a community college so as to transfer to UCLA if she was not accepted out of high school. Her desire to attend UCLA was indicative of her notable high school career and illustrative of her acceptance into major universities. She attributed much of her success to the PIER program and her relationship with her peer advisor:

She had a big part in shaping me in who I've become today, because I was always an introvert, and I was always quiet. She was always like, 'Girl, you know you have a voice...voice your opinion!' She always told me, 'You're strong, and you're independent!' I never believed that until she said, 'Come on, just get involved.'

Because of her peer advisor's encouragement, Mia had developed the confidence that led her to accept leadership positions on campus and to vigorously pursue her goals. Her choices had been defined within the context of her involvement with PIER. With three years of support from her peer advisor, the student had developed the critical consciousness she needed to know her options and act upon her world. Her attitude about college had been impacted as well: it was not simply a lofty goal that had no meaning or substance, but she had already witnessed the fruits of her labor by receiving acceptance letters from several universities. She was ready to pursue a plan that would lead her to her dream school, UCLA. This student's participation in PIER deepened her perspective on education. She reflected on how her attitude about higher education had changed:

Without PIER I don't think I would have my sense of culture, as well as my academics. I think I'd just be a girl walking around, knowing that I'm Samoan, but not actually connecting that to my education...knowing that I need to get my education, but not reflecting that back on why I need my education, why it's so important for me as a Samoan, as a Pacific Islander, to attain that higher education.

The potential to engage students in an ongoing dialogue about their culture, and develop a critical consciousness for the role education can play in the empowerment of their community, gives PIER a powerful advantage in the movement to access higher education.

In Long Beach, Sina made the decision to enroll in community college despite admission to several four-year universities. Her decision to pursue higher education was focused on the goal of attending UCLA, and the route determined her path that would best lead her to that school. After some consideration, she chose to attend Long Beach City College (LBCC). While

pursuing her own path to higher education, she has become actively engaged in her community and attributed her activism to her involvement in PIER:

Hearing their stories about why they wanted to do it (college students getting involved in PIER) got me thinking, ‘What is my purpose, too?’ You know, going to Sāmoa, seeing those people, like what they go through, not having stuff...seeing that stuff, their day-to-day, I’m so embarrassed for them. I’m so happy I don’t live like that. My dad asked me about Sāmoa and stuff, I was like, ‘I hate it, I don’t like how they live.’ Then he was like, ‘Then you do something about that. You want to help them? Then you got to make that change.’ So that’s what...the whole mentality, not just to do it for him, or myself, to help my family out there.... So I promised myself, I got the education out here; I should take advantage of it, and then help those people out there. So that was my mindset.

Some of her comments on life in Sāmoa deserve context and unpacking. Her position as a diasporic Samoan born and raised in the U.S. has complicated her identity as a Samoan woman and this becomes obvious in the way she reflects on life in the islands. Being “embarrassed” for her family in the islands, she reveals a strong negative reaction to the way she sees other people in her family live. By displaying a very paternal attitude towards her family in Sāmoa and their way of life, she reveals her own subjectivity and how Western and American values have influenced the way she perceives life in the islands. However, the conditions also motivate her to get involved in her own community in Long Beach. Her activism is a direct impact of the PIER project and its staff. By role modeling student activism and making it an organizational value, UCLA’s Pacific Islander students show that college is an option that can be balanced with community advocacy. In this way, the PIER project achieves its goal of producing community advocates.

Advocacy is important because research shows that barriers continue to exist for Pacific Islander students even after they graduate from high school. The CARE reports indicate that Pacific Islanders experience some of the lowest levels of degree completion in the community college system. “Pacific Islanders have a very high rate of attrition during college. Among

Pacific Islanders, 47.0 percent of Guamanians, 50.0 percent of Native Hawaiians, 54.0 percent of Tongans, and 58.1 percent of Samoans entered college, but left without earning a degree.”<sup>76</sup>

Student narratives corroborated this research. Students revealed that while they had high motivation for pursuing a college degree, once they were actually in college it became difficult to find the support they needed to finish. Charlie shared his motivation for going to college:

First, I wanted to go to college, but not for academics – at first, try to use what they gave me – their efforts to try to get my grades straight so that if football works out, that would be there...My senior year, my peer advisor asked if I’d ever thought about teaching. She’d ask, ‘What if it (football) doesn’t work out?’ When she said that, I [thought to myself], ‘what if it doesn’t work out? Have you ever thought about using academics to do what you want, instead of using football...to get that full ride to further my education?’

