



Asian American First-Generation College Students

A PRODUCT OF THE ASIAN AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM

Fellow: Catherine Bitney, Ph.D. | Project Mentor: Cindy Liu, Ph.D.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

MYTH: *Asian Americans are all the same.*

FACT: There is wide variation among the various ethnic subpopulations within the Asian American community.

MYTH: Asian American students are not really underrepresented racial minorities, do not struggle academically, and are not educationally disadvantaged.

FACT: Asian American college students experience a number of stressors, such as racial discrimination, pressures to conform to stereotypes, and struggles with navigating multiple cultures.ⁱ

MYTH: Asian American students are more successful academically and professionally.

FACT: Certain ethnic subgroups within the Asian American community hold high school graduation and college degree rates far below the national average and have a per-person income well below the median income.

WHO ARE ASIAN AMERICANS?

The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population consists of over 40 different ethnic groupsⁱⁱ, which vary demographically with regard to language background, immigration history, religion, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment.

A large portion of AAPI students are from low-income families, are the first in their family to attend college, and struggle financially to support themselves while attending school. Particular

subgroups, such as Southeast Asians (Hmong, Laotian, Cambodians, and Vietnamese) and Pacific Islanders (people whose origins are Polynesia, Micronesia, or Melanesia) are often overshadowed by being grouped with other Asian Americans. These ethnic subpopulations are at higher risk for lower income levels and poverty, language acquisition difficulties, lower graduation rates for high school and college, and occupational barriers.



WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ASIAN AMERICAN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS?

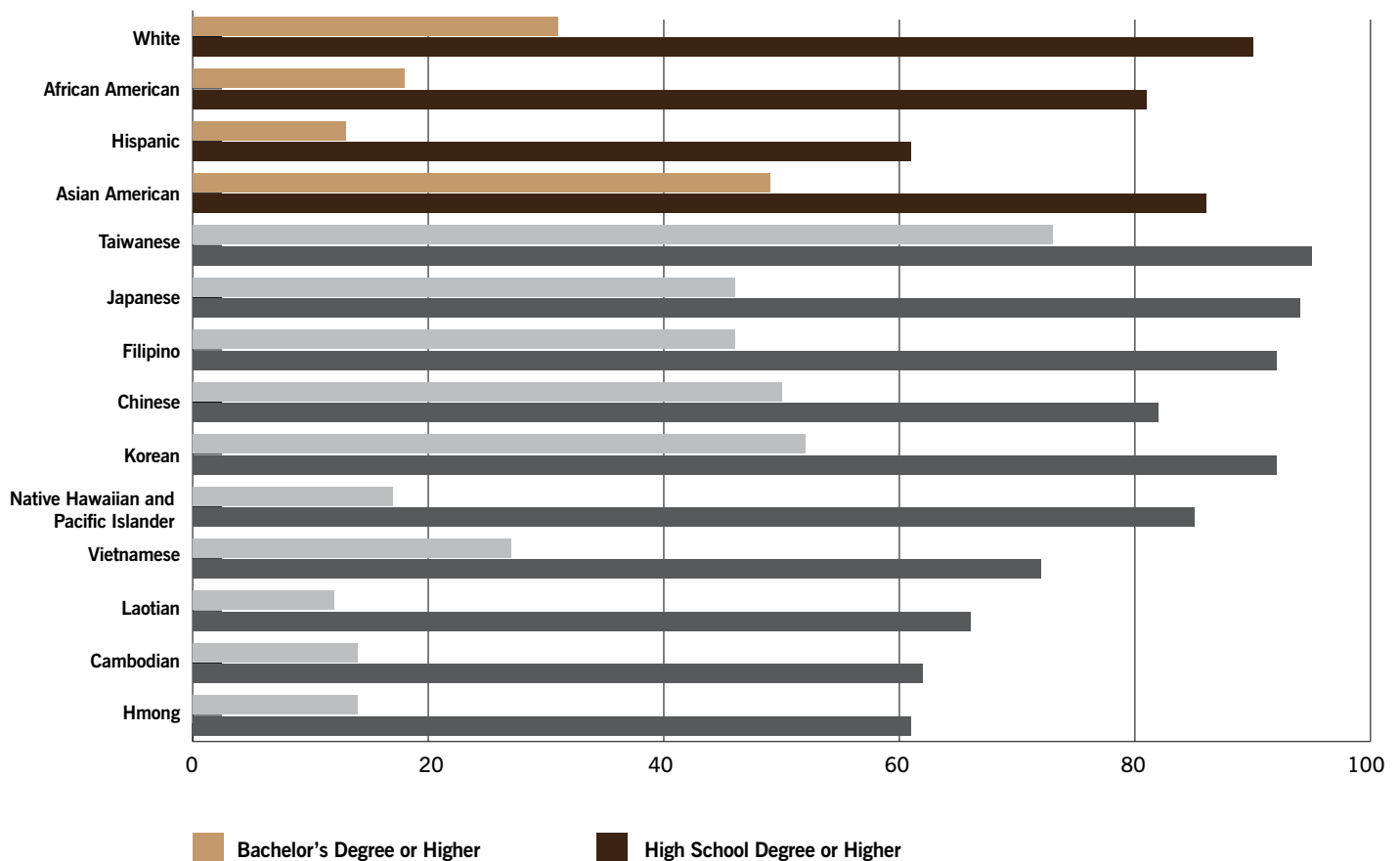
In general, first-generation college students are those whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university. Asian American first-generation college students face numerous barriers to academic successⁱⁱⁱ:

