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Research Article

Race and Class through the Lens of Asian American and Pacific Islander Experiences:

Perspectives from Community College Students

Robert T. Teranishi, Cynthia M. Alcantar,
and Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen

Abstract

While the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population is one of the fastest-growing college student populations, there is very little known about their situated experiences within community colleges, which is the sector of higher education where they are mostly likely to be enrolled. Community colleges are a particularly important sector in higher education for low-income AAPI students who are the first in their families to attend college. This study describes the financial vulnerability of low-income AAPI students, how their financial circumstances intersect with other aspects of their lived experiences, and how students describe the choices they make to navigate competing demands in their lives.

Introduction

Access to high-quality educational programs is critical to economic and social mobility in American society. Thus, there is a need to understand the experiences and outcomes of particular student subgroups (e.g., low-income, immigrant, and/or ethnic groups), especially in the context of the changing face of the American demography and the challenges to social mobility in the wake of the recent economic recession. Often referred to as “engines of opportunity,” community colleges have been touted as a key sector of higher education for helping Americans more fully participate in the twenty-first century economy (Muñoz, 2014) through the accumulation of both capital and the increased likelihood of obtaining stable and higher-paying jobs—both key factors in reach-

ing financial security. Community colleges are also recognized as a particularly important sector for the growing population of low-income and racial and ethnic minority students who are disproportionately enrolled in this sector of higher education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Mullin, 2012). Given that “obtaining a college degree . . . translates into substantially greater lifetime income and wealth” and, with the rising costs of attending four-year institutions, “low-income and students of color are . . . graduating in deep debt” (Shapiro, Mschede, and Osoro, 2013, 5) thus making community colleges an especially opportune option for the most financially vulnerable students.

Among the fastest-growing minority groups in America is the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population; however, very little is known about their situated experiences within community colleges, which is problematic because this sector of higher education is where they are mostly likely to be enrolled (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2010). Accordingly, this study focuses on the lived experiences of low-income AAPI students attending three community colleges. Specifically, we describe the financial vulnerability of low-income AAPI students at these institutions, how their financial circumstances intersect with other aspects of their lived experiences, and how students describe the choices they make to navigate competing demands in their lives. In doing so, we offer a lens through which the AAPI community college student experiences can be better understood and supported. Thus, our guiding research question is: What are the demographic characteristics and financial vulnerabilities of AAPI community college students as they pursue a postsecondary education?

Data reported were drawn from a larger study of AAPI students who applied for a race-conscious scholarship program for community college students. While the larger study involved a pretest and posttest analysis of scholarship recipients and nonrecipients, this paper focuses on descriptive analysis of student characteristics based on the survey data, and how the students described their lived experiences as low-income community college students, which was derived from focus group interviews.

Community Colleges, Low-Income Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and the Need for Financial Aid Research

Community colleges are an important sector of higher education because they provide an opportunity for educational and social mobility for underserved and disenfranchised communities. Community colleges have been especially critical in the emerging knowledge-based

economy, which has a growing demand for a college-educated workforce. In the next decade, it is estimated that nearly eight in ten new jobs will require some postsecondary education or training beyond high school, and half of the thirty fastest-growing occupations require a college degree (Muñoz, 2014). As a result, students earning associate degrees and certificates are more likely to earn higher wages, increase employment opportunities, and work more hours compared to high school graduates (Dadgar and Trimble, 2014).

Community colleges have also been called “engines of opportunity” in an era of increasingly selective admissions, rising tuition costs, and plummeting federal and state financial aid (Dowd, 2003). As a result, compared to their four-year counterparts, community colleges are more likely to enroll students from poor and working-class backgrounds (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Mullin, 2012). They are also disproportionately more likely to enroll racial and ethnic minorities as compared to white students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Open-access admissions also result in a greater proportion of students who are particularly vulnerable to not completing college or transferring due to a number of risk factors, including coming from underserved and underresourced K–12 schools that lack a college-going culture and academic preparation (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2003). Accordingly, a high proportion of first-generation college students in the two-year sector (36 percent) require developmental education (58 percent), are of nontraditional college ages (63 percent are older than twenty-one), and enroll part-time (61 percent) (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Attewell et al., 2006). These risk factors are particularly prevalent among racial/ethnic minority community college students.