By his senior year, Charlie was starting to consider many options. The support of his peer advisor kept him motivated and he decided on a path that made sense and for which he thought he had parental blessing. This was not the case.

I think for me, the main thing, was that I didn’t have that support system...at first, I’d ask them, but they’d always give me attitude, and as the months went by, I didn’t feel like asking my family for anything...like books for money, stuff like that...one of the main reasons I went to college was because [my father] wanted me to go to college. So I went to college, and I felt like, at least he should help me out. But when I asked him (for money) and he gave me attitude about it, I kind of felt like, betrayed...why would you want me to go to school if you’re not going to help me...most (difficult) part was the family, they just didn’t support.

Charlie identified one of the crucial elements for any student: the support (financial, moral, or other) of parents and family. He saw that while there was a respect and appreciation for higher education, when it came down to the logistics of being a community college student, his family could not understand why more was needed for him. Literature on “college knowledge” indicates that for many students from historically underrepresented communities, the family or

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<sup>76</sup> National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, “Federal Higher Education Policy Priorities and the Asian American and Pacific Islander Community.” 2011, 32.



parents are often unaware of, or unable to support, the increased cost of higher education.<sup>77</sup>

Financially, his family was unable to accept the added cost of his academic pursuits. This led to Charlie's apathy, and ultimately the choice to leave school altogether.

This student's situation emphasizes the importance of an educational support system. Having had that system in high school, when he moves into the community college environment it became apparent that in the absence of that support, his academic progress suffers. It is important to note that he does not share in his interview the kind of programs or support available at the community college, nor if he took advantage of those services. He revealed several times during our interview that he didn't understand the lessons that PIER staff were trying to teach him until long after he left high school. For example, when asked if PIER had prepared him for college, he replied that "they could have, I'm betting they did, I just didn't listen when they were trying to explain it to me...I think they did explain to me the best they could...I took college life a different way." When he got to college, he assumed that life would be a certain way, alluding to the parties and freedom from restrictions. "I thought...I could do whatever I want. Leave whenever I want. Go to school if I want. It kind of showed on my grades."

Recently, Charlie has funneled a lot of energy into being part of the Carson High School football coaching staff, volunteering time after work at the school and sometimes meeting with current PIER students during site visits. He revealed that he now likes to share his knowledge with younger students.

I always tell the kids, 'You got to change with the times, can't always stay 'high school this, high school that'...got to change with whatever life gives you, tosses you. Can't be thinking about the same old things, or else you won't mature, you won't grow up.' And that's something I picked up from PIER, although I didn't quite get that lesson until I was

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<sup>77</sup> Antonio, Anthony Lising; Bersola, Samuel. "Working Toward K-16 Coherence in California." *From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. 2004, 63.

in college, retracing my steps...it kind of sucks that it happened the way it did, but life is like that.

He openly acknowledged the impact that PIER had on his critical development and maturity. It was a hard-won lesson learned and he wanted to share with the younger students so that they could learn from his experience. He has found a source of empowerment by supporting young Pacific Islanders pursuing higher education in whatever way he can, becoming an agent of change in his community. The impact of the PIER program on Charlie, while not readily identifiable through degree completion, is more of an attitude shift, a way of thinking about his role in the community, and respect for the mentorship of young people.

### University Path

Three of the students I interviewed were current college students, enrolled in four-year universities. For these students, my focus shifted towards their transition and readiness for the college life while continuing to seek clarification on PIER's impact on their development. Mary spoke readily about her preparation for Kalamazoo College:

My transition was a lot easier than I thought it would be, simply because it's so far (Michigan). PIER helped me in the way in which they prepared me...not only to go to college to attain a degree for a better life, but they helped me understand that it's more so the process that you through to attain a degree that's important.

