

Student Interview

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Gina Chang is 21 years of age and a full-time senior at Penn State majoring in Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Management. Gina is actively involved in many organizations and committees on campus; all of her involvement has stemmed from being in a Greek lettered organization. Gina is a dedicated member of her Asian-interest sorority alpha Kappa Delta Phi (KDPhi) where she has served in multiple capacities, the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) where she has served as both the Executive Vice President and President, and Greek Week where she is currently the Overall Chair for the entire Greek Community.

I first met Gina during her tenure as President of the MGC where I served as the council's advisor. Throughout the interview I found that our pre-established relationship was both a challenge as well as an asset. Because we had an established rapport it allowed for a comfort in our conversation I believe would not have occurred had we met only for the purposes of this assignment. I also believe because of our relationship and the mutual identity of being not only Greek, but a Cultural Greek, allowed for a greater understanding of her experiences; our conversation was able to flow without interruption or explanation of her experiences. On the other hand, I encountered a few personal challenges throughout this experience that I will discuss at a later point.

Gina had an interesting transition to college. She was born in Ohio and moved to Pennsylvania before relocating to Shanghai where she lived a majority of her life. In Shanghai she attended an American school where she was expected to speak only English this, she believed, affected her ability to learn and speak mandarin, the dialect of her region. Although she can speak conversationally, she has a difficult time identifying as Chinese when she returns to Shanghai because she was never made to learn mandarin extensively and is not proficient. In high school students are given the opportunity to study in America; both she and her younger

sister declined the offer but her younger brother did not and left Shanghai for New York. After completing high school, Gina was again presented with the opportunity to study in America; this time she accepted the opportunity. Gina knew she wanted to attend an institution on the East Coast to be close to her brother and family, and she felt connected to Pennsylvania having lived here as a young child.

Gina currently only visits Shanghai about once or twice a year and although she does miss her family back home, she feels the transition hasn't been that difficult because she is very independent. Her parents have been divorced for a large portion of her life and her brother and sister have been split up for a while as well, her sister living with her mom and her brother living with her dad; Gina lived half her life with her mom and the other half with her dad. Coming to America the environment was difficult only because she came from a small school where she knew everyone, to a large campus where she only knew two other people who did the exchange program as well. Gina was able to adapt pretty quickly to Penn State's campus and culture through participation in student organizations. The sorority provided her with the opportunity to increase her social and professional network at Penn state which made her transition much easier. For Gina, the major challenge at Penn State had very little to do with her moving from another country, it was learning how to manage the freedom of a collegiate life. The rigors of the American curriculum were about the same as in Shanghai but her issue was that "I didn't have to go to class so I became pretty lazy about it and skipped a lot in the beginning."

I found that Gina struggled when addressing the ways in which she identified, particularly when discussing her racial/ethnic identity; this proved to be a recurrent theme throughout the interview. When asked to list her most salient characteristics she responded after what seemed to be much internal deliberation with "Asian, dependable, and confused." In further

conversation Gina stated that she struggles in identifying herself as either Asian or American “I don’t really know where I’m from. If I’m in the US and people ask me where I’m from I say Shanghai but when I’m in Shanghai I say I’m from US and if I was in a country outside of both, I would probably say I was American. I don’t really fit into anything or anywhere.” If this question was presented to those around her, she believed the responses would vary depend on who was being asked. If the person was an international student she felt that they would understand her struggle and have a similar perspective.

When questioning whether she felt her racial/ethnic identity development and/or thought process regarding race had changed since beginning college, she believed it had. Gina felt that coming from a place where being Asian was the norm, to where being Asian was a minority was difficult at first. As a result of new stresses in her environment, Gina sought out and is now involved with a variety of Asian American organizations and multicultural groups. Gina believed that not much had changed in terms of her racial/ethnic identification because she “never really thought about it before coming to college;” if anything she would just say that she is more aware now. At home everyone was Asian, but since she’s a minority here she notices her environment and herself more. Her involvement with student organizations has allowed her to broaden her social network to include individuals who are not of Asian- American descent or culture and as a result she is now more comfortable working with different types of people with which she previously did not have the opportunity. I believe Phinney’s model of Ethnic Identity Development explains and outlines a few of the struggles and breakthroughs Gina is currently facing, and in the second interview I will focus the conversation more on this area to further explore her development.

Gina identifies as a Female. In terms of her collegiate experience she believes being a female identified woman has made her more determined to apply for leadership positions and excel in the roles she has on boards and committees. Josselson's theory of identity development focuses on different stages and I feel that Gina is in between identities in terms of this particular model. Some comments, beliefs, and perceptions point towards identity achievement while other aspects can easily place her in a different category. She feels that women are not generally seen in these types of leadership roles and attempts to break norms by being a strong woman leader. She identifies as heterosexual and feels that people who also identify as heterosexual are faced with less controversy than those who do not. She admits that she is not very well aware about issues facing the LGBT community but that she does know being homosexual is still difficult in our society. She felt that when something isn't a majority it can be a struggle to be accepted simply because it's not considered to be the right way. This is an area I'm personally interested in exploring further. I feel that Chickering's vector theories most closely align with Gina's stages of identification and I hope to spark dialogue around this topic in particular as she seems to have had little exposure, challenge, or even conversation about orientations differing from her own.

And finally, Gina does not claim a religious affiliation and identifies as atheist. In Shanghai she said the dominant religion is Buddhism but that her family does not practice that or any other religion. Gina acknowledges that not believing in anything may be close-minded but she said she simply can't believe in what she can't see. Gina has never taken the initiative to seek out a religion for herself and although she would like to believe that there is life after death, she feels she can't because there's no proof of something existing.

In reflecting on my internal thought processes during the interview I realized that the difficulty I was having was due to observing a side of a student I hadn't seen before. There were

quite a few times where I was surprised by her responses and her limited exposure as a student leader and as a person. Having this newfound knowledge however I hope to channel this into a learning experience for both of us. At the same time, I gained insight into her identity struggles and found it to be interestingly aligned with many theories and in-class conversations. I believe for Gina this interview was a first exposure to questions that had never been articulated and that she had the opportunity to reflect on areas she hadn't previously given much thought. For our second interview I would like to change the location to somewhere more neutral. The first interview was conducted in my office and I feel that it potentially stifled the flow, depth, and breadth of our conversation. The only other item that I plan to change is the question structure. I have a few areas I would like to further explore with Gina such as her understanding, perceptions, and thoughts in regard to sexual orientation and ethnic identity. I hope to have a limited number of structured initial questions that focus on those few areas mentioned, but that the interview itself should be much less formal than I felt the first one was. Learning about one of my students in a way I hadn't yet was very interesting, and I feel this semester more so than last, I am able to take what I am learning in the classroom and apply it to my assistantship.