Access to financial aid, including scholarships, has been found to be useful in mitigating some of the factors listed in the preceding text that make students particularly vulnerable in enrolling and persisting in college (e.g., Brock and Richburg-Hayes, 2006; Cofer and Somers, 2001; Kennamer, Katsinas, and Schumacker, 2010; Mendoza, Mendez, and Malcolm, 2009; Patel and Richburg-Hayes, 2011; Richburg-Hayes et al., 2009; Richburg-Hayes, Sommo, and Welbeck, 2011; St. John and Starkey, 1994). Moreover the type of financial aid has an influence on student persistence. For example, loans in particular have a negative affect on community college students’ persistence—the more loans students have, the less likely they are to persist (Dowd and Coury, 2006). Conversely, scholarships (when released early during college) can impact persistence positively

(DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall, 2002). Despite these studies and others like it, research has demonstrated mixed results in terms of the impact of financial aid on long-term educational outcomes such as transfer and degree attainment for community college students (e.g., Arbona and Nora, 2007; Crisp and Nora, 2010; Crockett, Heffron, and Schneider, 2012; Dowd and Coury). However, there is very little research that examines the financial and social circumstances and needs, beyond tuition, that influence the academic success of low-income students or students who receive financial aid, including scholarships, nor do we know how financial aid impacts AAPI students specifically. Therefore, it is critical to further examine the educational experiences of underresearched, low-income AAPI students at community colleges in order to better understand how to address their needs specifically, and improve the social mobility of all underrepresented students broadly.

Conceptual Framework

In order to explore the nuanced experiences of low-income AAPI community college students, we utilize the conceptual framework of intersectionality. First introduced in the field of law (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), intersectionality has now emerged and been applied to a variety of fields in order to understand intersecting identities (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). Specifically, intersectionality transcends the view of identity as isolated social categories in which individuals are situated. Thus, focusing on race, ethnicity, class, or other single social categories, alone, cannot capture the identity and related experiences of individuals and require an analysis that examines their layered and multiple points of intersections. This viewpoint is particularly relevant for interrogating the nuanced experiences of the AAPI community, which is complicated by differences in ethnicity and immigration (and colonization) histories, among other distinctions between AAPI ethnic groups.

For example, while the immigration histories of Asian Americans have varied dramatically from the arrival of Chinese (Lee, 2003), and later Japanese and Filipino (Spickard, 2009), laborers in the 1850s and 1860s to the refugee experiences of Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, Vietnamese) who “left their homelands as political refugees fleeing war, death, and persecution” (Kim, 2002, 213) starting in 1975, these dramatically different migration patterns have largely been ignored when considering AAPI experiences within the United States. This is further complicated by the starkly different indigenous and colonization histories of Pacific Islanders in the United States (Denoon et al.,

2004), in addition to more diverse patterns of migration (Barkan, 1992), which are both largely understudied.

Accordingly, immigration policy has not thoroughly addressed the unique experiences of Asian American immigrants, or adequately supported the needs of displaced Pacific Islanders. For example, while AAPIs make up the fast-growing immigrant population to the United States through family preference categories, which include the reunification of parents, spouses, and children of permanent residents of the United States, they make up 36 percent of the visa backlog as other relatives including brothers and sisters await a slot to open up (Kieu, 2013). Demands from advocacy organizations, such as the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, for more comprehensive immigration policies point to the need for better understanding the many intersections that make up AAPI experiences in the United States.

One specific way through which intersectionality has been particularly productive is in its utility as a frame of analysis for “context-specific inquiries” (Crenshaw, 1991, 785). For example, Crenshaw (1989) first introduced intersectionality to address the intersecting forms of oppression black women face as they occupy multiple marginalized identities. For AAPIs specifically, Teranishi (2010) employed intersectionality to examine the intersections of ethnicity, social class, and immigration of Chinese and Filipino high school students to explore their experiences with school racial climate. These context-specific inquiries lend themselves well to the examination of the underresearched AAPI students in the two-year sector given that the mainstream narrative on AAPIs rarely considers the dimension of class, while the discussion of class, particularly low-income experiences, frequently dismisses the AAPI community. As demonstrated by our study sample, the intersection of race and class emerges as a critical point of axis for AAPIs, which experiences a wide spectrum of socioeconomic circumstances. Thus, intersectionality offers a valuable lens for examining the experiences of low-income AAPIs.

