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## Own Your Experience

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# Own Your Experience

## **Abstract**

*This is a computer-generated message from the Campus Navigation Portal (CNAV), which can be accessed via the URL: [Campus Navigation Portal \(CNAV\)](#). It was sent to you to inform you of a significant event.*

I received this email when I was a young, nervous First Year student. I took advantage of the clean slate I got from attending a new school and was scrolling through the Digest in search of a new identity. Maybe I could be one of those quirky unicycle riding, juggling, circus kids—it was all up in the air. I wasn't going to let the past hold me back anyway. Then I read this:

*You have been added to the group,*

*IRC\_Asian\_Students*

*You do not have the ability to unsubscribe yourself from this group. [excerpt]*

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Asian American, internalized racism, white privilege

## **Disciplines**

Asian American Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

**[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward**

## OWN YOUR EXPERIENCE

October 26, 2015

*This is a computer-generated message from the Campus Navigation Portal (CNAV), which can be accessed via the URL: [Campus Navigation Portal \(CNAV\)](#). It was sent to you to inform you of a significant event.*

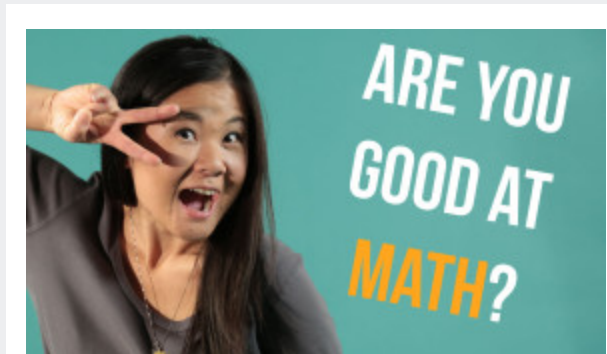
I received this email when I was a young, nervous First Year student. I took advantage of the clean slate I got from attending a new school and was scrolling through the Digest in search of a new identity. Maybe I could be one of those quirky unicycle riding, juggling, circus kids—it was all up in the air. I wasn't going to let the past hold me back anyway. Then I read this:

*You have been added to the group,*

*IRC\_Asian\_Students*

*You do not have the ability to unsubscribe yourself from this group.*

At the time, it felt almost like an accusation— a mark of shame.



Just to clarify, I am not a self-hating-Asian, but it is important to disclose why I once was.

Like every other person in the world, middle school was a miserable experience. My classmates had just discovered the exciting world of racist jokes and bowl-cut-Stephen made a most excellent target for practice. They would stretch their eyelids into long hateful squints, whilst butchering my name in buck-toothed, atrocious accents—"stinky-shoes" and "shoe-doggy-douchebag" just to name a few. Without starting too much of a self-pity-fest, I'll just say that I was socially ostracized and I lost many of the friends that I had grown up with.

At the time I could only see one solution: if you can't beat them, join them. I spent my high school years reinventing myself as the whitest Asian you could ever meet. I surrounded myself with very...well, for lack

of a better word, *white* people. I set my mind on defying stereotypes: I sucked at math, my Mandarin was (and unfortunately still is) terrible, and I didn't really care all that much about my grades. I would beam with pride when my friends would jokingly say things like, "Wait, Stephen, you aren't white?" I even went so far as to laugh at their offensive jokes just to show how detached I was from my race. For once in my life, I felt comfortable, but I was not comfortable in my own skin.

I had begun to [internalize racism](#) in the form of the rejection of my own identity. Our society told me that I, as a person of color, was "less than." But in attempting to detach myself from my race, in attempting to be the whitest Asian you could ever meet, I ended up partaking in systems of oppression. I ended up affirming and strengthening [white privilege](#).

The very sight of groups of Asians would make me embarrassed. I wondered why the international students at my school weren't making the same efforts I was to fit in. Every time I walked through the library, there would always, without fail be a group of Asians hanging out and studying. We called it "little Korea." Their public ownership of their race baffled me. I finally cracked and asked a Korean friend of mine something along the lines of "Aren't affinity groups like Asian Student Alliance a bit counterintuitive when it comes to diversity?" The fact was, these groups only allowed people of the same race to partake in their meetings. Exclusivity and diversity clashed like polka dots and plaid.

His response did more than enough to challenge my perception:

"An affinity group isn't meant to exclude people; it's meant to remind us of where we come from." Or, in Gettysburg-speak: "Own your experience."

Please take this to heart because you should spend your next four years and life not on pretending to be someone else to fit in, but instead on growing to your full potential. Take my word for it, living a lie is as bad as it is a cheesy cliché. Though everything about it sucked, I wouldn't trade my middle school or high school years for anything. The friends I made along the way are still among the closest friends I have today. Those experiences, both white and Asian, made me who I am—an American citizen.

To the minorities who no longer feel welcome at this campus, no one can take away your experiences. Own them with pride and never forget where you came from.

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