- Low-income neighborhoods and schools discourage students from pursuing a higher education.
- Significant pressure to contribute financially to the family while succeeding academically results in added stressors.
- Navigating the college application and choice process without support and guidance can be intimidating.

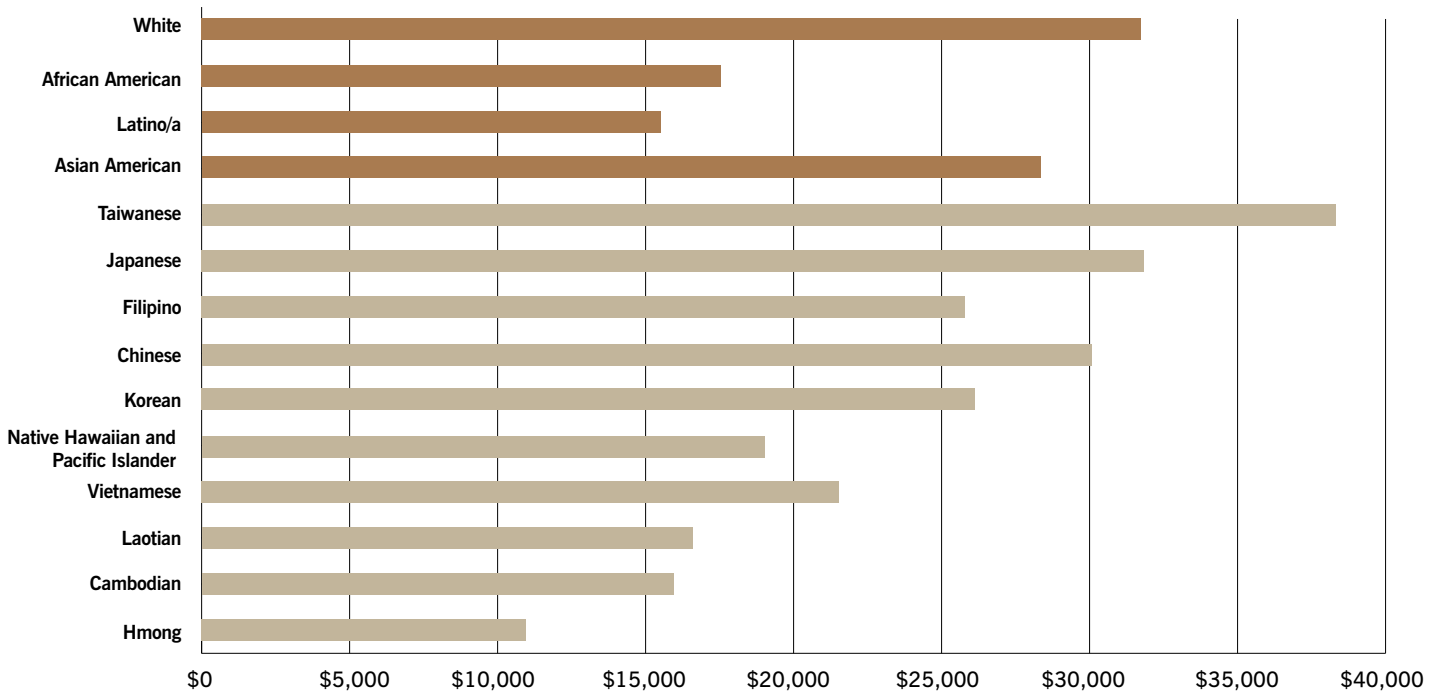
- Financial constraints influence students to attend less-expensive colleges close to home, such as 2-year community colleges, and cause them to question whether they can afford a degree^{iv}.
- Less than 1/3 of students who enter community college with the intention of earning a degree accomplish this goal in a six-year period^v.
- Attending low-performing schools, living in poverty, and being the first in their families to attend college results in being underprepared for college-level work and needing remedial English and other basic skills classes^{vi}.