Data Source and Methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from a longitudinal study of applicants for a race-conscious scholarship program for low-income AAPI students at three community colleges. For the current study, we focus our analysis on 1) the financial vulnerability of the low-income AAPI students, 2) how their financial circumstances intersect with other aspects of their lived experiences, and 3) how students describe the choices they make to navigate competing demands in their lives.

Data Source

Two sources of data were used for this study. First, we draw on survey data from a sample of 366 community college students. All respondents were applicants for a race-conscious scholarship program designed for low-income AAPI students attending three community colleges located in the Western United States. A large proportion of the total sample of participants were Vietnamese (30.9 percent), Chinese (25.4 percent), and Filipino (16.7 percent). The sample also includes Pacific Islander students (9.0 percent). More than half of the participants were female (51.4 percent).

Second, we utilize complementary data from focus group participants, which were selected from the pool of 135 scholarship recipients ($n = 39$). Focus group participants were recruited through outreach by college campus liaisons (e.g., counselors and faculty) and e-mails sent by the research team; participants were randomly selected from a pool of available and consenting scholarship recipients. Focus group interviews were held at each of the three campuses ($\bar{x} = 13$ participants per campus) and lasted approximately ninety minutes. Each session was audiorecorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded for themes by a team of three researchers.

Data Instruments

The survey included demographic variables: ethnicity, residency status, parents' highest education level, and their financial circumstances (e.g., number of dependents, household adjusted gross income, use of government assistance program, hours worked per week). The survey also included three open-ended questions, one of which we coded for emerging themes: "Please describe how attending a community college fits within your educational plan." A subsample of open-ended responses from thirty scholarship recipients were randomly selected for coding. We utilized a semistructured interview protocol for the focus group interviews and asked questions about students' work and academic behaviors.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the demography of the scholarship applicants. To assess work habits, we analyzed variables including hours worked per week in college and in high school, and students' perceived impact of work on academics. To assess financial adjustments, we analyzed variables including postponement of paying bills and forgoing specific purchases or health care services.

The focus group interview transcripts and open-ended questions in the scholarship application were hand coded and analyzed induc-

tively and comparatively for emerging themes (Merriam, 2009). First, we performed open coding (reading documents line by line to code), axial coding (grouping codes), and selective coding (after codes were selected documents were reanalyzed for core themes identified, including categorizing social class) (ibid.). The emergent themes were triangulated with quantitative data to shed light on the situated experiences of low-income AAPI community college students.

Limitations

A limitation to this study is the selection bias in our sample. For the quantitative data we only included participants who were applicants to the race-conscious scholarship and coded open-ended essays of scholarship recipients at three community colleges. Additionally, we did not disaggregate the data by ethnicity, which limits the examination of ethnic group differences. Although this limits the generalizability of the findings, the lived experiences and intersections of race and class of our participants warrant attention in that they challenge common stereotypes of AAPI college students. Additionally, by triangulating quantitative and qualitative data we are enhancing the trustworthiness of our findings.

Results and Discussion

Results are reported in two sections: 1) the demography of low-income AAPI students and 2) navigating competing life demands.

The Demography of Low-Income Asian American and Pacific Islander Students

Analysis of survey and focus group data provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of low-income AAPI community college students. What the data reveal is the extent to which financial vulnerability permeated every facet of their academic and lived experiences. For example, the students in our sample had a median household income of \$20,238, which is below the federally defined poverty level for a family of four. To provide further context for this level of household income, it is important to also consider the number of individuals living in the household as it points to how far household income has to stretch to cover expenses. For the students in our study, nearly half (46.7 percent) lived in households who had four or more people, with only a fifth (20.8 percent) reporting living alone, which sheds more light on their financial circumstances. It also helps to explain why more than a third (35.8 percent) of the students lived in a household in which either the student

or their parents/guardians utilized some form of government benefits. These benefits included financial support through food stamps, unemployment, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. For example, one Filipino student shared:

Besides academic challenges set before me, I have been set with adverse circumstances, ones of a personal nature. My mother and I are now experiencing even more difficult times with the absence of my father's financial contribution to our household. For example, we now find ourselves having to rely on such programs as the Food Bank and Food Stamps.

