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Educational Opportunity and the Missing Minority in Higher Education:
Changing the National Narrative of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders by 2040

Leilani Matasaua Pimentel and Neil Horikoshi

Abstract

For nearly half a century, the model minority myth has dominated perceptions of Asian American college students and masked educational disparities among the nearly fifty ethnic groups that comprise the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. This essay challenges the model minority narrative by presenting the narrative of the *missing minority*—outlining how this alternative narrative was influenced by the creation of federal AAPI-serving institution legislation in 2008. The authors explore Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution recognition, how it has provided a framework to further support AAPI higher education outcomes, and what factors will affect the national narrative in 2040.

> When Seata Shyon isn't taking care of her siblings, she is working late into the night on homework and college applications, as she plans for her future career as a college student. She is visibly exhausted. Yet even with the dark circles under her eyes, her face betrays a quiet hope and excitement. Like many of her peers at the June Jordan School for Equity, she is working very hard so that she can be the first person in her family to go to college. Born in Samoa, Shyon, 18, and her family moved to Hawaii, before relocating to San Francisco, where they lived in public housing. When her father was incarcerated six years ago, her mother took on two jobs, leaving Shyon with the responsibility of caring for five younger siblings, including an infant (Goossen, 2009, 1).

Introduction

Since the 1960s, the model minority myth has depicted Asian American students as beacons of academic success. In the 1980s, national publications such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Fortune* featured prominent articles praising and publicizing the successes of Asian American students. In recent decades, however, portrayals of "Those Asian American Whiz Kids," such as in *Time*'s 1987 feature cover, have evolved into sayings far more cynical than praiseworthy: "MIT stands for Made in Taiwan" and "UCLA stands for United Caucasians Lost among Asians."

Having permeated the national discourse on Asian Americans—and the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community—the model minority narrative has overshadowed an alternate and more realistic narrative: that AAPIs are a *missing minority* in higher education. This missing minority narrative tells a story similar to those of most minority communities: high poverty rates, low educational outcomes, and lack of access to higher education. It is the story of students like Seata, a Samoan American and Vietnamese American student from San Francisco balancing family responsibilities beyond those of an average American high school student with college applications. However, unlike other minority communities, this story is both ignored and perpetuated by America's widely held misconception that all AAPIs are whiz kids.

In contrast to the model minority narrative, the AAPI community represents varying degrees of educational access and socioeconomic status. With such a vast range of demographic characteristics, the AAPI community is also the fastest-growing racial group in America. Over the next decade, AAPI college enrollment is projected to increase by 35 percent and to grow significantly more by the year 2040, when one out of ten Americans will be of Asian American or Pacific Islander descent (Ong and Ong, 2015; CARE and APIASF, 2013).

Only in the last decade has the missing minority narrative of AAPIs surfaced in the realm of higher education policy with the creation of the Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) federal grant program. But while the AANAPISI designation and its grant programs for AAPI-serving institutions represent a measure of success, what will it take to continue these efforts into the future? As the AAPI community continues to grow at a rate faster than any other racial group over the next quarter century, the prevailing narrative—either the perpetuation of the model minority or the revelation of

the missing minority narrative—will inevitably drive higher education policy. The factors contributing to these narratives therefore demand attention as we look to the future. In this article we will explore AANAPISI recognition, how it has provided a framework to further support AAPI higher education outcomes, and what factors will affect the national narrative in 2040.

AANAPISIs as a Possible Solution to Contesting the Model Minority Myth

Representing nearly fifty distinct ethnicities and more than three hundred spoken languages, AAPIs have also become the fastest-growing poverty population in America following the recent recession. According to poverty data from the U.S. Census, the number of AAPIs living below poverty increased by more than half a million from 2007 to 2011, representing a 38 percent increase for all AAPIs (37 percent for Asian Americans and 60 percent for Pacific Islanders). Nearly 60 percent of the increase of AAPI poor consisted of the native-born segment of the population, and U.S. Census data point to many communities including Cambodian, Hmong, and Marshallese experiencing poverty rates that are more than double the national average (CARE and APIASF, 2013). Furthermore, the significant growth rate of AAPI poor is not reflected in the population's overall poverty rate (12.8 percent in 2000, 13.1 percent in 2011) due to the rapidly growing base of AAPIs and large numbers of highly skilled, highly educated immigrants.

