



---

Leo Macawile, York University

# A Critical Reflection of the Disturbing Underrepresentation of Filipinos in Higher Education

## Abstract

Filipinos are one of the largest visible minority groups in Canada and, each year, the rate of immigration into the country continues to increase. According to the 2010 Statistics Canada report, the Philippines was the number one source of immigrants, surpassing both India and China, which usually rank first due to their large populations (Chagnon, 2013). Despite the growing presence of Filipinos in Canada and their unwavering contributions to the economy, Filipinos remain disturbingly underrepresented in university institutions and higher education. Growing bodies of literature are now recognizing the issues and systemic barriers that disproportionately impact Filipino immigrants and the factors impeding Filipino youths from accessing a university education (Mendoza, 2018). The government of Canada claims that, as the leading multicultural country in the world, the country has successfully established spaces and opportunities for equity, inclusion, and upward mobility for immigrants (Brosseau & Dewing, 2009, Revised 2018). If this is indeed the case, then such a promise must be nourished to ensure that all racialized and marginalized groups are included and benefit from this pathway. Any gaps or issues must, therefore, be examined and addressed. This critical reflective paper will analyze significant events that I have personally experienced and which have heavily affected my decision to pursue post-secondary education. The main focus will be on the lack of role models, inadequate networks and connections, financial instabilities, and lack of parental guidance as possible reasons for the underrepresentation of Filipinos in university institutions.

**Keywords:** First Generation Immigrants, Filipino-Canadians, Barriers to Education, Role Models, Social Network.

## Résumé

Les Philippines sont l'un des groupes minoritaires les plus importants au Canada et, chaque année, le taux d'immigration dans le pays continue de grimper. Selon le rapport de Statistique Canada datant de 2010, les Philippines étaient la source primaire d'immigrants visibles au Canada, surpassant l'Inde et la Chine, qui se retrouvent habituellement en première place du à leurs impressionnantes populations (Chagnon,

2013). Malgré la présence grandissante des Philippins au Canada et leurs contributions continues à l'économie canadienne, les Philippins demeurent gravement sous-représentés dans les institutions universitaires et en éducation postsecondaire dans le pays. De plus en plus de textes littéraires reconnaissent maintenant les enjeux et barrières systémiques qui affectent de façon disproportionnée les immigrants philippins et les facteurs qui empêchent ces jeunes de poursuivre des études universitaires (Mendoza, 2018). Le gouvernement canadien maintient qu'en tant que pays multiculturel dominant dans le monde, le Canada a réussi à faire de la place et à créer des opportunités qui mènent à l'équité, l'inclusion, et la mobilité des populations immigrantes (Brosseau et Dewing, 2009, Revised 2018). Si c'est le cas, cette promesse doit être cultivée afin d'assurer que tous les groupes racialisés et marginalisés sont inclus et en bénéficient. Toute disparité ou problème doit donc être examiné et adressé. Ce texte critique réfléchi analysera les événements importants que j'ai personnellement vécus et qui ont grandement influencé ma décision de poursuivre des études postsecondaires. L'emphase sera sur les modèles, les connexions et réseaux inadéquats, l'instabilité financière, et le manque de support parental comme raisons possibles du manque de philippins dans les institutions universitaires canadiennes.

