I became a researcher with a focus on access and equity in higher education, because I knew how important those issues were to my home community. I was raised in farm-labor camps in central California. Though my parents' opportunities were limited, they valued education and made many sacrifices for me to pursue educational opportunities. Thanks to their support, scholarships, fellowships, and part-time jobs, by 1982 I found myself studying education administration and policy analysis in a doctoral program at Stanford University.

Graduate school expanded my understanding of issues confronting students of color on predominantly white college campuses. I realized that while mentors can be extremely helpful to individuals, the trajectory of a nontraditional student can be equally influenced by institutional structures, policies, and practices.

I also became keenly aware of the varied perspectives held by students who agreed to be interviewed for my research. I wanted to make sure that the individual voices of study participants were heard in my work. I wanted to give voice to those who often are left out of mainstream journals and other academic outlets. So my research thus far has explored the experiences of other people of color in American higher education.

But here I will explore my own experience. It's time for some personal reflection and recollection. I am a Mexican American, Filipino American research scholar and university teacher. What have I learned about issues related to students, staff, and faculty of color that applies to me and to my profession?

A professor who shaped my research approach once told me, "You have to be beige" when conducting interviews. Neutrality is important for overcoming bias in the interpretation of study findings. Yet while I maintain a critical view of my research work, I cannot help but learn about myself from the data I collect and the work to analyze it. Does this mean I am not being beige?

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I learned a lot about myself from the work of a sociologist on socialization in "total institutions," such as prisons and mental hospitals. As I read his description of how prisoners learn to be prisoners, I realized that I, too, was going through a socialization process—designed by my university department. I was learning how to be a graduate student, shaped by such forces as departmental policies and rules, the curriculum, the faculty, administrators, and my peers.

Realizing that I was going through a process, I became both participant and observer. And now I try, as a faculty member, to make students aware that their academic programs are part of a socialization process, not necessarily good or bad, but affecting their lives.

How people feel about socialization (apart from it or as a part of it) largely depends on the world view they start with. When I first arrived at college, I felt truly like an alien from another planet. Everything at college was so different from my pre-college world: the food (there was so much of it, and we could go back for more); people who pretended to be friends, even if they did not like you (sometimes at home I'd had bruises and black eyes from people who didn't like me); even the music (a difference between reality and fantasy). I thought everyone at college would listen to only classical music.

I especially remember hearing one student state that poor people are poor because they are lazy. I looked at her and said, in a matter-of-fact, not hostile way, "My family is poor, but my father works from sunup to sundown; he's not lazy." She stared at me intensely and walked away. That was the end of the conversation.

The social world that I found at the university was nothing like the world I came from. No wonder I felt like an alien. I was alien. And the college world was alien to me.

But aliens can in turn become alienators. An experience while I was gathering data for my dissertation taught me how easy it is to forget where you came from—especially after long immersion in a doctoral-studies environment.

I wanted to learn how Mexican American students experienced the transfer process from a two-year community college to a four-year college. I was explaining a questionnaire for first-year students in a nearby community college. Most of the students came from farm-labor camps in the area. Their backgrounds were similar to mine, and they lived very close to where I grew up.

As I explained the questionnaire, I noticed (out of the corner of my eye) that the classroom instructor was explaining me with chalkboard comments as I was talking. "B.A. = Bachelor of Arts — degree received after four years of college."

At that moment I remembered that when I was a first-year student, I did not talk this language either. I realized how easy it is to forget your earlier world view, and to make wrong assumptions about other people's outlook being like
your own. The recognition struck me, and I hoped the lesson would stay with me forever. I also realized, as I hadn't before, that most students of color need to learn a new language even to begin to participate fully in higher-education institutions — in higher-education culture.

A student I interviewed expressed the problem well: “The first semester, it was hard . . . It's still difficult. I was not familiar with the word ‘major.’ I asked myself, what's a major? What are they talking about?”

Given that initial language shock, it was not surprising that among the community colleges I studied, the one with programs and classes systematically explaining academic-cultural terms had the best transfer rate to four-year colleges.

From this experience I also began to understand how awesome the gap must be between students who do not understand college language and faculty or administrators who never had to work to learn it. Little translation needs to take place if individuals are raised to understand the language of academia. It is part of their world, like the air they breathe. When brought up short by that “B.A. =” on the chalkboard, I at least had the benefit of self-recognition, as would others with backgrounds like mine. Many professors would not be so lucky.

As a diligent student in graduate school, I was being well socialized to higher-education institutions. I was a “success.” But in that achievement I was forgetting what I was like before exposure to these settings and their compelling power to socialize strangers or else eject them. Educators constantly interact with students from varied backgrounds. As an educator, I must not forget mine.

But educators who have no alien background to forget — those who always knew they were going to college — must learn to “remember” what they have not experienced. As our institutions try to serve highly diverse students, worlds that are apart can be brought together only if teachers like me remember not to forget and others seek new experience to develop authentic understandings of difference.