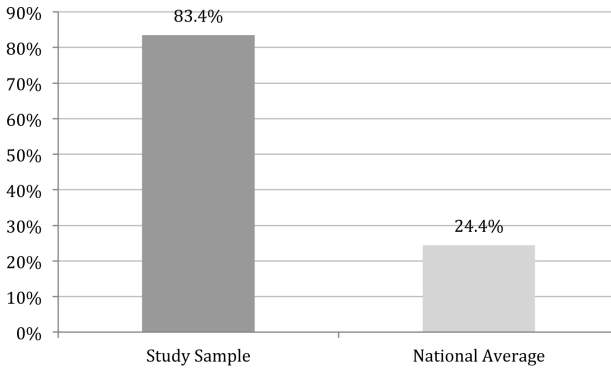
While the low-income status of AAPI community college students is consistent with the demography of community college students overall (Horn, Nevill, and Griffith, 2006), there were unique characteristics that are notable. One important background characteristic that differentiates the demography of low-income AAPI community college students from other community college students is the extent to which they have immigrant-origin backgrounds, which includes both foreign-born students (first-generation immigrant) and those who are U.S. born with at least one foreign-born parent (commonly referred to as second-generation immigrants). More than four in five respondents in our study (83.4 percent) were immigrants or children of immigrants, which is greater than the proportional representation of immigrant community college students nationally (24.4 percent) (Figure 1). More than half of AAPI community college students in our study were foreign born (52.5 percent) and nearly a third were children of foreign-born immigrants (30.9 percent).

In an interview, one Pakistani student expressed her feeling of frustration with navigating the U.S. higher education system as an immigrant:

After [e]migrating to America, I found myself lost and isolated. Since I did not know many people out here I soon found myself completely isolated; sitting with my head down on the library table crying to find a sense of belonging. I had no idea what the difference between UC and state colleges was and being a very ambitious person since a very young age I found this very frustrating. My accent was different and my style of writing was different; I lost my self-confidence in speaking and writing English.

This statement reflects the challenges faced by many immigrant-origin students, which are affected by factors such as immigration status, years in the United States, age of arrival, and country of origin (Kim and Diaz, 2013). For example, immigrants who arrive at an older age

Figure 1: Immigrant-Origin Background, Study Sample vs. National Average



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Horn et al., 2006.
CARE Community College Scholarship Survey, 2012-2013.

have been found to struggle with language barriers, building social ties, and navigating the higher education system (Damm, 2009; Kim and Diaz, 2013). This finding relates to research on first-generation college students, who often report feelings of isolation, lack of sense of belonging on campus, and limited college knowledge (Stableton, Soria, and Huesman, 2014; York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991).

Thus, from an intersectional standpoint, it is important to understand the effect of coming from immigrant-origin backgrounds and/or being a first-generation college student. Less than one-quarter of participants reported they had at least one college-educated parent (17.4 percent). Of the 17.4 percent of students who had at least one college-educated parent, 70.7 percent had earned their degree outside of the United States. The traditional definition of *first-generation college student* includes students for whom neither parent holds a college degree, without considering the country of where their parent received their education and/or college degree. This narrow definition of *first-generation college student* excludes the experiences of students whose parent(s) may have received a college degree in another country, thus, are unable to provide their children knowledge about how to navigate American higher education. This is often times exasperated by living in under-resourced communities with limited access to higher education information and support for their children. This does not mean all children with parents with college educations from a foreign country are living

in poverty, lack access to resources, and mirror the experiences of other first-generation college students, but our findings point to a need for a more nuanced understanding and definition of *first-generation college student*, especially for immigrant families. Thus, using this immigrant-inclusive, experienced-based definition of *first-generation college students*—either parent had not earned a college degree or at least one parent earned a degree but outside of the country—we found a considerable amount of the participants share the experiences of first-generation college students (94.9 percent) and are accordingly considered so in our study. This was more than double the national average of first-generation college students in community college (36.0 percent) (Figure 2).