**Mots clés :** première génération d'immigrants, philippins-canadiens, barrières à l'éducation, modèles, réseau social

## Introduction

Filipinos are one of the largest visible minority groups in Canada, and each year, the rate of immigration into the country continues to increase. According to the 2010 Statistics Canada report, the Philippines was the number one source of immigrants, surpassing both India and China, which usually rank first due to their large populations (Chagnon, 2013). Despite the growing presence of Filipinos in Canada and their unwavering contributions to the economy, Filipinos remain disturbingly underrepresented in university institutions and higher education. Growing bodies of literature are now recognizing the issues and systemic barriers that disproportionately impact Filipino immigrants and the factors impeding Filipino youths from accessing a university education (Mendoza, 2018). The government of Canada claims that, as the leading multicultural country in the world the country has successfully established spaces and opportunities for equity, inclusion, and upward mobility for immigrants (Brosseau & Dewing, 2009, Revised 2018). If this is indeed the case, then such a promise must be nourished to ensure that all racialized and marginalized groups are included and benefit from this pathway. Any gaps or issues must, therefore, be examined and addressed. This critical reflective paper will analyze significant events that I have personally experienced and which have heavily affected my decision to pursue post-secondary education. The main focus will be on the lack of role models, inadequate networks and connections, financial instabilities, and lack of parental guidance as

possible reasons for the underrepresentation of Filipinos in university institutions.

I was born in a small town in the Philippines called Candelaria Quezon. My family and I migrated to Canada in May of 2016. My mother had been here prior to this time and had been working full-time as a caregiver to support us in the Philippines. When I was in high school, and even now in university, I vividly remember how I did not often see my mother in our apartment because she was juggling three jobs to make ends meet. For this reason, she was not always available to guide me and help me with my studies. My father, on the other hand, had only finished high school and could not provide me with much assistance as I transitioned into university. Regardless of my parent's inability to offer me guidance and support in my academic journey, they instilled the importance of education in me and my siblings. As an immigrant, education has always been seen as the primary—and sometimes only—pathway to ensure a stable and comfortable life. Both my parents work low-paying and yet highly demanding jobs. My mother has a university degree in management from the Philippines but since her education and experiences from the Philippines are not recognized in Canada, she works as a Personal Support Worker (PSW), while my father works in a factory. PSWs are unregulated healthcare workers who are an important part of the healthcare system. The role of a PSW revolves around supporting nurses and other healthcare professionals with patient care as well as daily living activities (Saari et al.,

2018). Even with their salaries combined, if my parents supported my university education it would have caused the family financial hardship.

In September 2016, I went back to school to continue my high school education. Although I know how to read and write in English, I was not confident speaking it. Half of the time, I had no idea what my teachers were saying and struggled to follow instructions. Without guidance from my parents, keeping track and being on top of my schoolwork was challenging. Philip Kelly, a Geography professor at York University, studies the experiences of Filipino immigrants in Canada (2014). He discusses how, due to long working hours, most Filipino parents do not have the time to supervise their children and help with schoolwork (2014). Drawing from my own personal experiences, I remember only seeing my mother come home to quickly eat, shower, and sleep for two to three hours before leaving for her other job. When she is at home now, I do not usually talk to her because I know she is tired from working too much, and so she is usually hot-headed and easily irritable. I believe that my mom expected me to figure out everything for myself because her main goal was just to bring me to Canada. Personally, I think it was overwhelming for any 16-year-old immigrant to have the pressure and expectations of making something of themselves without consistent emotional support and parental guidance.

Fortunately, I went to a Catholic school with predominantly Filipino students, which made my transition a little bit easier. I remember being so happy meeting and getting to know so many Filipino students here in Canada. I consider them my “ates” and “kuyas”, which translates to older sisters and older brothers. During those times, I at least felt like I somewhat belonged by having that sense of a strong Filipino community. Unfortunately, most Filipino students in my high school, including my initial friends, were highly concentrated in classes within the college preparation stream. In addition, most Filipino students I know work part-time jobs in fast-food restaurants, grocery stores, and factories, all of which are also low-paying jobs. Surrounding myself almost entirely with my Filipino friends posed another challenge for me to imagine myself pursuing a university education. The feeling of not having someone to look up to, talk to, or seek guidance from regarding university education made me think

twice about whether going to university was the right choice for me. Many of my Canadian-born classmates see university education as a rite of passage, an obvious route to take after high school. For me, that was not the case; if I were to pursue a university education, I would be the first in my family to go to a Canadian university. Therefore, not having a role model to support and guide me put me at a tremendous disadvantage.

