

Rianna Herrera

Lang Prize

Reflective Essay

From August 2025 to March 2026, I designed and conducted a senior honors thesis project in Sociology under the guidance of Professor Kimberlee Shauman, my faculty advisor, and Professor Erin Hamilton, who led the honors thesis courses. I was primarily inspired by a pilot study I conducted as a freshman in my Introduction to Social Research Methods course, where I examined what societal influences inform Asian Americans' decision to attend college. For the present study, I narrowed down my initial study into a specific research focus, seeking to investigate the unique college experiences of Filipina and gender-non-conforming (GNC) Filipinx Americans. Though Filipinx Americans represent the third-largest group of Asian origin in the U.S., they are understudied and underrepresented in both sociological and intersectional feminist literature on educational aspirations in comparison with other racial and Asian ethnic groups. Aspirations are a vital source of motivation for students to perform well in academics, and understanding how Filipinx Americans in particular formulate their aspirations has significant implications for their educational trajectories. I utilized UC Davis Library resources in order to create a foundational guide and framework throughout the research process, uncovering and subsequently bridging existing gaps in the literature while also strengthening my evolving skills and determination as a researcher.

Given the significance of family background in shaping children's aspirations and educational trajectories, I focused on two primary research questions: (a) *How do gendered family expectations inform college-going Filipina and GNC Filipinx Americans' aspirations for higher education and mobility?* and (b) *How do they navigate and negotiate these expectations with their individual ambitions?* An additional research question I considered was: (c) *What meanings to Filipinx Americans apply to college in relation to their gender and ethnic identities?*

Because of the vast amount of sociological research conducted on the intersection of the family and higher education, my faculty advisor first recommended that I should read foundational studies such as Blau and Duncan (1967) and Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969) for a general understanding of what factors may inform youth's educational aspirations. I also drew upon Gomez Parra and Garcia's (2023) study, which examined the mobility aspirations of college-going Latinas, to understand what type of language was being used to discuss the college

experiences of various ethnic groups. After reading these studies, I started with a broad list of search terms such as “aspirations,” “educational attainment,” “mobility” and “desire” as I was unsure what I would find. As I began to collect further literature, I first utilized the UC Davis Library online database, applying these terms alongside other search terms such as “Filipinx American,” “higher education,” “gender,” and “family.” However, I quickly realized that while the literature on Filipinx Americans was already scarce, research focusing specifically on the intersection of these specific topics was especially difficult to come by. I could not be too broad nor too specific with my search terms lest the results continue to turn up sparse. This was the first hurdle in my research project as I knew I could not design a successful study without first understanding how similar qualitative studies have been carried out by prior researchers, and what findings already exist.

During this initial struggle with collecting existing literature, a visit from William Cuthbertson to the SOC 194H classroom gave me vital insight into the types of resources offered at the UC Davis Library, as well as how to navigate the online database’s search engine. Prior to his visit, I never understood how to group search terms together—my experience with navigating research databases was minimal at best, and I was very intimidated by vast databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR. However, after watching his hands-on demonstration using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and the asterisk (*) tool, I was able to efficiently navigate the ever-daunting advanced search bar and use the library’s online database as a launch pad to exploring other resource platforms. To resolve my initial issue of finding relevant research for my study, I decided to approach my literature collection in three different phases, focusing on the following key search terms during each phase:

	First Phase	Second Phase	Third Phase
Specific Topic of Inquiry	Experiences of Asian American and/or 2nd generation youth regarding their family background, higher education, with additional gender-specific findings if possible	Experiences of Filipinx Americans regarding their family background and extended networks, culture-informed interactions (through <i>utang na loob</i>), and gender roles (with a specific focus on constructions of femininity)	Experiences of Filipinx Americans regarding their family background, higher education, and any aspirations/desires for educational

Key Search Terms	“Asian American,” “immigration,” “family (background),” “educational attainment,” “occupational attainment,” “aspirations,” “gender roles,” “college,” and/or “higher education”	“Filipinx American,” “immigration,” “family (background),” “utang na loob,” and/or “Filipinx gender (roles),” “Filipinx femininity,” “familial obligations,” “gender obligations,” “mobility”	“Filipinx American,” “immigration,” “family (background),” “aspirations,” “mobility,” “college,” “higher education,” “educational attainment,” “occupational attainment”
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During the first literature search phase, I implemented the given search terms into the UC Davis Library online database, as well as sources such as JSTOR and ProQuest. Once I had exhausted these initial platforms, I utilized Google Scholar for both forward and backward citation tracking. The former was implemented if I selected an older study which was highly cited in order to uncover recent research on the specific topic. The latter was implemented if I selected a more recent study which drew upon prior research I believed could be relevant for my present study. I assess the validity and importance of the articles by examining the extent to which the articles were cited by later scholarship, as well as carefully reading the abstract. Once I determined from the abstract whether the article was relevant or not for my research, I read the introduction, the conclusion (including any discussion or limitations), and would then decide if and how I could implement the study’s findings to inform my research design and data analysis.

