

Debunking Myths and Misinformation: Testing Claims of Harm in Federal Investigations¹

One key argument in the ongoing affirmative action debate is that Asian American students who are not accepted to their first-choice college face a number of negative consequences. This was Coalition of Asian American Associations (CAAA) and Asian American Coalition for Education's (AACE) primary argument in their formal complaints filed to the US Department of Justice (DOJ) and US Department of Education.

More specifically, AACE and CAAA allege that the negative consequences include a reduction in time spent on leadership, public service, and co-curricular activities; diminished satisfaction in their academic institutions; a negative attitude towards academics and lower academic achievement, as well as “interpersonal problems, lack of self-confidence and assertiveness, high suicidal risk, and anxiety and depression;” and negative cross-racial interactions in the form of a “racial divide between Asian-Americans and other racial groups,” because they were not admitted to and thus unable to attend their first-choice institution.²

Based on these complaints, DOJ's Civil Rights Division launched an investigation into Harvard and Yale's admissions process in 2017 and 2018, respectively.³ These ongoing federal investigations pose serious implications and consequences for colleges and universities across the country. Despite the attention given to the complaints, the claims made were not empirically supported by data. Therefore, this research brief tests AACE and CAAA's claims to determine if Asian American students actually face negative consequences if they do not attend their first-choice institution.

Methods

Utilizing longitudinal data from the 2012 Freshman Survey (IFS) and 2016 College Senior Survey (CSS), we selected all relevant variables which appropriately measured student outcomes based on each theme (CSS).⁴ The claims can be organized into six categories:

1. Diversity and Racial Interactions
2. Academic Performance and Perception of Academic Abilities
3. Willingness and Ability to Contribute to Society
4. Satisfaction with College
5. Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem
6. Level of Student Involvement

In order to empirically determine if Asian American students who attended their first-choice college (Group A) had differing outcomes compared to students who did not attend their first-choice institution, because they were not admitted (Group B), we conducted a series of general linear models (GLMs), and clustered standard errors at the institution-level,⁵ while controlling for high school GPA, SAT score, gender, and first-generation college

status (Table 1-6). Additionally, we calculated Cohen's *d* effect sizes⁶ to determine the magnitude of the statistical differences in covariate-adjusted mean scores between the two different Asian American student groups. For the three variables that were ordinal in nature (i.e., time spent studying/doing homework, time spent participating in student groups, and overall GPA; see Table 7), we conducted Mann-Whitney tests. Similar to GLMs, this non-parametric test also allows us to compare the central tendencies of the two groups under investigation.⁷

Results

Limited, if any, statistical differences existed between the two Asian American groups when controlling for high school GPA, SAT score, gender, and first-generation college status (Tables 1 - 7). The results from the analysis are organized by the six categories noted above.

Diversity and Racial Interactions

Of the five indicators for this category, significant differences were found for one variable: negative

cross-racial interaction. Asian American students' experiences with negative cross-racial interactions were statistically less among those who attended their first-choice school (Group A), than those who did not (Group B), with a Cohen's *d* effect size of 0.21 [95% confidence interval: 0.06 - 0.37] (Table 1). Although Group B reported higher instances of negative cross-racial interactions, research strongly indicates that those types of experiences are linked to campus racial climate rather than college admissions.⁸

For the rest of the dependent variables in this category (pluralistic orientation, positive cross-racial interactions, knowledge of people from different races/cultures, and respect for the expression of diverse beliefs), there were no statistically significant differences between Asian American students who attended their first-choice institution and students who did not.

Academic Performance and Perception of Academic Abilities

Ten of the dependent variables for this category were not statistically significant between Groups A and B (TFS academic self-concept, CSS academic self-concept, CSS academic disengagement, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, preparedness for employment after college, preparedness for graduate or advanced education, ability to conduct research, ability to work as part of a team, and overall college GPA) (Table 2).

There was only one significant difference between Asian American students who attended their first-choice institution compared to students who did not. Specifically, students who attended their first-choice institution (Group A) spent more time studying and doing homework, compared to students who attended a non-first choice institution (Group B) (Table 7). In other words, students who attended a non-first choice institution may spend less time studying or doing homework, but they reported similar levels of academic performance and perception of their academic abilities (e.g., GPA, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, preparedness for work or graduate school, ability to conduct research, and teamwork), as opposed to "lower academic achievement." Furthermore, it is critical to fully appreciate the complexity of Asian American student achievement. Indeed, literature has documented several major structural disparities and barriers that exist for Asian American students and those impacts

on their academic trajectories, rather than just admissions into one's first-choice college.¹⁰

Willingness and Ability to Contribute to Society

After controlling for student background characteristics, there were no significant differences between Asian American students who attended their first-choice institution (Group A) and Asian American students who did not (Group B), across all four indicators (civic awareness, civic engagement, leadership, and social agency) within this category (Table 3).

