

On the Horizon: Emerging AAPI Issues in U.S. Education

In addition to the aforementioned “Facts” that discuss significant issues affecting AAPI participation in higher education, there are also other important emerging issues in the field that are noteworthy. In essence, these issues are *hidden indicators*—issues that often lack sufficient data to warrant attention or resources—that have considerable implications for policy, practice, and future research. We include a brief discussion of these issues both to highlight preliminary evidence in the research community as well as anecdotes surfacing among educators and administrators on college campuses to encourage further conversations within the research, policy, and education communities.

Selective College Admissions and Affirmative Action.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have historically been excluded from discourse on affirmative action, equal opportunity, and college admissions. In recent years, however, especially following the rise in anti-affirmative action legal pursuits such as the U.S. Supreme Court cases on affirmative action, we find an increase in rhetoric inclusive of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. For example, a recent study by scholars at an elite private university argues that AAPIs are the “biggest winners” without affirmative action. Specifically, they claim that without affirmative action at this university, AAPIs “would occupy four out of every five seats created by accepting fewer African American and Hispanic students.”¹⁹ Conversely, others have argued that practicing affirmative action doesn’t just hurt White students, it hurts Asians the most. Ward Connerly, architect of the California Civil Rights Initiative, asserted that increasing Black enrollment at highly selective public institutions in the UC system would require “kicking out” Asian students.²⁰

With the decline of Black and Latino students throughout selective colleges that do not use race as criteria for admissions decisions, AAPIs have also assumed the identity of conspicuous adversaries of diversity in higher education by creating homogenous Asian-majority schools. Thus, Asian Americans and Pacific

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Islanders have now been positioned as buffers, middlemen in the cost-benefit analysis of wins and losses in an affirmative action debate. Legal scholars Frank Wu and William Kidder explain that AAPIs have become “racial mascots” to camouflage an agenda that, if presented by Whites on their own behalf, would look too much like self-interest.²¹ Political analyst Claire Kim calls this “racial triangulation,” which in the case of AAPIs, shifts public debate from the real issue at hand to the false issue of whether affirmative action programs designed to benefit Blacks and Latinos unfairly discriminate against AAPIs, as opposed to Whites.²² The idea that there are winners and losers in selective admissions is often oversimplified by popular media. For example, following the end of affirmative action in California, the media brought a lot of attention to the low representation of Blacks in the University of California system. Among the different perspectives of what has occurred in the past 10 years is the idea that AAPIs are enjoying access to the UC system at the expense of low Black enrollment.

Others have gone further and suggested that Whites lose to AAPIs in the admissions game without the use of affirmative action. An article in the *Seattle Times* said, “The fact that the gains Asians have enjoyed seems to have come at the expense of Whites casts doubt on the theory that affirmative action hurts White applicants. It also suggests something that sounds counterintuitive—that, under affirmative action, when the competition was between Whites and Asians, it was the Asians who lost out and the Whites who benefited.”²³ The assertion that AAPIs are “outwhiting the Whites” is not new. This was precisely the focus of a *Newsweek* article published in 1971.²⁴ Legal scholar Jerry Kang, among others, argues that AAPIs are not enjoying the same advantages in selective admissions as Whites. In fact, he posits that AAPIs face “negative action,” which is the systematic process treating Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders differently in the admissions process than other applicants with similar qualifications.²⁵ Specifically, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are held to a higher standard than Whites; the intended outcome of negative action being restrictive access of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and maximized access for Whites.

Kidder has tested negative action in the context of admissions decisions at five public law schools where racial preferences were banned.²⁶ He found that without affirmative action, the share of Asian American and Pacific Islander enrollments dropped at two of the law schools and increased only marginally at three of the schools despite the popular belief that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders would significantly benefit from the end of affirmative action. These enrollment patterns were particularly surprising considering that during the time period studied, the percentage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders applying to law school increased 50 percent, so the pool, presumably, should have created the opportunity for major increases.²⁷

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In reality, there are no winners in a postsecondary system that is experiencing a rapid decline in the number of African American and Latinos since the end of affirmative action in a number of states. Claiming Asian American and Pacific Islander students have no problems, they are models for other to emulate, and they are “overrepresented,” works in the favor of educational and political elites who make decisions. Legal scholar Derrick Bell calls this claim “interest convergence.”²⁸ Focusing on AAPI students and their reputed success are excuses not to deal with the failure of our education system and the complex and interwoven nature of how race and racism operates in the United States.

Cultural Competency and Mentorship. It is quite ironic that there can be so much focus on the high representation of AAPI college students in higher education, without questioning AAPI presence in other parts of the academic community. Specifically, there is a lack of attention to the issues related to Asian American and Pacific Islander faculty, staff, and administrators. A critical mass of AAPI faculty and institutional leaders is essential to advocate and provide leadership for and about AAPI students. Unfortunately, they are too few in number and not at the decision-making tables of most institutions. Surveys of all two- and four-year institutions reveal that the numbers of AAPI college presidents are at an extremely low level. AAPIs make up less than one percent of the college presidency in the United States, with only 33 in the nation. Moreover, Asian American and Pacific Islander women are the most underrepresented group in the ranks of college presidents with only 13 women presidents in

the entire country compared to 768 White women, 87 African American women, and 58 Hispanic women in 2004.²⁹ In addition, there are substantial questions related to the race and gender data for full-time faculty in higher education, particularly in the Social Sciences.

