

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: The Changing Demography of the United States and Implications for Education Policy

by Robert T. Teranishi and Tu-Lien Kim Nguyen

ABSTRACT:

As the nation's population grows and the demographic shifts, institutions of higher education must be more conscious of and responsive to these new realities relative to setting goals, priorities, and strategies for achieving higher rates of college participation and completion for all Americans. In order for the United States to adequately respond to the demands of the global economy and to maintain its standing as a global leader, it must increase opportunities for all Americans to pursue higher education. Focusing on the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student population, this article highlights key findings from recent research by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education. Specifically, we describe the growth and uniqueness of the AAPI population (nationally and in different sectors of education), discuss the need to expand opportunities and remove barriers at institutions that serve AAPI students, and provide recommendations for change in the education policy arena.

Targeted investments in higher education by policy makers are being coupled with the expectation that colleges and universities will educate and train skilled workers for the jobs of tomorrow (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2009). With a focus on making college more affordable and investing in institutions that disproportionately serve high concentrations of low-income students and students of color (e.g., community colleges and minority-serving institutions), a major policy strategy is to decrease long-standing disparities in college access and degree attainment. The participation of all Americans, including underrepresented racial minority groups, low-income students, immigrants, and language minorities, is essential to ensuring that the United States can lead the world in creativity, productivity, and achievement.

Within the context of expanding higher education opportunities, we draw attention to the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student population and its role in meeting national priorities. Unfortunately, a considerable amount of what is known about the AAPI student population has been heavily influenced by stereotypes and false perceptions rather than by empirical evidence (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2009). The dominant narrative about AAPIs in higher education is that they are a model

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minority—a racial group with disproportionately high levels of educational attainment—attending only the most selective four-year colleges and institutions and facing no challenges in attaining degrees. When referring to underrepresented or disadvantaged students, much of the policy and academic literature focuses largely on “non-Asian” minorities, often omitting AAPI students altogether. As a result, there is a dearth of knowledge about the demography of AAPI students, their educational trajectories, or their postsecondary outcomes. AAPIs are, in many ways, invisible in policy considerations not only at the federal, state, and local levels but in the development of campus services and programs as well (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2007; Lee and Kumashiro 2005).

The purpose of this article is to highlight key findings from recent research by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE). This research demonstrates the needs, challenges, and experiences of AAPI students, particularly with regard to the wide range of social and institutional contexts in which they pursue their educational aspirations. Specifically, this article discusses the following trends relative to higher education:

- The growth and uniqueness of the AAPI population, nationally and within different sectors of education
- The need to expand opportunities and remove barriers at institutions that serve AAPI students
- Recommendations for change in the education policy arena

This article demonstrates the potential of a more accessible and equitable system of education, the importance of diversity as a major factor in our ability to compete in a global society, and the need for greater investment in institutions that serve low-income minority populations to expand opportunities and remove barriers.

EQUITY AND THE COLLEGE COMPLETION AGENDA

The college completion agenda is a response to the declining position in degree attainment among Americans relative to that of other nations. This decline occurs in the United States while every other developed nation shows increases in such attainment. As a result, the United States has fallen from first to tenth in international postsecondary completion rate rankings (Lumina Foundation for Education 2009). President Barack Obama has committed to ensuring that all Americans have the ability to pursue college and that the United States “regain its lost ground” and have the highest proportion of young adults with college degrees compared to other developed nations by 2020. The Lumina Foundation has its “Big Goal” of increasing the proportion of Americans

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with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems prepared a report in 2010 stating that, adjusting for population growth and educational attainment, the United States needs an additional eight million college degrees to close the gap for young adults aged twenty-five to thirty-four (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2007; Lee and Kumashiro 2005).

Improving educational attainment has benefits for both individuals and society as a whole (Lumina Foundation for Education 2009). For individuals, a postsecondary credential has become

continues to face many challenges associated with its historical vestiges of inequality and the demand for greater diversity. Thus, it is important to recognize the ways in which equity and diversity in higher education are confounding issues associated with the college completion agenda. The changing demography of our nation, which has as its fastest-growing groups people of color, immigrants, and English language learners, must be at the forefront of how we think about higher education and our nation's future more broadly. Making this poignant argument is U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who frequently describes education as “the Civil Rights

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increasingly important in the labor market. Low-skilled jobs that historically did not require a postsecondary degree are disappearing and in their place are jobs requiring some postsecondary education; this is estimated to increase to 63 percent of jobs in this country over the next decade (Carnevale et al. 2010).