The student quoted above was accepted to Kalamazoo College in Michigan through the Posse Foundation,<sup>78</sup> which offers full scholarships to students. She was hesitant about moving to Michigan but decided to take advantage of the opportunity, placing greater value on education. Her attitude about college was impacted by the PIER project, and she began to understand

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<sup>78</sup> Founded in 1989, Posse identifies public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes. Posse extends to these students the opportunity to pursue personal and academic excellence by placing them in supportive, multicultural teams—Posses—of 10 students. Posse partner colleges and universities award Posse Scholars four-year, full-tuition leadership scholarships. See the link: [www.possefoundation.org/about-posse](http://www.possefoundation.org/about-posse)

education as a process, not necessarily the end goal of a degree. She walked away from PIER with a different understanding of education and how it related to her personally. PIER provided the prism through which educational complexities and implications were revealed.

Several students mentioned the support they received from PIER, and how that gave them the strength to push through their senior year, complete their college applications, and graduate from high school. More importantly, they maintain that motivation into college, with a deeper sense of what it means to be a Pacific Islander college student. They have successfully navigated a path to higher education and, in doing so, opened up new doors and opportunities for themselves. It is important to note that they came to the PIER program having already participated in other educational outreach programs. They were involved in organization such as the Posse Foundation or Educational Talent Search, national programs that are very popular with college-bound high school students. Their open acknowledgement of PIER's impact on their academic success and matriculation into the university, then, serves as a powerful endorsement for the UCLA students, considering the variety of support services available to them.

### The Role of Alumni

There is one major theme that comes up when applying a close reading to each of these narratives. All of the students mentioned the desire to reach back and support their peers still enrolled in the high school level, and four of them specifically encouraged their younger siblings or friends to stay involved in the project. They spoke particularly about their desire to see younger high school students take advantage of PIER services. Charlie was very frustrated with the lack of effort he saw his younger brother putting in to his academics. He felt that his brother had different motivations for going to PIER:

It was different, only because his values are totally different from mine...for him; he used any excuse to get out of high. What we both had in common was, after we graduated from high school, we both wanted to stay and go back to high school...all he talked about was the field trips. When I asked him about the educational part, he said 'They're helping me,' so I'd ask, 'Well, why are your grades like this?'

Charlie expressed disappointment over his brother's haphazard academic performance, but related it to a larger generational issue, and alluded to the way Pacific Islander students rely and perform on stereotypes held about their community.

It's kind of a hassle...trying to teach these kids. When they come to high school they already have that mentality. 'Let's be the cool person like how they show in the movies, let's be the bad ass...just go play football or sports, [we] don't need the academic part.' But in reality, you need the academic part to play the sport you want.

Patty from Long Beach Poly observed her younger sister's participation in the program after she had graduated. Her leadership of the Polynesian Club at her former high school gave her a much deeper insight into her sibling's activities than might have otherwise been the case, and she knew when her sister was not fully active in PIER.

She started to go to PIER her freshman year but sometimes when I see her coming home on an off day, I'm like, 'Why are you here, when is PIER, why aren't you going?' So I try to tell them, even my brother, he's a freshman now, 'If you want to go to college, like where I'm at right now, you need to go to PIER, because they will really help you.'

As a former participant and beneficiary of PIER services, Patty understood their misgivings about the program. But more importantly, they could speak to the benefits for sticking it through. When she intercepted her sister at home from school earlier than normal, she knew that her sister had chosen not to participate in PIER activities and made it a habit to question her about that choice. This is how she stayed in contact with PIER staff and high school students, and gave her a different perspective on the program as well. She made it a point to encourage participation in PIER, and even offered suggestions to PIER staff when she knew they were having difficulty outreaching to new students.