The importance of having role models has been long discussed in academic literature (Chávez et al., 2019; Lockwood, 2006). Research in psychology agrees that there is a positive outcome of having a role model in one's life (Lawner et al., 2019). Morgenroth et al. believe this is especially true in historically racialized and marginalized groups because it allows the individual of these groups to redefine what is possible for them (2015). In post-secondary institutions, however, there is a lack of diverse staff, according to the Canadian Association of University Teachers (2018). This lack is continuing despite the public acknowledgement and claimed commitments of university institutions to have a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable representation of staff and students (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2018). In one of Kelly's research projects, he mentions the alarmingly low representation of Filipino students in post-secondary institutions compared to their parents and compared to other racialized groups at university (2014).

According to Kelly, one of the biggest contributing factors is the inadequate Filipino role models in the academic and professional spaces (2014). His studies show that “very few well-known figures in the Filipino community have found success in politics, major business circles, or cultural life” (2014). These findings indicate that the lack of role models in the Filipino community poses a great challenge for Filipino youths to imagine the possibility of working in professional spaces. This is something that I have experienced and continue to experience in my academic journey. For instance, when I was in high school, I only saw two Filipino teachers. Within my three years of university education, I have only seen two Filipino professors, despite thousands of faculty members and staff working at the university and despite having thousands of Filipino nurses in Canada. The lack of representation greatly

impacted my ability to imagine myself in academic spaces. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many Filipino students. It is extremely difficult to see oneself pursuing a university education if there is virtually no one who understands the unique experiences of being a Filipino immigrant to look up to and seek guidance or receive support from.

Growing up in the Philippines, my family had no connections or networks. When we moved to Canada, the inadequate social capital was only exacerbated. As my mother worked every day, she did not have time to go out and meet other people. Most of her friends and connections were also PSWs. I think that the lack of role models, the inadequacy of networks and connections, financial constraints and the lack of parental time and guidance amounted to my feeling that university was unattainable and unrealistic.

Despite the growing rate of immigration in Canada, the gap in the completion of higher education among immigrants continues to exist. The scientific community believes that social networks and connections play a crucial part in the perpetuation of post-secondary education (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009). A recent systematic review by Mishra concludes that social networks, connections, and support are vital for minority students to pursue higher education and succeed academically (2020).

Discrimination, negative assumptions, and stereotypes interfere with minority students' motivation to access the much-needed resources and support outside their communities (Mishra, 2020, Abada & Tenkorang, 2009). As a result, minority students are further marginalized, leading to even greater limitations on social networks and social capital. Among the minority groups that suffer from inadequate social connections are Filipino immigrants (Kelly, 2014). Kelly mentions that when Filipinos migrate to Canada, especially to major cities like Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, they tend to keep their networks and connections almost exclusively to the Filipino communities (2014).

Unfortunately, this can lead to what Kelly calls "ethnic mobility entrapment" (2014). While this provides a great sense of community and preservation of Filipino cultures and identities, especially for a newcomer in Canada, it can detrimentally limit their opportunities and access

to important post-secondary education information. The ultimate outcome is the "tendency for labour market marginality to be reproduced from one generation to the next" (Kelly, 2014). In addition, the lack of information access can lead to segregation and limited exposure to other opportunities and professions. The author concludes that social networks and social capital are important players in shaping Filipino youths' choices in both education and employment (2014).

Moreover, a study by Baum and Flores in 2011 suggests that financial stability plays a particularly significant role in upward social mobility and higher education attainment for immigrant students. They conclude that since immigrant families suffer from great financial restraints, it would be and is a constant struggle for them to support their children's pursuit of a post-secondary education (2011). Kelly's research also identifies the role financial resources play. Kelly argues that due to severe financial restrictions and the added expenses of sending money to the Philippines, most Filipino families do not have the financial capital to support a typical four-year university education (2014). For this reason, many Filipino students are forced to choose a more practical route—one that does not last four years and all but guarantees steady work swiftly after graduation (2014). Most options available for a shorter study period and a more practical route are low paying. This is something that I personally experienced when I was in high school. As an immigrant, I always have to be practical with my decisions. It was difficult to imagine studying at university for four years or possibly more when my family was always in survival mode. Financial resources were a huge factor when deciding if I should pursue a university education. In addition, Kelly believes that aside from financial resources, the time a parent can provide for their children also plays a tremendous role in helping them pursue a university education (2014).

