

# Understanding South Asian Collegiate Experiences: Facilitating Campus Leadership Self-Efficacy

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## Abstract

Leadership self-efficacy of South Asian international students in the United States campuses is often not discussed in leadership literature. The following study explored collegiate experiences and leadership engagement of South Asian students. Informants of the study included undergraduate international students from Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Findings indicated a tendency amongst the informants to engage in leadership activities for self-development. Participating students considered acculturation and inclusion in the learning community, and decoding American academic culture as key concerns that act as barriers in the road to assume campus leadership opportunities. Even though South Asian international students demonstrate efficacious leadership activity engagement within the campus in the United States, students still stressed the importance of actively participating in activities that strongly align with cultural interests.

**Keywords:** *Leadership Self-Efficacy, South Asian, International students*

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## Introduction

International students from Asia lack sufficient self-efficacy to pursue leadership activities within universities (Nguyen, 2015). Recent research reported that being Asian is considered a negative influencer of Asian students' efficaciousness to lead (Dugan & Komives, 2007). The limited availability of Asian student leadership literature reaffirms the necessity to investigate the problem of lack of efficacy amongst the Asian student population (Liang, Lee, & Ting, 2002). Similarly, research on South Asian students is further minimal due to the model minority status of South Asians in the United States (Rana, 2016). Majority of studies on leadership efficacy of Asian students are conducted utilizing Asian Americans. However, findings of both Asian international students and Asian Americans indicate that Asians in general lack leadership self-efficacy (Armino, Carter, Jones, 2000; Balon, 2005; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Nguyen, 2016).

Students coming to the United States from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan comprise of the South Asian student population. At present, 20% of the overall international student population in the United States is South Asian (Institute of International Education, 2017). Research indicates a general trend amongst Asian students in not viewing themselves as leaders (Balon, 2005). This is further evident in Asian students' reluctance to assume leadership positions within universities (Kodama, 2014). One of the reasons for the reluctance in assuming leadership positions is the difficulty faced by Asian students in integrating into American society (Kodama, 2014). Young (2017) reported that Asian students are conscious about their English and accent and are often ashamed of their linguistic weaknesses and it curtails the self-esteem of Asian students. Poor self-esteem reduces one's self-efficacy beliefs (Hajloo, 2014). Even though linguistic difficulties affect one's efficaciousness to lead, it does not adequately explain why Asian students are reluctant to assume leadership positions in the university. To add to this, Nguyen (2015) posits that Asian students value education over networking; and to further understand the reason for this reluctance, it was also found that Asian students generally prefer to associate students of the same ethnicity (Armino, Carter, Jones, 2000; Nguyen, 2016; Young 2017). Within ethnically homogenous groups, Asian students demonstrate leadership (Nguyen, 2016), and within their ethnic sphere, they tend to be more involved with club activities compared to domestic American students (Young, 2017). This could be due to feelings of collective racial esteem, which is also a significant predictor of one's leadership self-efficacy (Lee, 2011). Research also indicates Asian students' limited ability in tolerating cultural discomfort (Young, 2017), and this possibly could be an impediment to engage in leadership activities on the campus. This is especially true in campuses that are predominantly white. As Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000) assert, ethnic mixture of a university poses a significant influence on students of color's ability to lead; they find it difficult to lead a predominantly white group (Lee, 2011).

Similar to ethnic differences, cultural variations also have a significant influence on a person's leadership activities. Leadership is a social construct and it captures a Western notion (Dugan, Komives, Segar, 2008; Lee, 2011). Leadership in the American context is based on individualism while leadership in Asia is based on collectivism (Nguyen, 2016; Wang, 2016). Due to this reason, leadership could be different across continents, and even across nations. As Nguyen (2015) points out, cultural differences function as a hindrance in making social relationships. However, social relationships are conducive to engage in campus leadership activities. One key factor that highlights this is the collectivist nature of Asian students. Research indicates Asian students to offer more prominence to the group's

achievement than emphasizing the individual role as a leader within the group (Armino, Carter, & Jones, 2000). This is further apparent from Asian students' lack of preference for the use of words that implies hierarchy (Rana, 2016). Further, Young (2017) stated that American values in leadership such as individualism, assertiveness, and open expression of emotion to contradict with Asian values such as collectivism, humility, conformity, and emotional self-control. This possibly is a reason why Asian students are reluctant to engage in leadership activities within the campus.