From this first phase, I found vital articles such as Feliciano and Rumbaut (2005), Hanson and Gilbert (2012), and Portes and Zhou (1993), whose findings on Asian Americans and 2nd generation youth in higher education laid out the groundwork for my research into a specific Asian ethnic group. I repeated this cycle during the second literature search phase with new key terms, discovering pivotal research such as Almirol (1982) and Espiritu (2001), whose findings deepened my understanding of how cultural and structural factors inform Filipinx Americans’ interactions with their families. It was also during this second phase that I came upon Maramba’s (2008) study, which examined the experiences of Filipina Americans as they navigated their college life and family/home environment. Here, I utilized Google Scholar to examine the studies which cited the Maramba study to uncover further literature on Filipinx Americans’ experiences in higher education during the third phase. Because the second and third phases were more specific in regards to its focus on Filipinx Americans, and because of the aforementioned scarcity of sociological research on the ethnic group, I additionally navigated

APA Psych Info as I found that much of the existing research on Filipinx Americans and their families were not only concentrated in ethnic studies but (social) psychology research as well.

By breaking up my collection into three phases, I was able to cover much ground from the existing literature, finding sufficient data on how the different topics overlapped with one another in regards to both Filipinx Americans specifically and Asian Americans more broadly. While the process of developing and expanding upon my literature review continued up to the end of Winter Quarter 2026, I was able to successfully collect and synthesize findings from over 80 interdisciplinary studies in order to inform my research design and literature review. While less than 60 of these articles ended up being used in the final thesis, the experience of examining various studies across different research platforms allowed me to strengthen my critical analysis, while also developing my skills navigating various databases for the most relevant research.

Following the literature review, the next step in the research process was developing my theoretical framework and interview guide for the study. After reading and synthesizing the findings from the studies I collected, especially those utilizing qualitative methods, I found that much of the existing literature drew from both intersectional feminist literature and critical race theory. After examining some of the foundational works in these theories through Google Scholar, including Crenshaw (1989) and Solórzano and Yosso (2002), I was able to create a semi-structured, in-depth interview on the following topics: family dynamic & gender roles, educational expectations & aspirations, spatial mobility, navigating/negotiating expectations, and college experience. While I sought to examine how specific factors such as family and gender inform the participants' experiences, I wanted to ensure that participants also had the space to create and express their own narratives as they sought fit, which both theories postulate as vital to deconstructing dominant narratives which obscure the experiences of marginalized groups.

Once I had my interview guide and initial literature review prepared, I interviewed 21 college-going Filipina and GNC Filipinx Americans from across various California universities between October and November 2025. Utilizing my aforementioned theoretical frameworks, I focused on the depth of their responses to understand how various factors inform their aspirations, while also inviting participants into discourse they have often been excluded from regarding Asian American college students' experiences. Comparing my findings to the literature review allowed me to uncover new and crucial findings on Filipinx Americans. However, during the data analysis process, I struggled to underscore the significance or relevancy of certain

discoveries, such as the finding that families reportedly gave Filipina and GNC Filipinx Americans flexibility on what major and career they could choose as long as it would guarantee them financial stability. Though there was not much existing data on the topic in relation to Filipinx *Americans* specifically, by returning to the UC Davis Library online database, I found existing research on the experiences of college students in the Philippines. Specifically, Salazar-Clemeña (2011) underscored how families often decide youth's college major and future career for them. By being able to draw comparisons between the experiences of college students in America and college students in the Philippines, I was able to highlight the important effects of immigration, upward mobility, and national and cultural setting on youth's aspirations and educational trajectories in my present study. Without being able to access such international studies from the Philippines through the UC Davis Library resources, I would have never been able to properly examine or determine the significance of this specific finding in the context of immigrant families' impact on educational aspirations.

Throughout my honors thesis project, I was simultaneously challenged by both the dearth of research on Filipinx Americans and the overwhelming amount of research on immigrant families and higher education broadly. I also struggled with organizing my (initially) exhaustive literature collection into a comprehensive and succinct literature review, as well as understanding the deeper implication of some of my findings. However, through utilizing vital library resources such as the UC Davis Library online database, JSTOR, ProQuest, Google Scholar, etc., I was able to overcome these challenges by uncovering model studies that not only formed the groundwork for my current research, but also taught me how to approach research in critical and creative ways. By developing different research strategies such as approaching the literature collection in different phases and specifying search terms to retrieve the most relevant studies, my senior honors thesis was able to grow and evolve in ways I hadn't thought were possible. Being able to access the UC Davis Library resources not only allowed my research project to flourish, but I was also able to grow as a researcher, developing new and vital skills that I will take with me to graduate school in order to become a successful and productive scholar.

No AI tools/technologies were used in the writing of this essay.