Reports suggest that few Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are currently working toward the advanced degrees that might lead to administrative and executive positions in higher education; the perceived lack of career opportunities and the low numbers of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at senior executive levels may contribute to this situation. As such, it is important to engage more leaders in education who understand and support these significant issues, who are aware of the issues that impact Asian American and Pacific Islander students, and who can help to bring more Asian American and Pacific Islander educators and policymakers into such positions of leadership. This, of course, is vital at all stages of the educational pipeline; without AAPI role models and mentors at every level of a student's school experience, from elementary through postsecondary education, it will be difficult to effectively train and encourage tomorrow's leaders.

There is also growing evidence of a need for culturally sensitive mental health services in higher education. Asian American and Pacific Islander children in educational systems are often viewed as "models" with no challenges or problems that may require institutional attention or resources. This fiction has serious and sometimes tragic repercussions. In many cases, heavy expectations are placed on AAPI students to be the "model minority," with documented mental health implications. A few studies of students at highly selective four-year institutions in particular show that Asian American and Pacific Islander students exhibit the lowest self-efficacy and self-esteem of any student group. These patterns may be linked to achievement stress and academic performance

anxiety, combined with the tremendous pressure that students face generally during college.³⁰ Stress and anxiety levels among AAPIs has been found to be correlated with student perceptions of negative campus climate and depression levels, even after controlling for students' entering proclivities toward depression and varying institutional types.³¹ On Web sites, chat rooms, and in public forums, Asian American and Pacific Islander students openly and routinely discuss the extreme pressure and demands by their parents to achieve academically and to enter disciplines that they perceive to be secure (for example, STEM, Pre-Medicine, Business) even if the students lack aptitude, interest or both.³²

The rates of depression, stress, and poor self-efficacy among AAPI college students should be considered in the context of the reports of unexplained deaths and suicides by AAPI undergraduates. In fact, the suicide rates of AAPIs have reached alarming levels at some schools, which are far disproportionate to their percentages of enrollment. At an elite private university, for example, the overall student suicide rate has mirrored the national average, but 13 out of the 21 student suicide victims since 1996 were Asian or Asian American, while at an elite public university, deaths of Asian-descent students rose from 13 percent of all student deaths between 1990 and 1995 to 46 percent in 2000.³³ In response, the elite private institution mentioned above established a mental health-oriented Asian and Asian American Campus Climate Task Force in 2002.

There is a critical need for Asian American and Pacific Islander psychologists and counselors, to help bring attention to the needs of AAPI students who may be under unique pressure to meet high expectations of parents by succeeding in such traditionally predetermined careers as medicine and engineering. Unfortunately, research into this phenomenon is rare, making it difficult to ascertain precisely the extent and severity

of this issue. As Eliza Noh observed, “There are really no actual research studies. No control, no observation, no research design. [Yet] across the board you see people feeling pressured and are consciously aware of the model minority myth which pushes them.”³⁴

The World Is Shrinking. With national debates on immigration policies at an all-time high, there is a real need to reduce misunderstandings and tensions related to changing demographics in our educational system. Immigrants bring a wealth of linguistic, cultural, and historical abilities and insights. We must create learning communities that utilize these assets and foster cross-cultural communication, cultural literacy, and exchanges. Doing so will enrich all and can move us toward reducing divisions in our schools and our society.

The transformation of societies as a result of globalization and worldwide population changes calls for a concurrent transformation of U.S. education. “How well this country will fare in the new urban and new global reality will no longer depend on American political influence, military might, or capacity to expand economic productivity” observes Professor Luis Martínez-Fernández, Director of Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino studies at the University of Central Florida. “Instead, leaders of American institutions and business organizations will need to acquire, develop, and master international cultural fluency.” Technical and professional expertise of another language is not enough. The finance-oriented Committee for Economic Development has issued *Education For Global Leadership*, a study on “The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security” clearly stating, “the educated American of the twenty-first century will need to be conversant with at least one language in addition to his or her native language, and knowledgeable about other coun-

tries, other cultures, and the international dimensions of issues critical to the lives of all Americans.”³⁵

Schools, colleges, and universities with a serious eye toward preparing our students for the globalized society of the future must understand the need to dramatically upgrade and refashion their curricula, faculty structures, and resources to include a diversified community that can transfer on knowledge about the people, cultures, and histories of the Asia/Pacific, African, and Latin American regions, in addition to those of European origin. By breaking through the fictions that cloud our educational policies and visions, we can look forward together to the kind of educational systems and educated society that we as Americans are capable of achieving.