However, it is unclear how differences in ethnicity and culture generate a negative impact on one's efficaciousness to lead. What makes the problem worse is the lack of research on Asian students' leadership (Kodama, 2014; Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen 2016). Further, Asia is an enormous continent with 48 countries. Nguyen (2015), Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000), Balon (2005), and Dugan, Komives, & Segar (2008) are the primary research that report Asian students' lower level of leadership efficacy. Therefore, generalizing these findings to the entire Asian continent is problematic. Furthermore, South Asian representation in leadership self-efficacy research studies is minimal, and it is often problematic to consider Asia as a homogenous group (Rana, 2016). Most of the research on Asian students are in dissertations (Kodama, 2014), and it is difficult to generalize findings of a few studies to the entire continent of Asia as it houses 60% world's population.

Although the existing literature suggests ways Asian students have had their leadership self-efficacy negatively affected, the problem persists whether the above-mentioned ethnicity related and culturally related problems would translate to South Asian students with the same veracity. As Bandura (1977) opines, self-efficacy is a person's belief in handling stressful and challenging demands to achieve tasks successfully. A person's general level of efficacy is predictive of self-efficacy in domain-specific situations (Bandura, 1994). India and Sri Lanka being South Asian countries have scored on par with the United States on nation's mean level of general efficacy, and Sri Lanka has scored slightly higher than the United States (Scholz, Dona, Sud, Schwarzer, 2002; Selvaratnam et al., 2018). In the study by Scholz et al. (2002), Japan has reported the lowest mean score for self-efficacy. This is one of the reasons to indicate the problem in considering entire Asia as a homogenous group. Another discrepancy in considering Asians to be one homogenous group is evident in the annual report of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). While indicating "competent usage" of English for students from South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, it indicates lesser competence or "modest usage" of English for Asian countries such as United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Iraq, and China (IELTS, 2017). Thus, it is questionable to assume the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural findings on Asian students' leadership efficacy of existing literature to capture the South Asian international student. Further, consideration of Asia as a homogenous group and the utilization of "one-size fits all" approach does not account for the myriad of differences across nations. Moreover, there is no single leadership research published purely for South Asian students; and for this reason, it is of great importance to explore leadership efficacy of South Asian international students.

### **Literature Review**

Leadership efficacy on domestic students of Asian descent and international students of Asian origin is limited. Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000), Balon (2005), Dugan, Komives, & Segar (2008), Lee (2011), and Kodama (2014) conducted some of the primary research

pertaining to Asian American student leadership. Similarly, Nguyen (2015; 2016) provides crucial insight into the Asian student leadership efficacy utilizing Asian international students. Majority of these works signal a decreased campus leadership activity engagement among Asian international students. At present, leadership research on South Asian international students is negligible. Considering the sheer complexity of Asia as a continent, it is of great importance to explore the degree to which previous findings on Asian student leadership would translate accurately to South Asian students.

Cross-cultural leadership and the effects of ethnicity in determining one's capacity to lead on a college campus primarily appeared in recent history. Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000) conducted one of the seminal studies on cross-cultural leadership and reported a reluctance among Asian American students in identifying themselves as leaders. Findings further indicated a lack of preference among Asian American students to use the word "leader" in the pragmatic use of language (Armino, Carter, & Jones, 2000). Balon (2005) further reported findings analogous to Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000). Balon (2005) further claims a general reluctance among the American public to view Asians as prototypical leaders. This is further evident from the insignificant number of deans and presidents of Asian origin or descent in college campuses. As Balon (2005) asserts, Asians typically do not envision themselves as leaders. Due to the scarcity of leadership research on Asians, a comprehensive explanation to understand the reluctance among Asians, in general, to assume leadership positions in academic settings is unclear. However, Balon (2005) reasons that Asians feeling culturally marginalized from leadership roles is a plausible explanation to shed light on the phenomenon: Asians lack leadership efficacy. Suzuki (2002) reports a similar conjuncture on leadership efficacy of Asian students. As Suzuki (2002) opines, Asian Americans are not adequately encouraged, or assisted in improving conversational skills to improve leadership efficacy; because Asian Americans are commonly considered as problem-free high achievers. As reported earlier, conversational skills play an integral role in inculcating interpersonal relationships among students, and it possesses the potential to improve leadership efficacy of students (Young, 2017; Henderson, Gilbert & Zimbardo, 2014).