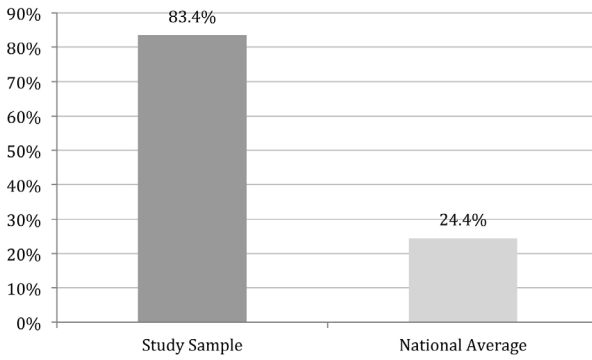
Therefore, although by a traditional definition the students in our study are not first-generation college students, they share similar social and academic experiences with students who are the first in their families to attend college. Given that first-generation college students are more likely to come from low-income households and communities, this student population faces a number of challenges including limited access to college, higher college attrition rates, and lesser likelihood of earning a degree (Chen and Carroll, 2005). Thus, the intersections of class, immigration and migration histories, and the nature of parental education for AAPI community college students is an important consideration, especially given that these students are disproportionately more likely to attend community colleges or vocational programs (Erisman and Looney, 2007; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco, 2011).

Navigating Competing Life Demands

Student respondents described a number of ways that their financial circumstances influenced their college experiences. One major theme was with regard to their process of choosing which college to attend. For example, 53.7 percent of the students felt that staying near their parents was an important factor to consider in their decision to attend a postsecondary institution. As one Vietnamese student expressed, contributing to the family played an important role in his/her decision to stay close to home:

My father suffered a massive stroke at the age of 40 leaving my mother, a young woman, the bread-winner of the family. My father was hospitalized for months in the hospital without insurance. We spent all our savings . . . and [my dad] became another dependent on my mom's shoulders. While taking college classes, I worked part-time at [a fast food restaurant] for some financial support and

Figure 2: First-Generation College Student Status, Study Sample vs. National Average



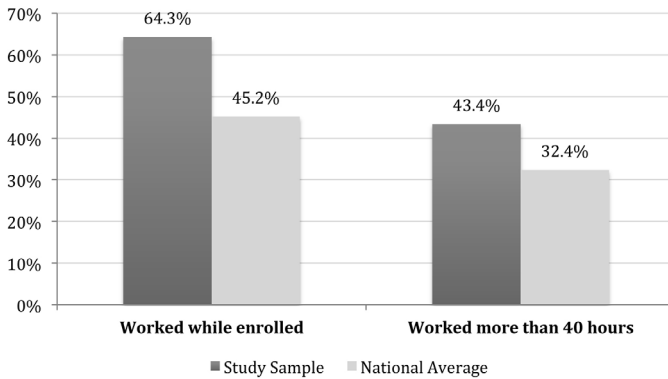
Source: American Association of Community Colleges, 2014
CARE Community College Scholarship Survey, 2012-2013.

to contribute to our family expenses. What I put in was not much and still not enough . . . but, our family has always been dependent on each other. My community college has been a great place for me to start my study journey. First, it costs less than public or private four-year residential colleges. Second, community colleges have weekend, night classes, and many other flexibilities to schedule classes, so I can take classes while I have a job.

In alignment with their decision to consider their fiscal contributions to their families during their enrollment in college, students also considered the cost of education (as demonstrated in the preceding quote). In fact, 85.4 percent of the students in our sample reported that low cost was important to their decision to attend their institution. As these data points demonstrate, financial vulnerability plays a central role in the decision-making process of AAPI students who attend community colleges and thus, highlight the need to better understand the unique challenges this overlooked community faces in their educational trajectories.