Despite these realities, the AAPI community has historically been distanced from America's definition of "minority." Minority-serving institutions (MSIs), postsecondary institutions that provide access to and serve the needs of low-income, underrepresented students of color, have received special federal recognition for decades. However, institutions serving high proportions of AAPIs in the United States have been excluded from federal MSI designation until recently. While hundreds of millions of dollars have been available to institutions that support historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities, and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), not until the last decade did AAPI leaders begin to gain steam in their efforts to advocate for greater resources for underprivileged AAPI students and families.

Park and Teranishi (2008) date the push for MSI designation to the late 1990s. They note that in 1999, a College Board report entitled "Reaching the Top, the College Boards' National Task Force on Minority High Achievement," which grouped Asian Americans with whites

in terms of educational achievement, served as a catalyst for AAPI advocates who sought to draw attention to the low educational outcomes of underserved ethnic groups such as Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders. In 2001, the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders recommended a new federal designation for institutions serving significant percentages of AAPI students (Conrad and Gasman, 2015; Park and Teranishi, 2008).

In 2002, Congressman Robert Underwood (D-Guam) introduced H.R. 4825, an amendment to Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Years later, and with efforts by Congressman David Wu (D-OR), Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and Senator Daniel Akaka (D-HI), the U.S. Congress authorized AAPI-serving institutions with the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 according to the U.S. Department of Education.

AANAPISI federal designation was enacted into law as a means of enabling institutions to improve and expand their capacity to serve AAPIs and low-income individuals. According to the legislation, institutions of higher education could be eligible to receive funds if they had an enrollment of at least 10 percent AAPI college students and at least 50 percent of degree-seeking students receiving financial assistance in at least one of the following federal programs: Federal Pell Grant, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant, Federal Work Study, or the Federal Perkins Loan. The first grantees of fiscal year 2008 included six institutions of higher education from Maryland, Washington, California, Hawai'i, and Guam.

In *Understanding Minority-Serving Institutions* Julie Park and Robert Teranishi explore AAPI-serving institution legislation as a *racial project*—seeking to "reinterpret racial dynamics by challenging the model minority image and carving out a unique space for Asian Americans in the racial spectrum" (Park and Teranishi, 2008, pp.112). In this regard, AANAPISI recognition could be viewed as the AAPI community's first tangible victory in its mission to reassert the AAPI needs with minority needs and thereby advocate for underserved AAPI students.

Sharing Experiences of Low-Income AAPI Students through AANAPISI Research

Building on the momentum of AANAPISI designation and the growing need for research on AAPI higher education issues, the Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) and the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Educa-

tion (CARE) issued a series of research papers beginning in 2008. Among the findings of the series of the CARE reports were disparities in educational attainment among AAPI ethnic groups, the rapid increase in AAPI students attending community colleges, contrasts between the AAPI students attending four-year institutions and those attending community colleges, and the impact of AANAPISI programs on student success.

For example, while more than 80 percent of East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) and South Asians (Asian Indian and Pakistani) who enrolled in college earned at least a bachelor's degree, high numbers of other AAPI ethnic groups are enrolling in college but failing to earn a degree. Among Southeast Asians, 33.7 percent of Vietnamese, 42.9 percent of Cambodians, 46.5 percent of Laotians, and 47.5 percent of Hmong adults (twenty-five years or older) reported having attended college but not earning a degree. Among Pacific Islanders, the proportions are even higher with 47 percent of Guamanians, 50 percent of Native Hawaiians, 54 percent of Tongans, and 58 percent of Samoans entering college but not earning a degree (CARE, 2011). Between 50 percent and 60 percent of Pacific Islanders and between 50 percent and 65 percent of South East Asians ages twenty-five through thirty-four report having not attended college at all (CARE and APIASF, 2014).