Satisfaction with College

As for satisfaction with coursework, there were no statistically significant differences between both groups. However, Asian American students who attended their first-choice institution (Group A) reported statistically higher levels of overall satisfaction with their college experience compared to students who did not attend their first-choice institution (Group B), with an effect size of $d = .25$ [95% confidence interval: 0.10 - 0.41] (Table 4). There is some literature that suggests that admissions could be a factor in dissatisfaction. However, it is not the only nor most compelling factor. There are other important considerations such as feeling welcomed and valued, faculty and student interactions, and the importance of compositional diversity that are more likely to impact college satisfaction.¹¹

Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

There were no statistically significant results between both groups across all three dependent variables for this category. More specifically, there were no differences for Asian American students who were accepted and attended their first-choice institution compared to those who did not attend their first-choice institution, with respect to social self-concept, interpersonal skills, and feeling depressed in the past year (Table 5).

Levels of Student Involvement

Of the two variables for this category, future plans to participate in student protests or demonstrations was not statistically significant for Groups A and B (Table 6). However, Asian American students who attended a non-first choice college (Group B) spent *greater* amounts of time participating in student clubs or groups compared to students who were accepted into their first-choice institution (Group A) (Table 7).

Discussion and Implications

This study sought to untangle the complexity of the Asian American college choice process and student outcomes, with respect to federal investigations regarding the contentious issue of race-conscious admissions. Statistical analysis suggests that there are limited, if any, significant and practical differences between Group A and B. In other words, 24 of the 27 indicators oppose CAAA's assertions, while three were aligned with CAAA claims. Of those three outcomes, Cohen's *d* effect sizes ranged from .21 to .25, indicating a small magnitude of difference between the two groups. Put another way, across the overwhelming majority of outcomes, Asian American students who attended an institution other than their first choice did not have significant consequences compared to their counterparts who attended their first-choice institution.

Our findings have several implications for future research, practice, and policy. With regards to research, further qualitative studies are necessary to explain why and how these few, if any, differences existed between the groups. Exploring the students' learning experiences in colleges with qualitative methodologies can provide a nuanced understanding of these differences in ways that college rankings do not. Additionally, quantitative studies would be helpful in determining other statistical relationships between our independent variable of interest and our six categories. Although many of the outcomes within our six categories are worthy of further investigation, starting with the three variables that showed statistical differences between the two groups of Asian American students should be prioritized. Doing so will enrich the field of higher education, while also informing the different approaches college administrators can utilize to improve education on the college choice process for Asian Americans.

With respect to policy, the targeted use of Asian Americans in new lawsuits and investigations warrants the necessity of this study, and speaks to the importance of empirical research informing the work

of federal investigators, policymakers, and the legal community. Unfortunately, there are serious and real dangers of launching and determining federal investigations on the reliance of untested claims. Certainly, as DOJ's "ongoing law enforcement proceeding" quietly advances,¹² whatever the result of their work, the educational practices of all postsecondary institutions and the trajectory of students in higher education will be seriously impacted by our government's most powerful institutions. Thus, we hope this study will inform the scholarly community, public debate, and relevant authorities in their decisions and actions, as well as offer an approach of policy-based research and engagement that places these communities in conversation with one another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's analysis demonstrates that Asian American students do not necessarily face negative consequences, if they are not admitted to and do not attend their first-choice college. In fact, college admissions decisions and choice are not necessarily about attending a first-choice institution, but rather attending one that best fits the applicant's interests and aspirations. It is what students *experience* in college, rather than the level of institutional prestige alone, that is more determinant of educational outcomes in college.¹³ Additionally, college admissions criteria is not a reliable factor in predicting student learning, engagement level, employment satisfaction, and overall well-being.¹⁴

Thus, taken in totality and within the context of decades of education research, the claims raised by CAAA, that were used to launch DOJ's investigation, appear to be inaccurate and misguided. And as DOJ continues to advance their investigation into race-conscious admissions, the findings from this study are directly applicable towards their inquiry. Since DOJ's overall rationale to launch their investigation stemmed from CAAA's report,¹⁵ the findings from this study should directly inform the outcome of their investigation, as well as suggest that their formal inquiry may not have been necessary.

The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) aims to increase awareness about the needs and challenges facing Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students in U.S. higher education. CARE conducts applied research on the demography of AAPI students, their educational trajectory, and their barriers to college access and success. CARE is housed at the University of California, Los Angeles' Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. For more information, please visit: <http://care.gseis.ucla.edu/>.

Tables

Table 1: Diversity and Racial Interactions

Indicators	ζ	N	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences	
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)			
			Adjusted M (M)	SE (SD)	N	Adjusted M (M)		SE (SD)
Pluralistic Orientation	0.18	290	53.03 (53.01)	0.54 (7.68)	391	53.14 (53.15)	0.52 (8.08)	–
Positive Cross-Racial Interaction	-0.57	282	56.58 (56.67)	0.37 (7.46)	377	56.23 (56.16)	0.48 (7.67)	–
Negative Cross-Racial Interaction	3.12	282	54.75 (54.73)	0.67 (8.62)	376	56.51 (56.53)	0.47 (7.99)	A < B**
Knowledge of People from Different Races/Cultures	-0.82	275	3.19 (3.20)	0.05 (0.71)	356	3.14 (3.13)	0.05 (0.70)	–
Respect for the Expression of Diverse Beliefs	-1.94	273	3.89 (3.88)	0.08 (0.97)	351	3.71 (3.72)	0.05 (0.98)	–