Another salient theme for the student participants in this study was the prevalence of working while attending college. For example, more than two-thirds of AAPI community college students (64.3 percent) in our sample reported working while in college, which was much greater than what is found among all community college students (45.2 percent) (Figure 3). Additionally, among the students who worked while in college, nearly half reported working more than forty hours a week, which is also significantly higher than the national average.

Figure 3: Work Characteristics Study Sample vs. National Average



Source: American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014
CARE Community College Scholarship Survey, 2012-2013.

Students in the focus group interviews shared various family and financial responsibilities that determined their decision to work long hours, often in more than one place of employment. One Filipino student said, “I usually work about 44 hours because like on Saturdays I was taking an extra shift so that I could help take care of daycare.”

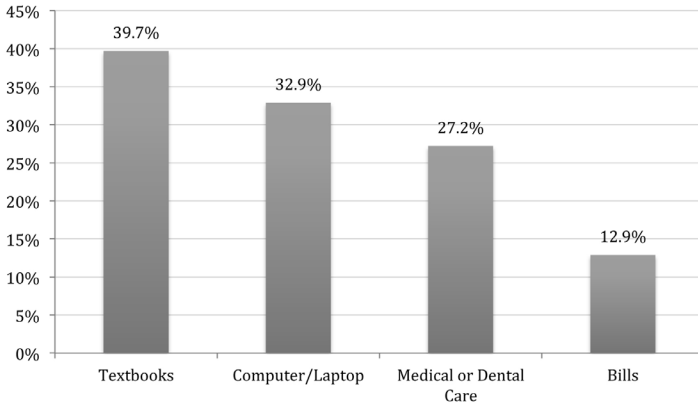
In addition to working long hours, students also reported that their financial situation involved a tenuous state of instability. As a result, a high proportion of students reported postponing medical or dental care (27.2 percent) or other bills (12.9 percent) (Figure 4). Not surprisingly, this also affected financial decisions that are central to college student progress and learning, which include postponing the purchase of textbooks (39.7 percent) or computers (32.9 percent) (Figure 4).

The impact of postponing these school-related finances also emerged in the interviews (Vietnamese student):

[I] only get paid every fifteenth of the month, so that means that every beginning of the quarter, which starts early in the month, I have to wait until I get my paycheck to buy my books, so I have to cram an entire two weeks of reading.

As demonstrated by this student, financial circumstances have a lasting effect beyond gaining access to college; their financial strain and work responsibilities also have an impact on their academic success (Cook and King, 2007; Mullin, 2012; Orozco and Cauthen, 2009). For example, more than one-third of these respondents (41.7 percent) reported

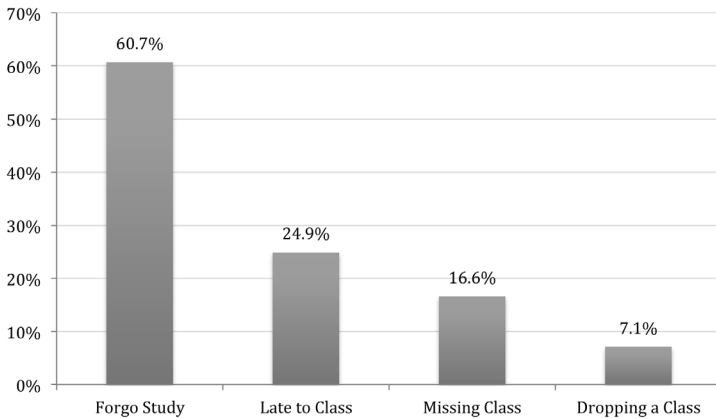
Figure 4: Postponement of Finances by Expense



Source: CARE Community College Scholarship Survey, 2012-2013.

that work interfered with their studies every week. More specifically, students reported a high rate of forgoing studying (60.7 percent), being late to class (24.9 percent), missing class (16.6 percent), or dropping classes (7.1 percent) due to work (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Academic Interferences Due to Work



Source: CARE Community College Scholarship Survey, 2012-2013.