Mary had the same motivation to stay in touch with her friends from Leuzinger:

I went back home over winter break, and I made a commitment to myself that every break that I get, I'd go back to Leuzinger to just be able to check in, reach out to students.

Her commitment to students at Leuzinger led her to a more perceptive view of the PIER program, and gave her a glimpse at some of the challenges that existed for the project.

After graduation, students specifically mentioned getting involved with PIER after graduation. One student began volunteering for the project during her first year in community college. Her ongoing participation in the project helped cement PIER's work at the school. "I volunteered time, because I love what [PIER does], helping students, just letting them be themselves. They're the same color and stuff, learning about their history." She also continued to participate in the annual retreat, and mentioned that it was her favorite activity. As a former leader at the school, she had far more influence over the students, knew more teachers and administration, understood the school culture better than PIER staff, and had an emotional connection to the well being and success of her school peers. Her advocacy became a crucial element for the project's stability at that site.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on PIER's impact on its students and their access to higher education. Students revealed both immediate and long-term impacts on their choice to attend college. Some of the more immediate advantages were activities such as tutoring, daily homework assistance, college applications, and personal empowerment through one-on-one mentorship. Long-term impacts were found in the evolution of their attitudes about college, self-empowerment, and community service. There is ample evidence that PIER positively impacted their academic and personal empowerment, and growth of critical consciousness. No matter the

path they took after high school, all the students I interviewed acknowledged the project's favorable influence on their knowledge and attitude about higher education, and on the development of new academic, personal and professional skills. PIER has significantly shaped how students perceive education and their own potential to pursue a postsecondary degree. Students recognize their own abilities and responsibilities to serve their communities. Some even became advocates for higher education in their personal spheres of influence.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined how involvement in the PIER program impacted its student participants, relying on student narratives as the foundation of my research. In Chapter 2, I provided background information on the Pacific Islander community and the educational environment that students experience outside of their involvement in PIER. Students revealed some of their common experiences as Pacific Islander high school students in urban Los Angeles, including the presence of stereotypes and the lack of relevant educational material about their communities. In Chapter 3, I introduced the PIER project, and shared details on its core components: peer advising, tutoring, workshops, field trips, and parent engagement. I analyzed the student narratives to reveal that the three primary benefits of the PIER project were the creation of safe spaces, sensitive role models, and increased awareness of higher education. These benefits variously impacted the attitudes of PIER's students, a process examined in Chapter 4. Because of this shift in attitude, the idea of accessing higher education no longer seems unattainable.

Also, I recommend three policy changes for the project. First, PIER should initiate a series of pre- and post- surveys in order to measure specific program outcomes and collect impact data. For example, it would be instructive to ask a ninth-grade PIER student what they know about college when they first enter the project, and ask the same question to that student at the end of the year. This and related questions would give PIER a better sense as to how they've impacted student attitudes and knowledge about higher education over the course of the year. Additional data points could also compare how a student's understanding of higher education develops over the course of their high school career. Second, I recommend that PIER reevaluate

the project continuity on two levels: rethinking how students are paired with peer advisors over the course of their high school experience, and maintaining relationships post-high school graduation. I raise this point because students expressed a great deal of anxiety when it came to the issue of continuity. Third, I recommend that the project include a more formal and confidential structure for student input regarding PIER's direction and administration. Such feedback can ensure that high school youth have a larger role in guiding project policy.

It is critical to acknowledge local efforts like PIER. By compiling this information and acknowledging the students' growth, I have used this MA thesis to evaluate PIER's impact on Pacific Islander high school students and to inform the larger discourse on Pacific Islander access to higher education in the state of California and the continental Pacific Islander community. At its core, PIER is a local, community effort that operates "below the radar," so to speak. It is an alternative outreach effort situated in UCLA's Community Programs Office, organized and coordinated by UCLA Pacific Islander students. My research demonstrates that PIER has a positive impact on how students think about higher education. That process takes place within the walls of their own high schools – an often hostile space alienated from their identity and cultural values. PIER uplifts the way students see themselves as students and helps them take ownership of their education. When surrounded and supported by older students who have successfully navigated that process, PIER students have come to understand education as their whole cultural, academic, political, and spiritual selves, transformed into active, empowered agents of their own lives.