Dugan, Komives, & Segar (2008) also reported findings on leadership efficacy of Asian Americans similar to Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000), and Balon (2005). However, Wang, Hempton, Dugan, & Komives (2007) provide a dissimilar explanation for Asian Americans. A majority of quantitative studies conducted on Asian Americans have employed Likert scales to collect data. Wang, Hempton, Dugan, & Komives (2007) reported a higher propensity among Asians to select neutral responses in self-administered testing instruments, which results in a reduced average score of leadership efficacy for Asian populations. Moreover, Lee (2011) reports findings that further strengthens the claim of Wang, Hempton, Dugan, & Komives (2007). As Lee (2011) explains, ethnicity is a prominent predictor of leadership efficacy. Lee (2011) further demonstrated positive leadership activity engagement by Asian American students of Filipino, Chinese, and Indian/Pakistani descent in campuses. Kodama (2014) also reported findings similar to Lee (2011) indicating the efficacious engagement of campus leadership activities in college campuses by Asian American students. The research findings of Lee (2011) and Kodama (2014) rooted in the creation of a dichotomous view on Asian student leadership efficacy.

To further understand this dichotomous view of leadership efficacy of Asian students, Nguyen (2015; 2016) investigated domestic American and international students from Asia for leadership efficacy. As Nguyen (2015; 2016) demonstrates, international students, in

general, have a slightly lower level of leadership efficacy compared to domestic American students. Findings further indicated a lower level of leadership efficacy by Asian international students (Nguyen 2015; 2016). The findings further strengthen the initial claim that Asians are less efficacious to assume leadership roles by Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000), Balon (2005), and Dugan, Komives, & Segar (2008).

The reason for this dichotomous view on the leadership efficacy of Asian students is unclear. At present, a substantial number of technological organizations (i.e. – Google, Microsoft, Adobe Systems) are led by South Asians who were once international students of American universities. A preponderance of evidence indicates past leadership experiences as a key predictor of future leadership (Bandura, 1997; Lee, 2011). Considering the success of South Asian individuals in the United States, it is unclear how research missed South Asian student engagement within campuses in mainstream research. As a result of this, it is of great importance to explore how the South Asian international students perceive the construct of leadership self-efficacy in the American campuses. As Bhattacharjee (2018) and Pew Research Center (2017) demonstrates, South Asians are generally successful academically and financially compared to the general American population. This further accentuates the importance of exploring the leadership efficacy of the South Asian international student population. Moreover, the contradictory evidence on Asian leadership self-efficacy indicates a misalignment with the western conceptualization of “leadership” which needs further exploration.

### **Leadership Self-Efficacy**

Leadership self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in one’s own ability to lead or successfully complete a task specific to leadership (Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen, 2016; Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008). However, a substantial number of research describe leadership self-efficacy as one’s confidence in leading (Denzine, 1999; Chemers, 2000). As McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment (2002) posit, confidence is a personality trait that provides to a person’s general sense of competence whereas efficacy is a belief spring out of one’s cognition based on one’s ability to perceive a task as achievable. Despite the difference between the two constructs, the contemporary research report that highly confident people generally are efficacious in leading (McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment, 2002).

Leadership self-efficacy is an integral facet of higher education (Lee, 2011; Dugan, Komives, 2007). As Bandura (1997; 2000) opines, efficacy is one of the main pillars of human agency that guides human behavior. As a result of that, higher efficacy in leadership possesses an inherent capacity to improve the academic achievement of students in universities (Rana, 2016). Further, students with higher levels of leadership efficacy own the ability to adapt and persist in the face of challenging situations (Nguyen, 2016; Selvaratnam et al. 2018). Moreover, Wang (2016) reports that leadership self-efficacy to promote coping, and emotional intelligence. Due to the profound characteristics, leadership self-efficacy contains the ability to distinguish leaders from non-leaders (McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment, 2002). Furthermore, leadership self-efficacy influences the frequency a student seeks to assume leadership roles (McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment, 2002).

Research further indicates the influence a person’s ethnicity poses on leadership efficacy. As Armino, Carter, & Jones (2000) & Lee (2011) demonstrate, ethnicity is a key determiner of one’s ability to lead. Since efficacy beliefs are within human cognition, it is

shaped through one's perception of self (Bandura, 1997), and culture plays a key role in shaping the individual perception of self (Kastanakis, Voyer, 2013). Ethnicity has a strong impact on determining one's capacity to lead (Armino, Carter, & Jones, 2000; Lee, 2011), as it is influenced through an individual's perception of self (Bandura, 1997).