In its 2010 and 2011 reports, CARE also identified a growing prevalence of AAPIs in community colleges, providing contrast to the widespread assumptions that all Asian American students attend prestigious four-year universities. The reports identified a 73.3 percent increase in AAPI community college enrollment between 1990 and 2000 compared to a 42.2 percent increase in public four-year institutions (CARE, 2010). Furthermore, nearly 50 percent of AAPIs are enrolled in community college.

Even more compelling are the disparities between AAPI students enrolled at two-year institutions and four-year institutions with respect to risk factors such as delayed enrollment, lack of a high school diploma, part-time enrollment, having dependents other than a spouse, single-parent status, and working full-time while enrolled. From 2003 to 2004, 74.7 percent of AAPI students at two-year institutions reported one or more risk factors while 77.3 percent of AAPI students at four-year institutions reported no risk factors at all. AAPI community college students were also more likely to enter college with lower levels of academic preparation in English and mathematics. Furthermore, 55.2 percent of AAPI students entering two-year institutions had never taken a math course beyond Algebra II in high school, compared to only 12.7 percent

of AAPI students entering four-year institutions in that same year.

CARE's most recent report, "The Impact of Scholarships for Asian American and Pacific Islander Community College Students," found that AAPI community college students also have a high rate of immigrant-origin backgrounds. More than 80 percent of participants were either immigrants or children of immigrants—a figure three times higher than the percentage of immigrant-origin community college students as a whole (24 percent). CARE also found that a high proportion of AAPI community college students are first-generation college students with 82.6 percent of participants having parents who never attended college, which is also much higher than the national average for all community college students (36 percent). Additionally, 78.7 percent of AAPI students reported family responsibilities interfered with their academics.

Factors Affecting the 2040 Narrative

Not even a decade since official recognition by the federal government, the federal AANAPISI program plays a critical role in the success of AAPI students in higher education by providing funding to support institutional capacity building, curriculum development, faculty training, data collection, leadership development, academic resources, and programs that support student retention and graduation at a local level. However, additional funding for the AANAPISI program and support of AAPI students through other resources, effective data, and holistic policies taking into account the diversity of the AAPI community will greatly impact the AAPI narrative in 2040.

Federal Funding

A 2013 Partnership for Equity in Education through Research study in collaboration with CARE and APIASF also highlighted the impact of AANAPISI-funded programs on AAPI student success and persistence based on key factors including institutional culture, responsiveness to students, student connection with AANAPISI-funded staff, community engagement, and leadership development. However, the study also found that there is great need for further investment and capacity building for emerging AANAPISIs.

As a relatively new federal designation in comparison to other MSIs such as HBCUs and HSIs, AANAPISIs continue to be largely unknown even among higher education and policy leaders. AANAPISIs could benefit from capacity building that ultimately supports further research, advocacy, and contact between institutions. Without such sup-

port, AANAPISIs continue to be disconnected from opportunities that should be available to all MSIs and are challenged in their ability to share publicly the impact of their programs.

Following the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, there were 116 AANAPISI-eligible institutions nationwide by 2009 according to campus data on AAPI and low-income students. The number then grew to 148 institutions in 2011 (CARE, 2011) and 153 institutions by June 2013 (CARE and APIASF, 2014). Of the 153 eligible institutions nationwide at the time of the study, only seventy-eight (51 percent) had applied for and received formal AANAPISI designation. Of the seventy-eight designated AANAPISIs, only twenty-one (14 percent) applied for and received funding. Furthermore, while the 153 eligible AANAPISIs supported 41 percent of all AAPI students attending any postsecondary institution in the country, they represented only 3 percent of all postsecondary institutions in the country (ibid.). This alarming statistic illustrates the high concentration of AAPI students in just a few campuses and communities in the United States, primarily in California, New York, and Hawai'i, along with communities in Georgia, Illinois, and Texas—areas that historically have not had a high proportion of AAPIs.

