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Asian American College Students over the Decades:

Insights from Studying
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from 1971 to 2005 Using
Survey Research Data

Julie J. Park

Summary

The purpose of this brief is to discuss insights from using survey data from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey to study Asian American first-year students. The CIRP is the country's oldest, ongoing study of college students, and 361,271 Asian American students have completed the survey since its inception. In addition to describing unique findings that came from disaggregating data by gender and income level, I discuss the need for survey response options to be tailored to the needs of Asian American students.

Introduction

A perennial lament in the research on Asian American college students is that there is simply not enough. As part of the effort to help fill this void, I was part of a research team with collaborators Mitchell Chang, OiYan A. Poon, Monica Lin, and Don Nakanishi that wrote two reports, *Beyond Myths: The Growth and Diversity of Asian American College Freshman, 1971–2005* (Chang et al., 2007), and "Asian American College Students and Civic Engagement" (Park et al., 2008). I begin by explaining the background of our projects and note some of the unique findings that our analyses unveiled due to our ability to disaggregate by sex and family income. I then discuss some of the questions raised by our work, as well as its limitations, and end with suggestions for future research.

Background

The projects originated from an invitation from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute to analyze thirty-five years of accumulated data on Asian American college students. The CIRP is the country's oldest ongoing national longitudinal study of college students, with more than fifteen million participants since the surveys began in 1966. It is important to note that the CIRP is representative of the national first-time (both first-time enrollment and first year of college), full-time college-going population. The Asian American college-going population is exceptionally diverse, and almost half of Asian American undergraduates enrolled in higher education institutions attend two-year institutions. Unfortunately, the data do not adequately capture this sector of the college population. Still, the survey is a rich repository of data on college students' beliefs, values, and experiences over time. With 361,271 students, it is the largest compilation and analysis of data on Asian American college students to date. One sign of the times is how racial/ethnic categorizations have evolved in CIRP surveys, and they continue to do so. For instance, during the early years of the survey, Asian American students only had the option of checking "Oriental." It is important to note that the CIRP did not include a separate "Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander" response option until 2001; prior to this, students would have either checked "Asian/Asian American" or "Other." The analyses described below are limited to participants who identified as Asian/Asian American in the CIRP over the years.

Methods and Key Findings

When we began the project, we were interested in disaggregating the data by sex and household income. A common misperception of Asian American college students is that they are a homogeneous population. Unfortunately, only one year of the CIRP, 1997, disaggregated the Asian American category by ethnic subgroup (giving the response options of "Chinese American/Chinese, Filipino American/Pilipino, Japanese American/Japanese, Korean American/Korean, Southeast Asian [Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, etc.], and other Asian American/Asian"), and thus we were unable to make comparisons over time using data disaggregated by ethnicity. However, by disaggregating by sex and income, we were able to identify key findings that would have gone otherwise

undetected. As documented in the *Beyond Myths* report, we found that although 48.1 percent of respondents reported being native English speakers in 1987 when the question was first introduced, by 2005, 58.6 percent reported being native English speakers. When we disaggregated responses by household income, we found that from 1990 to 2005 nearly half of nonnative English speakers consistently came from low-income families, suggesting that nonnative English speakers encounter multiple challenges in higher education.

We also found notable trends when disaggregating by sex and income. In 1971, a higher percentage of Asian American men than women came from low-income backgrounds. In 1980 and 1990, roughly equal proportions of Asian American men and women came from low-income backgrounds, but beginning in 2000 and continuing into 2005, Asian American female college students were more likely than male students to come from low-income families. In the report we commented: "This trend is partially related to the increased enrollment of Asian American women in higher education, but it also reveals that a significant portion of these female students are coming from low-income backgrounds. Although the increased enrollment of Asian American female students in higher education is something to celebrate, it begs the question of whose enrollment is not keeping pace: male Asian American students, particularly those from low-income households" (Chang et al., 2007, 11).