As Nguyen (2015; 2016) reports, provision of more networking opportunities (i.e. co-curricular activities) for international students to improve their conversing skills while providing means to get adjusted to values and customs of the new academic environment is one of the effective ways of improving confidence and efficacy in assuming leadership roles. This contains the capacity to boost the confidence of students resulting in maintenance of adequate self-efficacy to lead within the campus. Further, considerable experience in campus engagement has the potential to enhance leadership efficacy of students (McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment, 2002). In addition to these methods, Bandura (1997) identifies guided mastery as one of the alternative ways of improving leadership efficacy of students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore collegiate experiences and leadership self-efficacy of South Asian international students.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study explored leadership efficacy of South Asian international students and university leadership engagement. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the qualitative approach utilized to conduct this inquiry. IPA is a qualitative research design that enables the researcher to explore "lived experiences" of a group of participants, and how participants make sense of those lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009; Alase, 2017). IPA was utilized to explore the understanding of leadership efficacy and experiences associated with leadership efficacy among South Asian students. The researcher specifically considered IPA for its respect and sensitivity towards the lived experiences of individuals (Brocki, Wearden, 2006; Alase, 2017). Moreover, Creswell (2012) posits that phenomenology is capable of producing a common meaning shared by a group of individuals, which is of great importance in understanding how South Asians view leadership and efficaciousness to assume campus leadership positions.

Having understood the problem, this paper addresses three questions based on a qualitative phenomenological study conducted with nine South Asian undergraduate students. Participated students represented Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

1. What activities do South Asian students experience on campuses?
2. How do South Asian students describe self-beliefs about the ability to participate in the college learning community?
3. What recommendations do South Asian students have for universities to facilitate leadership development?

## Results

**Table 1**

*Research Questions and Emergent Themes*

Research Question	Emergent Themes
RQ1. What activities do South Asian students experience on campuses?	Self-development drives activity choices Activity choices align with cultural interests
RQ2. How do South Asian students describe self-beliefs about the ability to participate in the college learning community?	Acculturation and inclusion remain challenges to acceptance Difficulty decoding American academic culture Time management influences student involvement
RQ3. What recommendations do South Asian students have for universities to facilitate leadership development?	South Asian students do not prefer “international” identification.

### Self-development drives activity choices

The present study revealed a prevailing inclination amongst the South Asian international students to participate in activities that drive self-development. Students identified campus 'involvement' as a unique aspect that helps them to develop people skills. Few other gains noted included opportunities to learn American academic culture and being able to involve in a learning community. Asian students usually are academically driven (Santiago, 2005). As findings of the current study indicated, involving in campus activities help students to improve one's overall campus and academic experience. Such improvements possess the ability to enhance efficaciousness in leading (Nguyen, 2015). In summary, students get involved in activities if it improves them.

### Activity choices align with cultural interests

Findings from interviews demonstrated a propensity among the South Asian students to engage in activities that correspond with cultural interests. A portion of students indicated active participation in sports such as soccer and cricket. For example, cricket is a game with a strong cultural connection to South Asia as it houses four of the world's top ten cricket teams: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Although South Asian students are highly engaged in sports activities such as cricket, it is often not recognized due to lack of recognition for cricket in the United States. Lack of recognition for South Asian cultural interests in the United States could be a reason why most past research indicates South Asian students as a group that does not involve in campus activities (Liang, Lee, Ting, 2002;

Dugan, Komives, Segar, 2008; Lee, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; AAPA, 2018). South Asian students also demonstrate leadership in organizations that relate to them culturally. For instance, several students indicated leadership and active participation in ethnicity-based groups and international student clubs. Drawing similarities, past literature on Asian leadership also indicate a preference among international students from Asia to demonstrate leadership in similar ethnic spheres (Lee, 2011).

### **Acculturation and inclusion remain challenges to acceptance**

The qualitative analysis revealed South Asian students to feel unwelcomed in the college campuses. Yam (2017) notes the same in a document named "safety is a top concern for Indian students admitted to US schools for fall." As participants of the current study stated, students feel not welcomed despite the fluency in English. A factsheet by AAPA (2018) also reported findings identical to what participants of the present study described on feeling unwelcomed.

As participants described, domestic students at times could not comprehend meaning conveyed by an international student in a conversation. Lack of comprehension may occur due to thick English accents of the South Asian students. Having thick English accents may make international students more conscious of language use. As Young (2017) opines, being excessively conscious of language use could reduce one's self-esteem. Damaged self-esteem could in return reduce one's efficacy beliefs (Hajloo, 2014). As informants elaborated, the existing language issue encourages them to participate in groups that relate to them culturally or ethnically. Students often find it comforting when expressed opinions are understood, and acknowledged. As previous research suggests, active involvement in similar ethnic spheres could occur due to perceived collective racial esteem (Lee, 2011). Racial esteem is also a significant predictor of active participation and leadership self-efficacy (Lee, 2011).