In addition to the college completion agenda, American higher education

issue of our generation.” Put another way, equity and social justice in education are an unfinished agenda, yet to be fully achieved.

Indeed, systemic political, social, and economic divisions have led to disproportionate gaps in educational attainment and workforce participation and ultimately to intergenerational patterns of poverty. A 2007 report prepared by the

Educational Testing Service suggests that inequalities linked to education could worsen with time, and “a looming question is whether we will continue to grow apart or, as a nation, we will invest in policies that will help us to grow together” (Kirsch et al. 2007). Building

come and will be a fundamentally different story than in the past. The release of the 2010 Census data demonstrates significant changes in the U.S. population. The total U.S. population more than doubled between 1950 and 2010, from 151 million to 309 million, which is a faster rate of growth than any other industrialized nation in the world.

Table 1 — Asian American Population Change, 1890 to 2010 (in thousands)

Year	Number	Percentage Change
1890	109	—
1930	265	143%
1970	1,539	481%
2010	15,214	889%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

Trends in actual and projected data on the AAPI population demonstrate that this group is a significant contributor to the growth of the United States as a whole. While the AAPI population was relatively small up to 1960, when the AAPI population was less than one million persons, it has been doubling in size nearly every decade since then. Growing at an exponential rate, the AAPI population reached more than fifteen million persons by 2010 (see Table 1). The growth in the population is anticipated to continue at a significant pace. Based on projections to 2050, this group is estimated to reach nearly forty million persons.

on this point, we assert that the college completion agenda needs to be viewed in the context of a broader commitment by the higher education community to mitigate disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for marginalized and vulnerable populations. What we do to rectify inequality in higher education is an essential and necessary component of the democratic mission of higher education as the nation’s demographics rapidly shift.

The remarkable growth of the AAPI population has been well-documented (Barringer et al. 1993), particularly following changes to immigration policy in 1965 and refugee policy in 1975 and 1980, which vastly increased the growth, diversity, and complexity of the AAPI population (Teranishi 2010). The AAPI population is unlike any major racial group with regard to its heterogeneity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the AAPI racial category consists of forty-eight different ethnic groups that occupy positions along the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum, from the poor and underprivileged to the affluent and highly skilled. AAPIs also vary demographically with regard to language background, immigration history, culture, and religion.

AAPIS AND THE CHANGING FACE OF THE UNITED STATES

AAPIs, along with other minority student populations, reflect the future of our nation. Our ability to realize a better, more effective system of higher education is dependent on how we integrate AAPIs and other minority populations into the college completion agenda. While the historical trends in the demography of the nation have been a remarkable story, the reshaping of the nation is projected to continue at a fast pace for decades to

Table 2 — AAPI Public K–12 and Undergraduate Enrollment, 1979–2019

Year	AAPI Public K–12 Enrollment	AAPI Undergraduate Enrollment
1979	650,000	235,000
1989	1,267,000	550,000
1999	1,892,000	913,000
2009	2,523,000	1,332,000
2019	3,140,000	1,698,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

Consider that while a significant proportion of immigrants from Asia come to the United States already highly educated, others enter from countries that have provided only limited opportunities for educational and social mobility. Pacific Islanders, defined as people whose origins are from Polynesia, Micronesia, or Melanesia, are a diverse pan-ethnic group in themselves, whose histories include such challenges as the struggle for sovereignty. Yet, these and other very unique circumstances are often overshadowed by being grouped with Asian Americans. Thus, while the AAPI population represents a single entity in certain contexts, such as for interracial group comparisons, it is integral to understand the ways in which the demography of the population is made up of a complex set of social realities for individuals and communities that fall within this category.

