

Research Brief: The Relevance of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to the College Completion Agenda (October 11, 2011)

As the global economy continues to evolve and workplace demand for postsecondary education increases, the United States is faced with critical questions about how to respond to urgent challenges that will ultimately determine our ability to remain economically competitive. Whether the United States can maintain its standing as a global leader will be inextricably tied to its ability to ensure that more Americans have the opportunity to pursue a postsecondary degree. This brief describes the ways in which the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population is relevant to America's college completion agenda.

AAPIs and the Emerging Student Demography

The stories of the future of American higher education and the nation as a whole cannot be told without regard to the changing demographic landscape.

The AAPI population is a significant contributor to the growth of the U.S. population. While the AAPI population was relatively small until the 1960s when the AAPI population was less than one million people, it has been doubling in size nearly every decade since then. The size of the current population has reached 18.5 million, and is projected to reach 40 million by 2050.

The AAPI population is experiencing tremendous change with regard to its composition. The AAPI racial category consists of 48 different ethnic groups that occupy positions along the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum, from the poor and under-privileged, to the affluent and highly-skilled. AAPIs also vary demographically with regard to language background, immigration history, culture, and religion.

The demography of AAPI students is rapidly changing. Public K-12 enrollment of AAPIs grew four-fold in the 30 year period between 1979 and 2009, from 600,000 to 2.5 million. AAPI college enrollment grew five-fold between 1979 and 2009 from 235,000 to 1.3 million. K-12 and higher education enrollment projections show that this trend will continue through 2019.

The Educational Attainment of AAPIs

One of the most misunderstood trends about AAPIs pertains to educational attainment. AAPI students vary widely in their progress through the educational pipeline, which has implications for their educational attainment and outcomes.

Differential access to higher education. While much of the college completion agenda is focused on increasing the persistence and graduation rates of existing college students, it is important to recognize that access to higher education remains a significant challenge for many AAPI students. Consider that 50% to 65% of Southeast Asian and 50% to 60% of Pacific Islander adults (25 or older) have not enrolled in any form of postsecondary education.

Differential postsecondary outcomes among AAPIs. Differential access to different types of institutions has a number of implications for the likelihood of degree attainment. 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, 35% to 50% of Southeast Asian and 50% to 60% of Pacific Islander adults (25 years or older) reported having attended college, but not earning a degree. Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders were also more likely to report an associate's degree as their highest level of education.

Investing in Institutions that Serve AAPI Students

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. With a high concentration of students of color within certain sectors of higher education, one effective policy effort is the federal investment in minority-serving institutions.

The AANAPISI program has potential to reach a large concentration of AAPIs. The 15 funded AANAPISIs enrolled nearly one in 10 AAPI undergraduates¹, which is in sharp contrast to their enrollment of 1.5% of the nation's total undergraduate population.

AANAPISIs can target resources to respond to unique needs of AAPI students. AANAPISIs are located in and serve AAPI communities that face a number of challenges. The institutions that met the criteria for AANAPISI funding enrolled 75% of all low-income AAPI students in 2007. The neighborhoods served by the University of Hawaii at Hilo had an average poverty rate for Pacific Islanders that was 20.1% – nearly twice the national poverty rate of 12.4%. Moreover, in the neighborhoods served by South Seattle Community College, 57.8% of Asian Americans and 70.8% of Pacific Islanders had a high school diploma or less.

The AANAPISI program has growth potential. In 2009, there were 116 institutions that met the criteria for the AANAPISI designation. We estimate that, as of 2011, 148 institutions now meet the criteria for the designation. We also project that at least 12 more institutions that will meet the criteria for AANAPISI status by the 2012/2013 academic year. These data capture the growth and need for the AANAPISI program.

¹ Among Title IV undergraduate degree-granting, public institutions.

Strategies for Improving AAPI Higher Education Outcomes

Expanding knowledge and broadening awareness. The field of higher education needs to broaden its awareness about and be more responsive to the AAPI community. Research is the first step toward expanding knowledge and building awareness about the needs and challenges of AAPI students, but we need to leverage existing knowledge and expertise, pursue new research, and push for disaggregated and cross-tabulated data.

Building institutional capacity. Institutions serving high concentrations of AAPI students need by increased resources so they can be more responsive to this population. We need a shared vision of institutional change that includes strategic planning to support AAPI student success, and initiatives to create or recast programs or policies so they better meet the needs of AAPI students.

Coalition building and advocacy efforts. Advocacy is a key step toward greater access to resources and opportunities for AAPI students. AAPI and other minority-serving advocates should work in concert by discussing the ways in which their goals and interests are aligned around broad reform efforts. We must generate actionable goals and establish benchmarks, broaden partnerships to be more inclusive, and explore public/private partnerships.

The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) conducts applied research to provoke thoughtful and actionable discussions about the mobility and educational opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) in America's system of education. For more information, contact Tu-Lien Kim Nguyen at tlknguyen@nyu.edu.

^a Congressional Research Service, *Memorandum Regarding the Number of Institutions Potentially Eligible to Receive Grants Under the Assistance to Asian American and Native American and Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions Program* (Washington, DC: Author, 2009).