South Asian students' problems related to acculturation and inclusion could occur due to a lack of skills in tolerating cultural discomfort (Young, 2017). As the researcher of the current study interprets, most of the informants indicated a specific incident as the sole reason to believe South Asians as an unwelcomed group on campus. Inability to tolerate cultural discomfort and feeling unwelcomed on campus could be a result of the general homogenous societal structures in South Asia (Nguyen, 2015). As the present study reports, acculturation and inclusion still remain a problem for South Asian international students, and this aligns with findings of the previous study by Kodama (2014). In summary, the theme displays active participation among South Asian students in campus activities while considering acculturation and inclusion as roadblocks in the journey to becoming a successful leader on campus.

### **Difficulty decoding American academic culture**

International students from South Asia find it difficult to get adjusted to American academic culture. In the current exploration, undergraduates often indicated a lack of a mentor to guide them in the United States. Students also reported freshmen from South Asia to encounter difficulties in the first semester of academic exposure to the United States. Some students still feel alienated and feel it would help students if there were a mentor to guide them. As students asserted a mentor is required primarily in the first academic year in the



United States. Students believe a mentor could help in decoding American values and academic culture. Informants requesting a mentor demonstrate the collectivist nature of South Asian students. Collectivism, in its essence, teaches the importance of interdependence (Meghani & Harvey, 2016; Young, 2017). Suzuki (2002) also stated South Asian students as a group that seldom receives verbal encouragement and support. Lack of support could intensify acculturation related problems. Despite the need for assistance, South Asian students are reluctant to seek support from campus administrators. Refraining from raising one's concerns further demonstrates the non-assertive nature of South Asian students (Meghani & Harvey, 2016).

Difficulty decoding American academic culture addresses two aspects of South Asian collegiate experience. First, it discusses an important aspect of self-beliefs in students' ability to participate in the university learning community. Most students described difficulties in participation due to lack of proper guidance. As informants elaborated, the novelty of being in America and new academic experiences could overwhelm students. Secondly, this could be considered a recommendation South Asian students are making to university administrators to consider. Positive recommendations could enhance the active involvement of South Asian students in campus activities. Active participation is crucial to expedite leadership, the researcher reflects.

### **Time management influences student involvement**

Difficulty managing time is a reason informants refrain from actively participating in college activities. The present study indicated South Asian students allocate a substantial amount of time for classes and work. As a result, active participation in extra-curricular activities is often a problem. Participants further noted conflicts in schedules as another reason for not actively engaging in campus activities. Moreover, South Asian students tend to take more credits every semester to graduate in less time. While taking additional credits appears a smart financial decision, it still intensifies the time management problem. As results indicated, students are willing to participate. However, time constraints often make it a difficult endeavor for students to actively participate and pursue leadership opportunities.

### **South Asian students do not prefer “international” identification**

The qualitative analysis further revealed a lack of preference amongst South Asians to identify them as “international” students. As participants reasoned categorizing students as “international” distances South Asian students from domestic counterparts. Further, such identification creates segregation or a divide between the domestic and international students, one participant expressed. Moreover, such a divide greatly reduces the chances of South Asian students getting involved in campus activities, another informant reasoned. As the participants opined, the university should consider all the students as one large learning community. Such consideration would facilitate active participation in university activities, and leadership efficacy.

Previous literature on Asian student leadership does not indicate a lack of preference amongst students to consider one's self as an “international” student. This particular finding is unique, and also is a recommendation do South Asian students are proposing to facilitate leadership development.

### Recommendations

Four recommendations emerge from the phenomenological study. It is recommended that:

- International services in universities increase the provision of opportunities for South Asian students to network with domestic students to understand conversational pragmatics, which is conducive to make positive social relationships. Social relationships are essential for active participation and leadership.
- International services in universities implement or increase the provision of information sessions on American values, customs and academic culture in student orientations. This could improve the acculturation process for South Asian students.
- University administration and international services provide student volunteers who are willing to mentor South Asian students to help decode American academic culture.
- University administration limits the use of “international” label to identify South Asian students. This is recommended to enhance the inclusiveness of South Asian students in the campus learning community.

### Conclusions

South Asian students demonstrate efficacious participation and leadership in campus activities. Research by Lee (2011) and Kodama (2014) revealed the same. However, in domain-specific situations such as leadership outside one’s own cultural or ethnic group, South Asian students seem to struggle. Asian students generally prefer to associate with students of the same ethnicity (Armino, Carter, Jones, 2000; Nguyen, 2016; Young, 2017). Moreover, limited engagement in ethnically and culturally heterogeneous organizations may result due to issues identified in acculturation, inclusion, and decoding American academic culture. These problems heighten as Asian students exhibit limited ability to tolerating cultural discomfort (Young, 2017).

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