According to a recent report issued by the Congressional Research Service, there are currently 172 institutions eligible for AANAPISI designation. However, to date, only twenty-seven AANAPISIs have applied for and received funding through the federal AANAPISI program. According to the most recently posted application for MSI grants in the Federal Register for fiscal year 2016 awards, HSIs had an estimated available funding total of $52,287,473 with an estimated range of awards at $500,000 to $650,000 per campus, whereas AANAPISIs were given an estimated $3,062,000, with $200,000 to $300,000 per year estimated for each campus.

Given the limited resources from the federal government for the AANAPISI program, which is also structured as a competitive grant process, institutions will certainly be limited in the amount of federal resources they are able to secure. With the growing AAPI population over the next few decades, it is vital to AAPI student success that federal funding for the program continue through and beyond 2040.

Data-Driven Advocacy

Population projections show the number of Asian American registered voters will double to about twelve million in 2040. Furthermore, among Asian American voters, U.S.-born voters will also account for

majority of the net increase (Ong and Ong, 2015) and their median age will be thirty-seven years old, meaning that the future makeup of the Asian American electorate will be increasingly more U.S.-born, younger, and potentially also more connected to AAPI issues in higher education. Given population projections and expected demographic shifts by 2040, it is crucial that AAPI leaders and organizations continue to engage AAPI citizens and build coalitions to advocate for AAPI policy issues and further investment in AANAPISIs.

But in order to advocate more effectively, robust data must be available. Data on certain ethnic groups within the AAPI community reflect the widely held belief that all AAPIs come from highly educated families, whereas the lack of data on smaller, less visible ethnic groups mask the stark reality that AAPIs also have some of the highest poverty rates in the nation. Largely invisible subethnicities within the AAPI label, such as Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians, are often excluded from the national education dialogue and policy decisions. The unique needs of newly arrived refugee groups, who also tend not to identify as "Asian American," are also blurred by the larger AAPI label and mainstream misconceptions.

Data disaggregation based on ethnicity has been a major issue of the AAPI community and several attempts to pass legislation to change federal policy are still underway. However, even if change on a national level may be years ahead of us, we must advocate for change locally and within each campus, and particularly within large state systems supporting a high proportions of AAPIs. Considering the diverse needs of the AAPI community, it is crucial that the community, as a whole, continues to support a diverse array of interventions targeted to specific ethnic groups and regions.

While AANAPISI legislation provided an impetus to increase awareness that AAPI issues were missing from discussions on minority student achievement, these findings and the opportunity to share them with leading decision makers in the government, federal, and nonprofit sectors have served as part of a growing effort to not only raise the banner of the missing minority narrative but to also activate support and action among key stakeholders. America's demography is changing and in order to thrive, policy makers must respond by disaggregating the data for the problem and solution and developing skilled and effective leadership within AAPI communities.

Multiraciality

The issue of multiraciality will also likely affect the supply of AANA-PISIs should a greater number of multiracial students enroll in institutions that would be considered AANAPISI designated. Current 2015 to 2040 projections highlight a growth rate of 104 percent multiracial Asians overall and 130 percent of the adult population (Ong and Ong, 2015). In fact, growing numbers of multiracial AAPIs may eventually diminish the supply of AANAPISIs simply due to the fact that current national data collection methods are not favorable toward the multiracial AAPI student count.