Appendix A: PIER Sites and Staff

Academic Year	PISA Outreach Coordinator	Outreach Sites	PIER Project Director
1997-1998	N/a	Carson High School	Troy Lau
1998-1999	N/a	Carson High School	Troy Lau
1999-2000	N/a	Carson High School	Natasha Saelua
2000-2001	Natasha Saelua	Carson High School	Maniaka Aga
2001-2002	Maniaka Aga	Carson High School /Hawthorne High School	Karalee Vaughn
2002-2003	Ronal Chand	Carson High School /Hawthorne High School	Maniaka Aga
2003-2004	Ofa Mataele	Carson High School /Hawthorne High School	Natasha Saelua
2004-2005	Maurice Bell	Carson High School /Hawthorne High School /Samoan Congregational Church (Carson, CA)	Ursula Siataga
2005-2006	Vailala Salazar	Carson High School /Hawthorne High School	Maurice Bell
2006-2007	Lilinoe Harbottle	Carson High School/Carnegie Middle School	Karel Lokeni
2007-2008	Leolani Gallardo/ Sikander Iqbal	Carson High School/Carnegie Middle School	Karel Lokeni

2008-2009	Ovava 'Afuhaamango	Carson High School /Long Beach Poly High School	Karel Lokeni
2009-2010	Mikaela Saelua	Carson High School /Long Beach Poly High School/Leuzinger High School	Nefara Riesch
2010-2011	Selina Stasi	Carson High School /Long Beach Poly High School/Leuzinger High School	Nefara Riesch
2011-2012	Rohit Maharaj	Carson High School /Long Beach Poly High School/Leuzinger High School	Terisa Siagatonu
2012-2013	Rohit Maharaj	Carson High School /Long Beach Poly High School/Leuzinger High School / El Camino College	Don Hatori

## Appendix B: Recruitment Email

### **“PIER Through a Critical Lens: Evaluation of a Student-Initiated, Student-Run Outreach Program”**

#### **Recruitment Email**

Hello! My name is Natasha Saelua, and I'm in my second (and final) year of my MA program in Asian American Studies at UCLA. I'm doing research on Pacific Islander high school students' access to higher education, but more specifically, students who have been part of UCLA's Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER) program, at any of the following high schools: Carson High, Long Beach Poly, Leuzinger High School, or Hawthorne High School. If you attended any of these high schools between 2000-2011, and participated in the PIER program for at least 1 year, I'm looking for you! I'm hoping you can answer a few questions, so that I can understand, and write about, what it was like to be part of PIER; what you learned from PIER programs or staff; and most of all, whether or not the PIER program helped you reach your educational goals. I'm hoping to include your voice in my thesis so that together, we can help the PIER program improve in its work with high school students – who better to provide feedback to PIER staff than to former PIER students, like yourself?

Let me say little about myself. I'm a UCLA alumna, and former staff person with the PIER project. It's changed a lot since the time I graduated, but the mission is still the same: to provide information about college, tutoring and mentorship, and workshops for students and parents, so that more Pacific Islanders see college as an option and choose that path. I'm still pretty involved in education issues for Pacific Islanders. This has become an ongoing passion, and even the focus of my current job. When I got into the MA program at UCLA, I knew that I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect on PIER's mission, vision, and how well it has accomplished its original intention.

That's where you come in. I'd like to invite you to participate in a structured interview, to answer questions about PIER and to reflect on your time as a high school student. The interview will probably take 1.5 – 2 hours, and you will be able to see the questions before the interview. If you're interested, please contact me at [Saelua@gmail.com](mailto:Saelua@gmail.com) so that we can set something up.

Thank you so much for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you!