These realities and perceptions have policy implications for higher education. The way academic researchers and administrative managers gather information, ask questions, and interpret data has strong impact on what they learn and what they recommend. The impact was illustrated for me as I observed experiences of undergraduate students of color at the University of Minnesota.

Two different studies were seeking to assess the efficiency of special programs that provided services to minority students. One study gathered data with a questionnaire focused on the content and types of service offered. The other used individual interviews asking people who provided and used the services to describe their experiences with the program.

The questionnaire answers identified substantial duplication of services provided in different places and pointed to a need for centralized reporting and student tracking pertinent to the recruitment, retention, and financial support of minority students. The interview data highlighted serious staff-morale issues in minority programs and provided evidence that special student centers alleviate the sense of cultural isolation felt by many minority students.

For an example from the interviews, listen to these words of a Native American student:
I didn’t need help for academics . . . I needed emotional support, an informal get-together place. A place you feel comfortable, you feel a sense of community. Seeing another Indian face is real important — making that connection. This is something taken for granted by the white majority.

For me, comments like that made the academic studies of some of my colleagues come to life. One colleague had stated that the “academic, social, and psychological worlds inhabited by most nonwhite students . . . are substantially different in almost every respect from those of their white peers.” Another, that “minorities are more aware of racial tension . . . because they . . . must depend on constant interracial social contact in social, learning, and work spheres on predominantly white campuses.”

The questionnaire data on minority student services had a very different focus and flavor. In looking at content instead of context, the questionnaire ignored the cultural aspects of service delivery. It emphasized the categories of help or information offered to students in different locations — financial-aid information, for instance, at the traditional financial-aid office and at the African American student center. Since the content of the information was the same in both places, it looked “duplicative,” and analysis of the data supported consideration of eliminating financial-aid service in the minority student centers.

(One has to ask, if the services were truly duplicate, why was there no discussion of trimming the traditional financial-aid office, instead of only the student centers?)

But is aid information or any other service really duplicated when provided by different people in qualitatively different settings? In interviews, several university students of color described the impersonal nature of the main financial-aid office. The same students stressed the more comfortable approach that they experienced at minority student centers. Among their comments were, “I feel like I’m talking with my mother, when I come in to see my counselor;” and “They know that not all Indian students have BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] money;” and “They don’t treat me like I’m getting a handout;” and “They understand why my parents and I don’t understand the financial-aid forms and explain them to us with a caring not a snotty attitude.”

So what looked like wasteful duplication to one investigation looked like vitally needed variety to another. Needless to say, the recommendations and policy implications of the two studies pointed in quite different directions. It does make a difference how you gather the information and ask the questions.

This episode taught me a powerful lesson about complexity in service-delivery issues. Beyond that, it helped me realize that the way people process everyday information leaves lots of room for misunderstanding and miscommunication. The pitfalls here are a major barrier to be addressed if the many different groups in higher education are to reach some measure of mutual understanding and respect.

Here’s an example of people shifting — probably without knowing it — to

Educators who always knew they were going to college must learn to “remember” what they have not experienced.

make discordant facts before them fit a common mold. Not many years ago interviewers on a California campus asked white students how they felt about the growing influx of students of color. Several students saw the influx as a threat to academic standards. They thought African American, Hispanic, and Native American students were being admitted with lower test scores and lower grade averages than required of whites. Merit as measured by aptitude tests and class performance, they insisted, should be the only basis for college entry.

However, in regard to large numbers of Asian American students on campus, the same interviewees strikingly changed their standard. Here they measured merit not by test scores but by
“well rounded” activities and interests — athletics or music or leadership in student government. They thought students without these credentials should not be admitted.

The thrust of both responses was that white students would feel more secure and the campus would be a better place without so many students from other worlds.

...Continuing to live in worlds apart, when actually the worlds already overlap, may have dire consequences. When I was in high school, two boys my age got in a quarrel. One was Chicano, the other white. They didn’t know each other. They weren’t in the same classes. Their families, friends and peers were separate groups. Worlds apart. But already my life was in both worlds. In all the school, as I remember, I alone knew both these young men.

The quarrel led to a racist slur. The slur led to a knife drawn in anger. The stabbing led to death for one boy and prison for the other. I felt not one but both had died. Two families mourned, two communities separately suffered. Worlds apart.

And because the communities — neither of which condoned the verbal or the physical violence — had no habits or skills for healthy interaction with each other, there was no resolution in the school or the town that would act to prevent further violence later.

Helping racial and ethnic groups maintain the integrity of their own identities while participating with equal power in the larger community requires change. However, most higher-education faculty and staff (myself included) have been educated in and now work within traditional academic programs. We have been socialized to our present professions by institutions with cultures resistant to change.

Yet we desperately need an environment that increases the success and participation of students of color. The need challenges individuals and institutions to be creative and introspective at once, to bring worlds apart together in academe. It is the challenge that all who care about higher education must address.