Currently, the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) collects race and ethnicity data and reports to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System through the following guidelines. If the individual self-identifies as "Hispanic only or Hispanic and any race category," they are reported as "Hispanic." If the individual self-identifies as "Not Hispanic; Asian only" or "Not Hispanic; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander only," they are reported as "Asian" or "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander," respectively. If the individual self-identifies as "Not Hispanic; more than one race category," they are reported as "two or more races." As a result, only students who report being Asian or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander *alone* are counted toward the 10 percent threshold for AANAPISI designation. Given the projected increase of multiracial Asian Americans, it is crucial that policy reflect the changing demographics.

Available Funding for Race-Conscious and Income-Based Scholarships

Scholarships for underrepresented students, such as racial or ethnic minorities, should be inclusive of low-income AAPI students. Scholarships for low-income AAPI students provide support for access, persistence, and success amidst key risk factors. These students, especially in community college settings, face a number of challenges that are often overlooked, masked by aggregate data, or misunderstood. For example, CARE's 2015 report found that 41.7 percent of AAPI community college students indicated that work interfered with their studies every week. Students reported forgoing studying (60.7 percent), being late to class (24.9 percent), missing class (16.6 percent), and dropping a class because of work (7.1 percent). Of the students in this study who were employed, 43.4 percent worked forty hours or more per week, which is higher than the national average of 32.4 percent for all community college students. In an earlier report, CARE also found that AAPI college students are three times more likely to have considered leaving college

for nonacademic reasons than AAPI students with parents who had attended college (33.8 percent vs. 11.5 percent).

However, 81.1 percent of students indicated that the financial aid they receive directly impact their ability to succeed in college. Scholarships also affected academic outcomes including the rate of credit accumulation to make steady progress toward earning a degree or transferring to a four-year institution. Receiving a scholarship was associated with improvements in academic success and educational expectations and decreased the number of hours worked.

Conclusion

As the AAPI community continues to grow at a rate faster than any other racial group over the next quarter of a century, Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders will continue to be among the fastest growing racial groups in America; but as this occurs, AAPIs will remain among the most diverse, and most misunderstood, groups in America.

Given the increased number of AAPIs who experienced poverty in the United States over the past decade, the anticipated 35 percent growth of AAPI students enrolling in college over the next decade, and the anticipated growth of AAPI students who will need to enroll in, and complete, college by 2040 when college completion and/or advanced degree completion becomes the "new normal," attention must be paid to the AAPI student population in order to effectively support their educational, professional, and personal success.

The changing demography, federal funding, data collection standards, and the availability of resources to help AAPI access higher education and persist through graduation will play a significant role in shaping the AAPI higher education narrative. Moreover, this narrative—along with advocacy efforts and supporting data—will shape policies affecting one in ten of the U.S. population by 2040. Looking ahead at 2040, it is paramount that the narrative of AAPI students are not left missing in the shadow of the model minority.

The successful efforts of those trying to raise awareness of and support for the diverse needs of AAPIs in higher education in the future will significantly depend upon on our success in addressing the country's perception of AAPI students in the present. By 2040, will the mainstream narrative of model minorities remain? Or will the narrative of a missing minority lacking access to educational opportunity come to the forefront? Will the publicized successes of certain segments of the AAPI

population overshadow the support needed in low-income AAPI communities? Or will the successes and hopeful stories of first-generation AAPI college graduates finally change the national narrative?

> *To all students and scholars, college really is an option, not just a dream.*

> Seata Shyon, Education and Social Policy Research Assistant, APIASF 2009 Scholar, and 2013 Smith College Graduate

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Neil Horikoshi, President and Executive Director joined APIASF in 2008 after a distinguished thirty-year career at International Business Machines Corporation, where he served in legal and executive management positions in the United States and Asia Pacific. Through his leadership, APIASF has formed strategic partnerships with AANAPISIs, expanded organizational programming to better meet the needs of underserved AAPI students, and received national recognition as a socially impactful organization. Neil graduated from the University of Hawai'i, Manoa with a bachelor's degree in business administration, and received his JD and MBA from the University of Southern California.