Among the most significant trends in public K–12 enrollment is that students are increasingly diverse and non-White, which has profound implications for our education system. Between 1989 and 2009, for example, the share of the K–12 enrollment that was White decreased from 68 percent to 55 percent (Aud et al. 2011). These shifting demographics can

be attributed to significant increases among AAPIs and Latinos, who are also largely immigrants and English language learners. Public K–12 enrollment of AAPIs, for example, grew fourfold in the thirty-year period between 1979 and 2009 from 600,000 to 2.5 million (see Table 2). Enrollment projections show that this trend will continue through 2019. While the proportional representation of Whites and Blacks is projected to decrease by 4 percent each, Hispanics are projected to increase by 36 percent, AAPIs by 31 percent, and Native Americans by 13 percent (Hussar and Bailey 2011).

AAPI college enrollment grew fivefold between 1979 and 2009 from 235,000 to 1.3 million (U.S. Department of Education n.d.). And, while college enrollment is projected to increase for all racial groups, AAPIs will experience a particularly high proportional increase of 30 percent between 2009 and 2019. Given these trends, we assert that equity and diversity need to be at the heart of reform efforts in higher education.

AAPI COLLEGE PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In this section, we deconstruct AAPI educational attainment, which is one of the most misunderstood education trends in the AAPI community. With the number of AAPI college students at its highest ever, and growing at one of the fastest rates of any major racial population in American higher education, it is necessary to dissect this student population (Teranishi 2010). We examine the trends, focusing on the differential rates of college participation that vary significantly among the population.

Access to higher education remains a significant challenge for many marginalized and vulnerable populations in

Table 3 — Educational Attainment Rates of AAPI Adults (25 Years or Older), 2006–2008

	Percentage Among College Attendees				
	Have Not Attended College	Some College, No Degree	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Advanced Degree
Asian American					
Asian Indian	20.4%	8.2%	5.0%	40.5%	46.3%
Filipino	23.8%	26.6%	15.4%	46.9%	11.1%
Japanese	27.8%	21.5%	14.4%	43.9%	20.2%
Korean	29.3%	18.1%	9.4%	46.8%	25.8%
Pakistani	30.2%	12.7%	8.1%	42.6%	36.5%
Chinese	34.5%	12.5%	8.5%	39.2%	39.7%
Thai	36.0%	20.7%	14.3%	40.9%	24.1%
Vietnamese	51.1%	33.7%	15.7%	34.3%	16.3%
Hmong	63.2%	47.5%	22.1%	25.2%	5.1%
Laotian	65.5%	46.5%	19.7%	26.6%	7.2%
Cambodian	65.8%	42.9%	20.7%	28.8%	7.6%
Pacific Islander					
Native Hawaiian	49.3%	50.0%	17.2%	22.7%	10.1%
Guamanian	53.0%	47.0%	20.6%	25.0%	7.5%
Samoaan	56.8%	58.1%	20.2%	14.3%	7.4%
Tongan	57.9%	54.0%	15.0%	24.8%	6.2%

Source: American Community Survey, 3-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

Table 4 — AAPI Undergraduate Enrollment, 1979–2019

	Public Two-Year		Public Four-Year	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1985	184,792	41.7%	185,421	41.8%
1995	345,303	44.6%	310,650	40.1%
2005	471,299	47.3%	383,166	38.4%

Source: IPEDS, U.S. Department of Education, Fall Enrollment Survey.

America. Consider the statistics for AAPI subgroups: 51.1 percent of Vietnamese, 63.2 percent of Hmong, 65.5 percent of Laotian, and 65.8 percent of Cambodian adults (twenty-five years or older) have not enrolled in or completed any postsecondary education (see Table 3). Similar trends can be found among Pacific Islanders with 49.3 percent of Native Hawaiian, 53 percent of Guamanian, 56.8 percent of Samoan, and 57.9 percent of Tongan adults not having enrolled in any form of postsecondary education.

In the context of the poor pipeline to higher education, there is a large sector of the AAPI population with very low rates of educational attainment at the levels of elementary and secondary education. For example, 34.3 percent of Laotian, 38.5 percent of Cambodian, and 39.6 percent of Hmong adults do not even have a high school diploma or equivalent (Teranishi 2010). In the Hmong community, nearly a third of the adults have less than a fourth-grade education. This data demonstrates that access is, indeed, an important issue for many AAPI subpopulations.