My experience matters because this is the reality for most Filipino youths in Canada. Even if Filipino students decide to pursue a university education, they face endless obstacles and constraints that prevent them from attaining a university degree. Consequently, many Filipinos remain in low-paying jobs similar to their parents. Yet, what surprised me the most was the lack of information and action regarding

these issues. When I was looking for articles to support my arguments, I found very limited studies addressing the issues surrounding Filipino underrepresentation in Canadian universities. There is a huge gap in the available knowledge, and I believe that more research is urgently needed in order to fully understand the factors that preclude Filipinos from pursuing higher education and to create a solution for these issues.

Analyzing the available literature on this topic, I learned that the issue of the underrepresentation of Filipinos and other racialized communities is not recent. An issue this extensive takes years, or decades, to develop, and the lack of acknowledgement and action to address the problems is not only disappointing but simply unbearable. The idea that these problems have the potential to prevail and persist for many more years and can potentially impact more generations of Filipino immigrants is undoubtedly disturbing (Kelly, 2014). If left unexamined and unaddressed, underrepresentation at university can further marginalize Filipino immigrants.

I have learned plenty of valuable lessons from my own experiences that I plan to remember as I continue my university journey. I now understand that the hardship and obstacles I have experienced result from the systemic barriers preventing Filipino immigrants like me from taking space in academic settings. I have also learned that the challenges I faced and overcame to pursue higher education are not unique to me but a stereotypical story for many Filipino immigrants (Chun, 2014; Nadal et al., 2010).

With this in mind, I now understand that Filipino students do not come to their decision lightly when they decide not to pursue a university degree. Their inability to pursue higher education is not an indication that they are unintelligent or lazy but is the result of a flawed system (Chun, 2014). I believe that Filipino students who wish to attain a university degree should have an equal opportunity to do so, free from systemic barriers.

Furthermore, I realized that it is crucial to consider the external factors that hinder Filipino immigrants' ability to engage in university education. Reflecting on my experiences at university, I felt totally helpless as the concerns

and issues that were heavily affecting me were not being addressed or even discussed. For upward social mobility for Filipinos in Canada to be possible, the issues that exclusively and disproportionately affect Filipino immigrants must be urgently acknowledged. If left unexamined, said issues may perpetuate and result in intergenerational trauma and diminished upward mobility.

The issue of Filipino underrepresentation in post-secondary education is a problem that cannot be fixed by a single solution but rather by a combination of multiple approaches: firstly, more research is needed to uncover why Filipino students are having challenges in pursuing higher education. By conducting more studies, more data and evidence will be produced to make appropriate recommendations. As of now, minimal knowledge has been produced regarding Filipinos in Canada and the reasons why Filipino students shy away from attaining a university degree.

Secondly, mentorship programs and scholarships need to be available for Filipino students. As mentioned above, financial instability and inadequate Filipino role models are the most significant contributing factors to why Filipino students cannot pursue higher education. If more scholarships are available, it may provide an additional incentive for Filipino students—especially new immigrants—to pursue a university education.

Thirdly, a free and accessible mentorship program might help Filipino students believe they have a place in academia by seeing someone who looks like them and has attained a university degree. In addition, a more lenient university application is worth exploring. Given that many Filipino students have to work part-time during high school in highly laboured and exhausting jobs, having a separate application for Filipino students helps alleviate the idea that only exceptional students pursue a university education. Finally, since many Filipino families were separated for long periods of time, it might be worth considering reunification programs to make transitioning to a new environment easier for Filipino students and their families.