Another advantage of our data was the ability to compare cohorts of students over time. This approach was especially helpful when studying trends related to college access and choice. We found that the percentage of Asian Americans applying to six or more colleges increased substantially over time, from 10.7 percent in 1980 to 35.9 percent in 2005. We also found that, consistently over time, high-income Asian American students were most likely to apply to six or more colleges, although the gaps between the income groups have narrowed over time. A key benefit of the CIRP data is that we were able to compare Asian Americans with the overall national population of first-time, full-time college students who completed the CIRP. Thus, we found that the percentage of Asian American students applying to six or more colleges (35.9%) far exceeded the percentage of students from the national population (17.4%). Additionally, we found that, "In 1974, 77.2% of the national population and 68.0% of Asian American students reported attending their first choice college. By 2005, the difference between

the two groups doubled: while 69.8% of students from the national population reported attending their first choice college, only 51.8% of Asian American students did so. Also, the percentage of Asian American first-year students who reported to be enrolled at an institution considered to be less than their second choice more than tripled from 5.3% in 1975 to 19.7% in 2005" (Chang et al., 2007, 17). Contrary to the model minority stereotype, the majority of Asian American college students do not attend selective or highly selective institutions. Still, our findings identify some noteworthy trends about how some Asian American students are navigating the selective admissions process.

In addition to findings related to students' academic preparation, career aspirations, and majors, our analyses include rich information about Asian American students' political and civic activities and attitudes. This information is particularly relevant for policy makers and community activists interested in understanding the landscape for the Asian American young adult vote, as well as those interested in how Asian Americans are reacting to key social issues. We found that, overall, there was a substantial decline in the percentage of Asian American college students who found it very important or essential to keep up to date with political affairs from 1990 to 2000, although the percentages increased slightly from 2000 to 2005. In 2005, slightly more Asian Americans identified as "middle of the road" or "left or liberal" in comparison to the national population of first-time, full-time college students.

With specific political issues, we found some consistency as well as some shifts over time. The percentage of students who supported a national plan to "cover everybody's medical costs" increased from 68.1 percent to 78.1 percent from 1980 to 2005. Almost half (44.7%) of Asian American students opposed same-sex relationships in 1980, but only 24.7 percent of students supported prohibiting them by 2005. Consistently, more than 60 percent of cohorts over time supported keeping abortion legal, with the highest percentage being in 1992. Consistent with previous research, we found that Asian American students were roughly split fifty-fifty on the issue of affirmative action. However, when we disaggregated findings by sex, we found that there was less of a gap between female and male support for affirmative action for Asian Americans than the overall college population. In 2005, the national population of male college students was approximately ten percentage

more points likely than female college students to oppose affirmative action, while Asian American men were only 5.4 percentage points more likely to oppose the policy than Asian American women. In subsequent analysis of CIRP data (Park, 2009) I found that although 51.1 percent of Asian American first-year students supported affirmative action, by the end of their fourth year of college, 62.6 percent of Asian American college students indicated support for race-conscious admissions policies.

We also found that Asian American students have expressed more interest in shaping the world around them in recent years. The percentage of Asian American students stating that it was very important or essential for them to be a leader in their community almost tripled from 1971 (13.0%) to 2005 (32.3%). From 1971 to 2005, we also found increases in the percentage of students who wanted to influence social values (29.8% to 42.3%) and the political structure (15.8% to 21.4%). In 2005, 44.6 percent of Asian American first-year students stated that it was very important or essential to have administrative responsibility for others, versus 25.1 percent in 1971.

The findings from *Beyond Myths* sparked our interest in Asian American students' civic and political capacities. Thus, we continued our analysis in a chapter focusing specifically on civic and political engagement featured for a volume compiled by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP). In the LEAP report, we also disaggregated data in certain cases by citizenship and language heritage. Interestingly, we found little difference between Asian American students who were citizens versus those who were not, as well as between native English speakers versus nonnative English speakers, in their reported levels of volunteering prior to college. We found some differences between male and female respondents in the area of volunteering. In 2005, Asian American women were 18.4 percentage points more likely to anticipate volunteering in the future than men, and they were more likely to prioritize becoming involved in a community action program. We also found that Asian Americans have been consistently slightly more likely than the national population to view participating in environmental cleanup programs as important or very important.