Among AAPI students who do attend college, it is important to note that they attend a range of postsecondary institutions, which presents a complex set of challenges to which higher education must respond (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2010). Research by CARE, for example, has found that the largest sector of AAPI college enrollment, at 47.3 percent, was in the community college sector in 2005 (see Table 4). While AAPIs made up less than five percent of the national population in 2007, they represented nearly 7 percent of all community college students. These trends are projected to continue with AAPI

enrollment at community colleges outpacing growth in all other sectors of higher education. Between 1990 and 2000, for example, AAPI community college enrollment increased by 73.3 percent, compared to an increase of 42.2 percent in the public four-year institutions (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2010).

AAPI community college students are also characteristically different from AAPI students in four-year institutions. Analysis of recent data on AAPI community college students shows that 62.9 percent enrolled as part-time students and 31.7 percent delayed matriculation by two years or more (from author analysis of data on National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education Web site). With an average age of 27.3 years, AAPI community college students also tend to be older than their AAPI counterparts at four-year institutions. These differences suggest that AAPIs at community colleges, compared to AAPI students at four-year institutions, are more likely to fit the characteristics of “nontraditional” students.

Compared to AAPIs at four-year institutions, AAPI community college students are also more likely to enter college with lower levels of academic preparation in English and mathematics. In 2003, 55.2 percent of AAPI students entering two-year colleges had never taken a math course beyond Algebra II in high school, compared to 12.7 percent of AAPI students entering four-year institutions in that same year (from author analysis of data on National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education Web site). With one in five needing remediation in English (Chang et al.

2007), AAPI students are also particularly vulnerable to policies and practices that relegate remedial English courses to two-year institutions. This data demonstrates that AAPI students in community colleges carry many “risk factors” that are correlated with lower rates of persistence and completion among two-year college students. This includes delayed enrollment, lack of a high school diploma (including GED recipients), part-time enrollment, having dependents other than spouse, single parent status, and working full time while enrolled (thirty-five hours or more per week).

Differential access to different types of institutions has a number of implications for the likelihood of degree attainment. Consider that less than one-third of all students who enter community college with the intention of earning a degree accomplish this goal in a six-year period (Berkner 2002). Significantly underfunded compared to their public four-year college counterparts, community colleges often lack the resources they need to support their student population, which is heavily made up of those who lack the academic skills needed to succeed in college, those without the resources to finance a college education, working adults, parents, English language learners, and first-generation college-goers.

Because some AAPI subgroups are more likely to enroll in community colleges and less selective institutions, there are significant differences in degree attainment rates within the AAPI student population. Consider, for example, that while more than four out of five East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) and South Asians (Asian Indian and Pakistani) who entered college earned at least a bachelor’s degree, large proportions of other AAPI subgroups are

attending college but not earning 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. Similar to Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders have a very high proportion of attrition during college. Among Pacific Islanders, 47 percent of Guamanians, 50 percent of Native Hawaiians, 54 percent of Tongans, and 58.1 percent of Samoans entered college but left without earning a degree. Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders also had a higher proportion of their college attendees who had an associate’s degree as their highest level of education, while East Asians and South Asians were more likely to have a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

This data represents the significant challenges that exist among marginalized and vulnerable groups of AAPI students and demonstrates why AAPIs are relevant to the college completion agenda. These populations need to be targeted in the institutions they attend, and these institutions need to be responsive to their unique needs and challenges that are contributing to their high rates of attrition and low completion rates during college. The Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) federal program, initially authorized by the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, is structured as a competitive grant process for institutions with at least a 10 percent enrollment of AAPI students, a minimum threshold of low-income students, and lower than average educational and general expenditures per student (similar

to requirements for Hispanic-serving institutions (Santiago 2006). As of 2011, there were fifty-two institutions with the AANAPISI designation, twenty-one of which have received funding. The AANAPISI program, one of the most significant investments ever made for the AAPI college student population by the federal government, is notable for at least three reasons: First, it acknowledges the unique challenges facing AAPI students in college access and completion. Second, the AANAPISI designation represents a significant commitment of much-needed resources to improving the postsecondary completion rates among AAPI and low-income students. Third, it acknowledges how campus settings can be mutable points of intervention—sites of possibilities for responding to the impediments AAPI students encounter.