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

n's may not add up to total sample due to missing values

Table 2: Academic Performance and Perception of Academic Abilities

Indicators	ζ	N	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences	
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)			
			Adjusted M (M)	SE (SD)	N	Adjusted M (M)		SE (SD)
TFS Academic Self-Concept	0.05	308	50.76 (50.30)	0.43 (7.55)	404	50.79 (51.14)	0.44 (7.94)	–
CSS Academic Self-Concept	0.70	280	49.84 (49.59)	0.51 (8.77)	376	50.39 (50.58)	0.57 (8.86)	–
CSS Academic Disengagement	1.89	302	50.89 (50.49)	0.63 (8.37)	403	52.18 (52.48)	0.43 (8.59)	–
Time Studying/Doing Homework Score	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	See Table 8
Critical Thinking Skills	-1.29	276	3.50 (3.51)	0.03 (0.60)	357	3.44 (3.43)	0.05 (.59)	–
Problem-Solving Skills	-0.42	276	3.49 (3.49)	0.03 (0.59)	357	3.47 (3.47)	0.06 (0.58)	–
Preparedness for Employment After College	-0.07	275	3.19 (3.2)	0.05 (0.73)	357	3.19 (3.18)	0.07 (0.70)	–
Preparedness for Graduate or Advanced Education	0.090	276	3.23 (3.24)	0.07 (0.70)	357	3.24 (3.23)	0.05 (0.64)	–
Ability to Conduct Research	0.36	276	3.18 (3.18)	0.07 (0.71)	357	3.21 (3.20)	0.05 (0.71)	–
Ability to Work as Part of a Team	0.82	275	3.43 (3.44)	0.07 (0.62)	354	3.49 (3.48)	0.05 (0.60)	–
Overall College GPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	See Table 8

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

n's may not add up to total sample due to missing values

Table 3: Willingness and Ability to Contribute to Society

Indicators	ζ	N	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences	
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)			
			Adjusted M (M)	SE (SD)	N	Adjusted M (M)		SE (SD)
Civic Awareness	0.65	275	45.00 (45.08)	0.77 (7.56)	357	45.54 (45.47)	0.29 (6.51)	–
Civic Engagement	1.17	301	51.19 (51.32)	0.74 (7.95)	402	52.03 (51.93)	0.35 (7.38)	–
Leadership	0.29	292	48.49 (48.58)	0.92 (9.33)	395	48.76 (48.69)	0.62 (8.46)	–
Social Agency	0.72	280	54.20 (54.55)	0.93 (9.92)	376	54.85 (54.59)	0.65 (9.74)	–

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

n's may not add up to total sample due to missing values

Table 4: Satisfaction with College

Indicators	ζ	N	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences	
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)			
			Adjusted M (M)	SE (SD)	N	Adjusted M (M)		SE (SD)
Overall Satisfaction	-3.55	283	51.19 (51.26)	0.49 (7.37)	388	49.23 (49.18)	0.55 (8.08)	A > B***
Satisfaction with Coursework	-0.32	276	50.09 (50.25)	0.56 (8.70)	354	49.90 (49.77)	0.50 (9.19)	–

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

n's may not add up to total sample due to missing values

Table 5: Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

Indicators	ζ	N	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences	
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)			
			Adjusted M (M)	SE (SD)	N	Adjusted M (M)		SE (SD)
Social Self-Concept	0.02	280	50.91 (51.00)	0.74 (9.13)	376	50.92 (50.85)	0.50 (8.98)	–
Interpersonal Skills	-1.28	275	3.38 (3.38)	0.05 (0.61)	357	3.30 (3.29)	0.06 (0.64)	–
Felt Depressed in Past Year	-0.72	281	1.83 (1.82)	0.05 (0.69)	385	1.79 (1.80)	0.04 (0.68)	–

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

n's may not add up to total sample due to missing values

Table 6: Levels of Student Involvement

Indicators	ζ	N	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences	
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)			
			Adjusted M (M)	SE (SD)	N	Adjusted M (M)		SE (SD)
Plan to Participate in Student Protests or Time Participating in Student Clubs/Groups	-0.3	313	2.09 (2.07)	0.06 (0.89)	413	2.06 (2.08)	0.07 (0.90)	–
	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	See Table 8

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

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Table 7: Results from Mann-Whitney Test

Indicators	U	ζ	Accepted & Attended First Choice		Not-Accepted and Attended Non-First		Significant Differences
			Institution (Group A)		Choice Institution (Group B)		
			N	Ranked Mean	N	Ranked Mean	
Time Studying/Doing Homework	103,755	-2	436	493.53	513	459.25	A > B*
Overall GPA	193,714	-0	396	426.29	455	425.75	–
Time Participating in Student Clubs/Groups	195,566	-2.5	435	449.58	511	493.86	B > A*

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

n's may not add up to total sample due to missing values

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