The following information is based on the 2010 U.S. Census^{vii}:

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY RACE/ETHNICITY, UNITED STATES 2007 TO 2009



PER CAPITA INCOME BY RACE/ETHNICITY, UNITED STATES 2007 TO 2009



The following information is based on the American Community Survey^{viii}:

- Among Southeast Asians, 34% of Vietnamese, 43% of Cambodians, 47% of Laotians, and 48% of Hmong adults (25 years or older) report having attended college, but not earning a degree.
- Among Pacific Islanders, 47% of Guamanians, 50% of Native Hawaiians, 54% of Tongans, and 58% of Samoans entered college, but left without earning a degree.
- The unemployment rates of Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians were 3–5 times greater than those of Japanese, Sri Lankans, Thai, Chinese, Asian Indians, Filipinos, and Koreans.
- Approximately 11% of Asian Americans live below the federal poverty line.
- Over 1/4 of Hmong Americans, and roughly 1/5 of Cambodian and Bangladeshi Americans live below the federal poverty line.
- Compared to only 1% of non-Hispanic Whites, approximately 7% of Asian Americans live in overcrowded households.

TAKE ACTION

1. **Recruit and retain faculty and staff** who reflect the cultural and language backgrounds of the AAPI community.
2. **Increase resources** for Asian American First-Generation students:
 - support their transition into college,
 - encourage language competency,
 - provide adequate health/mental health services,
 - increase financial aid/scholarships,
 - initiate mentorship.
3. **Realize and recognize the impact** of historical trauma, colonization, racism, poverty, language, anti-immigrant sentiment, family pressures, cultural differences, and barriers to medical care on AAPI individuals and the community.

RESOURCES

Asian American Psychological Association – <http://aapaonline.org>

American Psychological Association – <http://apa.org>

Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs – <http://apa.org/pi/oema>

Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund – <http://aaldef.org>

National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese Americans – <http://nafeaonline.org>

Southeast Asia Resource Action Center – <http://searac.org>

National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education – <http://naapae.net>

National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association – <http://naapimha.org>

NY Coalition for Asian American Mental Health – <http://asianmentalhealth.org>

Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum – <http://apiahf.org>

Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations – <http://aapcho.org>

National Institute of Mental Health – <http://nimh.nih.gov>

National Alliance on Mental Illness – <http://nami.org>

REFERENCES

- i Museus, S. D., and Kiang, P. N. (2009). The model minority myth and how it contributes to the invisible minority reality in higher education research. In S. D. Museus (Ed.), *Conducting Research on Asian Americans in Higher Education. New Directions for Institutional Research*, 142, 5-15. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ii Sandhu, D. S. (1997). Psychocultural profiles of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans: Implications for counseling and psychotherapy. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 25, 7-22.
- iii Museus, S. D. (2011). Mixing quantitative national survey data and qualitative interview data to understand college access and equity: An examination of first-generation Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. In K. A. Griffin & S. D. Museus (Eds.). *Using Mixed-Methods Approaches to Study Intersectionality in Higher Education: New Directions for Institutional Research*, 151, 63-75. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- iv Yeh, T. L. (2004). Issues of college persistence between Asian and Asian Pacific American students. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 6, 81-96.
- v Berkner, L. K, He, S., Cataldi, E. Forrest, & Knepper, P. R. (2002). *Descriptive summary of 1995-96 beginning postsecondary students: six years later. Statistical analysis report*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education.
- vi Olsen, I. (1997). *An invisible crisis: The educational needs of Asian Pacific American youth*. New York: Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy.
- vii U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey, 2007-2009. Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity, 3-year Estimates*.
- viii U.S. Census Bureau. *American Community Survey Reports, 2010*. The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education.