Analysis of Title IV degree-granting institutions reveals that the first fifteen funded AANAPISIs had a large range of proportional representation of AAPI undergraduate enrollment (11.5 percent to 90.9 percent) in 2009, and together they enrolled nearly one in ten AAPI undergraduates nationally. This is in sharp contrast to their enrollment of 1.5 percent of the nation's total undergraduate population. In sheer numbers, AANAPISIs are enrolling and conferring degrees to a significant number of AAPI students. In 2009, for example, these fifteen institutions enrolled nearly 89,000 AAPI undergraduates and awarded nearly 9,500 associate's and bachelor's degrees to AAPI students (U.S. Department of Education n.d.).

AANAPISIs are able to target much-needed resources to respond to the unique needs and challenges of AAPI students attending these institutions. The 2010 CARE report on analysis of the 2008

American Community Survey data found that the neighborhoods served by the University of Hawai'i at Hilo had an average poverty rate for Pacific Islanders that was 20.1 percent—nearly twice the national poverty rate of 12.4 percent. In the neighborhoods served by South Seattle Community College, 57.8 percent of Asian Americans and 70.8 percent of Pacific Islanders had a high school diploma or less. These results are consistent with other research that has found that the institutions that met the criteria for AANAPISI funding enrolled 75 percent of the low-income AAPI students in U.S. higher education in 2007 (Dortch 2009).

Other analysis conducted by CARE has found that large proportions of AAPI students attending AANAPISIs are arriving on campuses underprepared for college-level work, often as a result of growing up in poverty, attending low-performing schools, and being the first in their families to attend college (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2008; Olsen 1997; Um 2003). At De Anza Community College, for example, AAPI students account for more than half of students enrolled in remedial English and other basic skills classes. At Guam Community College, more than 80 percent of the students were eligible for financial aid, and 58 percent of the students were older than the traditional college age (eighteen to twenty-two years old). The AANAPISI program not only represents a significant commitment to the AAPI community, it also provides much-needed resources to respond to specific needs that impact college access and success for AAPI students.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

The changing demography of our nation means that our system of higher education must realize a fundamentally different approach to teaching, learning, and student support. This article demonstrates the relevance of AAPI students to America's college completion agenda and acknowledges the urgency to ensure that AAPI students have an opportunity to fully participate in the twenty-first century workplace. While the national college completion agenda is largely focused on reaching a numerical goal, which is important in the context of the growing AAPI student population, we believe that there are additional higher education priorities that should not fall by the wayside. To further a college completion agenda that keeps the needs of AAPI students in mind and brings our national higher education priorities into the twenty-first century, higher education policy makers and practitioners need to be mindful of the significant disparities that exist with regard to educational access and attainment. For AAPI students, gaps in college participation and degree attainment are often concealed by comparisons between AAPIs and other racial groups and more of an issue between AAPI subgroups, many of which are being overlooked and underserved.

We believe that there is a great deal of untapped potential in higher education; this is true of AAPI students and minority student populations as a whole. While working toward degree attainment goals, colleges and universities should be more mindful of and responsive to the needs of their diverse student populations. This is particularly an issue for institutions serving large concentrations of AAPIs and other students of color but also for

institutions with lower representation of minority student populations.

Finally, with globalization as a mantra in the college completion agenda, it is important to look at the advantages of diversity in American society, a demographic reality unique to the United States. Working toward a diverse democracy is critical in the context of the changing demography of our nation. We need to realize the potential of diversity and recognize it as an asset as opposed to a deficit.

A critical step toward broadening awareness about and being more responsive to these goals is having more applied research. This is not only important to the AAPI community but also to higher education as a whole as the demography of our nation continues to evolve. While research in itself cannot fulfill this goal, it is an essential and necessary first step toward expanding knowledge and broadening awareness about the needs and challenges of the emerging minority-majority. Future research can advance new perspectives on AAPI students in the higher education field and further demonstrate the importance of targeted investments in the community.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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