Natasha Saelua

## Appendix C: Referral Email

### **“PIER Through a Critical Lens: Evaluation of a Student-Initiated, Student-Run Outreach Program”**

#### **Referral Email**

Hello! My name is Natasha Saelua, and I'm in my second (and final) year of my MA program in Asian American Studies at UCLA. I'm doing research on Pacific Islander high school students' access to higher education, but more specifically, students who have been part of UCLA's Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER) program, at any of the following high schools: Carson High, Long Beach Poly, Leuzinger High School, or Hawthorne High School. If you were staff of the PIER program between the years 2000-2011, I'm looking for you! I'm hoping you can refer me to former PIER students you may still be in contact with so that I can get in request an interview with them. I'm hoping to include their voice in my thesis so that I can provide the PIER program an evaluation that privileges the voices of its former high school student recipients. Who better to provide feedback to PIER staff than to former PIER students?

Let me say a little about myself. I'm a UCLA alumna, and former staff person with the PIER project, from 1998-2001. I'm still pretty involved in education issues for Pacific Islanders. This has become an ongoing passion, and even the focus of my current job. When I got into the MA program at UCLA, I knew that I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect on PIER's mission, vision, and how well it has accomplished its original intention.

That's where you come in. Please let me know if you have contact information of any former PIER students so that I can request that they participate in a structured interview, to answer questions about PIER and to reflect on their time as a high school student. If you can help out, please send me their names and email addresses at [Saelua@gmail.com](mailto:Saelua@gmail.com) so that we can set something up.

Thank you so much for your time and support!

Natasha Saelua

## Appendix D: Consent Form

**University of California, Los Angeles**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

PIER Through a Critical Lens:  
Evaluation of a Student-Initiated, Student Run Outreach Program

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Natasha Autasi Saelua, M.A. Candidate from the Department of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The results of this study will contribute to a Master's thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your knowledge and/or involvement in the student-initiated access project, Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER) at the University of California, Los Angeles. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the impact and effectiveness of a student-initiated access program, PIER. In particular, I want to better understand how your involvement in PIER affected your post-graduation decisions, and the particular aspects of the PIER project that are most helpful in supporting access to higher education for Pacific Islanders

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to participate in a formal structured interview. I will ask you to respond to a list of questions that will guide my interaction with you. I will videotape record the interview and then transcribe it at a later date. I expect that the interview will last about 1 to 1.5 hours. The interview questions tend to fall into two categories: 1) demographic and background information, such as your age, race/ethnicity, gender, and so forth, and 2) questions about your participation in PIER, including your perceptions about the effectiveness of various components of the program.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Your participation in this study poses no more than a minimal risk to you. Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Findings deriving from this project have the potential of advancing both theory and practice relating to the access of Pacific Islanders to higher education. In particular, this study has the potential to develop key insights about the impact of undergraduate student-initiated outreach/access programs that target specific ethnic groups, and the strategies or approaches that most effectively serve that community. Such knowledge may be useful in developing similar outreach programs for Pacific Islander young people in other high-density areas around the country. Although there may be long-term benefits for outreach programs and for Pacific Islander high school students in general, it is unlikely that you will directly benefit from your participation in the research study.

- PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive payment for your participation in this study.

- CONFIDENTIALITY

Information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. You have the right to review transcripts of the video recorded interview, make necessary edits, or erase the taped interviews and your participation in whole or in part. Only I will have access to the tapes and transcripts. Tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet until the end of this project, at which point they will be destroyed unless other arrangements are made with your full consent. At any time you retain the right to review/edit your tapes and interview transcripts.

- PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study.

- IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

Natasha Saelua  
M.A. Candidate  
UCLA Department of Asian American Studies  
[Saelua@gmail.com](mailto:Saelua@gmail.com)  
Tel: (310) 936-7691  
Fax: (310) 206-3175

Keith Lujan Camacho, Ph.D.  
Faculty Sponsor  
UCLA Department of Asian American Studies  
[kcamacho@ucla.edu](mailto:kcamacho@ucla.edu)  
Tel: (310) 267-5559

- RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP). If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to: UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program; 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694; Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694.

I agree to allow Natasha Saelua to identify me by name in her thesis.

Yes       No

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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