To this point, a Chinese student shared:

My first quarter here [I took a course] and failed it because I was working full-time. I was an assistant manager at [a company] and

I was working over 40 hours a week and it was really hard so I failed it.

Contrary to the common perception of AAPIs as being the over-achieving and wealthy model minorities, our findings highlight the financial and educational vulnerabilities of the largest and fastest-growing student population in higher education. AAPI community college students' financial vulnerabilities and experiences pose challenges to persisting through college, transferring, and earning a college degree. This is problematic due to community colleges being a mechanism through which to achieve social mobility. In other words, their financial vulnerabilities may not only affect their educational outcomes, but also their possibilities to achieve financial security and lifetime wealth. So what can be done to improve the financial experiences and ultimately the educational outcomes for low-income AAPI community college students?

Conclusion and Implications

These findings are critical for our emerging understanding of the experiences of low-income AAPI community college students. While AAPI students are one of the fastest-growing populations in higher education, there is very little known about their situated experiences within community colleges, which is the sector of higher education where they are mostly likely to be enrolled. While the two-year sector is particularly important for low-income AAPI students, this study reveals the extent to which these students have unique challenges associated with financial vulnerability and how their financial circumstances intersect with other aspects of their lived experiences.

The intersections of their financial circumstances, immigrant-origin backgrounds, and the limited college knowledge within their families has a number of implications for how AAPI community college students navigate access to and persistence in college. Another key finding is the fact that intersectionality, as a conceptual lens, provides a unique perspective through which to understand the situated experiences of AAPI community college students—a concept that can further explore other aspects of student identity that were not addressed in this study. A focus on the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, for example, may yield a very different perspective on the experiences and life-course trajectories of AAPI community college students.

The results of this study also have important implications for practice and policy. For example, while community colleges are often

touted for their accessibility (e.g., affordability and lower threshold of academic requirement), there is a need for a deeper understanding of the ability of these institutions to help degree-seeking students earn an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year institution. To this point, there is a need to better understand the extent to which community colleges can, indeed, facilitate upward social mobility for low-income AAPI students. Thus, research focusing on particular postsecondary institutions can lead to a more thoughtful discussion about the role and function of community colleges, both in the context of the broader higher education community, as well as the communities in which they are embedded.

In addition to gaining a better understanding of vulnerable populations, especially of low-income AAPI students in community colleges, this study has more practical implications for policy and practice that include the following:

- More scholarship and grant programs should target support for these vulnerable populations and consider the unique experiences faced by this student population, which include their financial and familial responsibilities beyond the cost of tuition. Access to more financial aid may potentially allow students to reduce the amount of hours they work, devote more time to their studies outside of class, and access the tools that would help them succeed such as purchasing textbooks and computers.
- In addition to having access to financial aid, there is a need for practitioners to support these first-generation college students in helping them navigate an unfamiliar educational terrain through 1) access to financial resources; 2) providing financial literacy and helping students balance school, work, and family responsibilities; and 3) having targeted outreach efforts to increase student's utilization of these financial and student support services.
- Additionally, there is a need to involve the use of a more inclusive definition of first-generation college students so it considers student's immigrant backgrounds, country of parent's education, and family income in the design of programs and services. Students whose parents received a college education outside of the United States, but are low income and lack resources to pursue a higher education, are often excluded from outreach programs and services that use a traditional definition of first-generation college student status.

While this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the situated experiences of low-income AAPI students in community colleges, a population that is often overlooked or misunderstood, this study also sheds light on the important ways that higher education, broadly, and community colleges specifically, can be critical in students' trajectory toward financial security. As a report by the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (Shapiro et al., 2013) rightly concluded, "We need to support policies that help more students from low- and moderate-income families and families of color graduate. And we need to value education as a public good and invest in policies that do not leave students strapped with huge debt or a reason to drop out" (6). Financial aid scholarships that support students in the two-year sector are one such policy that can help mitigate that possibility and respond to wealth inequality. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider how these findings apply to other financially vulnerable student populations and how it can inform comprehensive reform of financial aid and higher education policy and practice to support student transfer and degree attainment to promote economic and social mobility for low-income racial/ethnic minority populations.

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