One of our most intriguing but potentially troubling findings is related to shifts in self-rated leadership ability over time. In 1971, roughly the same percentage of Asian American women

and women from the overall national population ranked themselves as being in the top 10 percent amongst their peers in leadership ability. Both groups of women trailed behind Asian American men and men from the overall national population. In 1971, Asian American men were actually slightly more likely than men from the national population to see themselves as being in the top 10 percent of their peers in leadership ability. However, this dynamic has shifted over time. By 1990, males from the overall national population were most likely to see themselves as being in the upper echelon of leadership ability, followed by women from the overall national population, followed by Asian American men, and finally by Asian American women. By 2005, the overall male first-year college population was notably more likely than Asian American female college students to see themselves as being in the top 10 percent of leadership ability: "In 2005, 64.5% of men overall, 58.7% of women overall, 51.6% of Asian American men, and 49.4% of Asian American females rated themselves as having top leadership abilities" (Park et al., 2008, 87). Overall, we found that although roughly equitable percentages of Asian American male and female college students see themselves as having top leadership potential, they are less likely to regard themselves as being top leaders than the overall national populations of male and female populations of first-year college students.

Limitations and Unanswered Questions

Although quantitative analysis provides rich snapshots of broad trends affecting a substantial portion of the Asian American college-going population, it is constrained by the limitations of survey research and secondary data analysis. One of the biggest limitations is the inability to disaggregate CIRP data beyond the 1997 dataset. Another key limitation is that all surveys rely on self-reported data, and at times we may be unsure of how students interpreted certain questions or why they answered certain questions the way they did. For instance, the gap between Asian Americans and the national population's self-rated leadership ability seems troubling. However, do we really know that Asian American students have less self-confidence in their leadership skills? Wang, Hempton, Dugan, and Komives (2008) summarize several studies that found that Asian Americans are less likely to select extreme survey responses on Likert scale-type questions

(e.g., “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree”). In their own analysis from data from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, they found that U.S.-born Asian Americans were slightly more likely than foreign-born Asian Americans to select extreme survey responses, but that overall, “Asian/Asian American students favor middle options and avoid extreme responses more often than any other racial/ethnic groups, no matter what the question was asked about.” Fascinatingly, they found that some trends depend on the racial diversity of the respondent’s institution: “For 78% of the items, the odds of selecting middle options for Asian/Asian American students increased as the percentage of Asian students in the total student population increased.” They note several implications of their study; for instance, they suggest that researchers interpret Likert scales with caution and test different types of questions in order to capture Asian/Asian American opinions better.

Recommendations

Overall, our findings illuminate the numerous complexities and nuances that emerge when data on Asian American college students are disaggregated by sex and household income. They also provide a rich snapshot of the ways in which Asian American students have changed over time and identify areas in which their experiences and attitudes have remained more consistent throughout the decades. Such findings pave the way for future studies and provide greater context for researchers trying to understand better the experiences of Asian Americans attending four-year institutions. Our studies affirm and reflect much of the diversity of the Asian American college-going population—past, present, and future.

Survey research plays a critical role in identifying key trends within and between populations, and such research is an essential tool for researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and community members as they seek to understand the needs of the Asian American community. Beyond the CIRP surveys, it is critical for other large-scale surveys of college students to make a special effort to capture representative samples of Asian American students. Data disaggregation by ethnicity is also necessary in order to ensure that sampling procedures are capturing the diversity of the Asian American college-going population; disaggregation is also needed to allow researchers to identify pertinent trends and inequalities in educational outcomes.

However, as Wang et al. (2008) remind us, it is important for researchers to be sensitive to some of the limitations of survey research. Future researchers should further analyze how Asian Americans respond to certain types of survey questions; they should also consider triangulating responses from multiple questions and/or data sources. Qualitative research is particularly needed to provide some of the depth and detail of Asian American students' experiences, attitudes, and self-assessments. In addition, mixed-methods approaches can supply valuable insight. By using multiple analytic methods, researchers can furnish a valuable service to the community by capturing patterns in Asian American students' experiences that can illuminate our collective understanding of this growing and diverse population.

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