In conclusion, despite the growing population of Filipinos in Canada, Filipinos remain frightfully underrepresented in university institutions. The factors discussed in this paper are limited

examples of the determinants that hinder the ability of Filipino students to pursue higher education in a Canadian university. The unique experiences of Filipino immigrants deserve to be addressed to ensure they are not being left behind. My experience of hardship in pursuing a university degree is not unique to me, it is the

reality and generic story of many Filipino students in Canada. My experience taught me that if left unexamined, the existing systemic barriers have the potential to continue to marginalize the next generation of Filipino students who are simply trying to make something of themselves.

## References

- Abada, Teresa, & Tenkorang, Eric Y. (2009). Pursuit of university education among the children of immigrants in Canada: the roles of parental human capital and social capital. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 12(2), 185–207.
- Baum, Sandy, & Flores, Stella M. (2011). Higher Education and Children in Immigrant Families. *The Future of Children*, 21(1), 171–193.
- Brosseau, Laurence, & Dewing, Michael (2009; Revised 2018) *Canadian multiculturalism*. Legal and Social Affairs Division: Parliamentary Information and Research Service. Retrieved from <https://lop.parl.ca/staticfiles/PublicWebsite/Home/ResearchPublications/BackgroundPapers/PDF/2009-20-e.pdf>.
- Canadian Association of University Teachers. (2018). *Underrepresented & underpaid: Diversity & equity among Canada's post-secondary education teachers*. Retrieved from [https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/caut\\_equity\\_report\\_2018-04final.pdf](https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/caut_equity_report_2018-04final.pdf).
- Chagnon, Jonathan, (2013). *Migration: International, 2010 and 2011*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/91-209-x/2013001/article/11787-eng.pdf?st=GmoFKnPg>.
- Chávez, Noé R., Race, Alexandra, Bowers, Marisa, Kane, Susan, & Sistrunk, Christopher. (2019). Engaging underrepresented adolescents in authentic scientific settings: Scientist role models and improving psychosocial outcomes. *J STEM Outreach*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8078839/pdf/nihms-1555158.pdf>.
- Chun, G. (2014). A study of the underrepresentation of Filipinos in higher education. *University of Hawaii at Manoa*.
- Kelly, Philip. (2014). *Understanding intergenerational social mobility: Filipino youth in Canada*. Canadian Electronic Library. Retrieved from <https://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/research/diversity-immigration-and-integration/filipino-youth/kelly-feb-2014.pdf>.
- Lawner, Elizabeth, Quinn, Diane M., Camacho, Gabriel, Johnson, Blair T., & Pan-Weisz, Bradley. (2019). Ingroup role models and underrepresented students' performance and interest in STEM: A meta-analysis of lab and field studies. *Social Psychology of Education*, 22(5), 1169–1195.
- Lockwood, Penelope. (2006). "Someone like me can be successful": Do college students need same-gender role models? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30(1), 36–46.
- Mendoza, Maureen Grace. (2018). Educated minorities: The experiences of Filipino Canadian university students. In *Filipinos in Canada* (pp. 360–381). University of Toronto Press.
- Mishra, Shweta. (2020). Social networks, social capital, social support and academic success in higher education: A systematic review with a special focus on "underrepresented" students. *Educational Research Review*, 29, 100307, 24pp.

Morgenroth, Thekla, Ryan, Michelle K., & Peters, Kim. (2015). The Motivational Theory of Role Modeling: How Role Models Influence Role Aspirants' Goals. *Review of General Psychology*, 19(4), 465–483.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000059>.

Nadal, Kevin, Pituc, Stephanie T., Johnston, Marc P., & Esparrago, Theresa. (2010). Overcoming the model minority myth: Experiences of Filipino American graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(6), 694–706.

Saari, Margaret, Patterson, Erin, Kelly, Shawna, & Tourangeau, Ann E. (2018) The evolving role of the personal support worker in home care in Ontario, Canada. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 26(2), 240–249.