Asian Americans in Today's U.S. Higher Education:
An Overview of Their Challenges and Recommendations for Practitioners

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Abstract

Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the US, yet their experience within higher education has been understudied. Many practitioners are familiar with the term "model minority myth", yet their understanding of Asian American students remains overly generalized and superficial. By examining the experience of the Asian American through a public policy and demography perspective, this literature review identifies the root of the model minority narrative as it exists beyond the political tagline. As an effect of racial complexity and historical discrimination, Asian American students are disparate based on the ethnically heterogeneous nature of the population, overlooked microaggressions and academic barriers on college campuses, and mental health challenges due to lack of family or social support. Intergroup conflicts among different Asian racial and ethnic groups further perplexes the sense of unity of this student group on educational issues. Through this paper, practitioners will gain an overview on challenges faced by Asian American students in today's college campuses, along with recommendations for practitioners and institutions to improve support for Asian American students on college campuses.

Keywords: Asian American students, college experiences, student support

When searching for information about competitive universities in the U.S., one may encounter a few acronyms and puns stereotyping successful Asians in universities, such as "University of Caucasians Lost Among Asians" for the University of California, Los Angeles; "Made in Taiwan" for Massachusetts Institute of Technology; or "University of Chinese Immigrant" for the University of California, Irvine (Hartlep, 2014). These terms allude to an overrepresentation of Asian Americans on college campuses, accompanied by assumptions of successful Asian students being raised under highly educated and disciplined parents, also known as the Tiger Mom parenting style (Kim, 2013). Although the public assumes Asian American students are overachievers on college campuses, their experience in higher education says otherwise. As such, the goal of this paper is to unpack the problematic formation of model minority stereotype and to provide context to the educational reality experienced by Asian American students. Moreover, the paper calls for student affairs practitioners and institutions to assume responsibility in educating themselves and supporting the development of Asian American students.

Reality Check: Asian American Student in Today's College Campuses in Numbers

The first glimpse of Asian American college experience involves low rates of enrollment and complicated demographics. Contrary to common misconceptions, Asian Americans constituted only 5.25% of the total college enrollment during the fall 2014 semester despite their increase in population, which was lower than their white, black, and Hispanic peers. While China, India, and the Philippines are the largest countries-of-origin among the overall Asian American population, there are about 19 different origin groups within the Asian American population (López, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). When disaggregating data by ethnic group, college readiness is a core issue faced by many Asian Americans. In California, more than half of southeast Asian American high school juniors are not prepared for college due to limited English proficiency or low-income household status (The State of Higher Education in California, 2015). Additionally, about 47% of Asian and Pacific Islander students attend community colleges (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.; Maramba, 2017), a reality starkly different from the assumption that Asian Americans typically attend elite universities. These misconceptions raise dissonance and questions when considering their reality.

The Political Factor of the Asian American Race

Before exploring the current experiences of Asian American students, it is important to unpack the origin of Asian immigrants in the U.S. and its relations to the model minority myth. Xenophobia was experienced by Asian Americans since their arrival in the U.S., such as the Asian immigrants ban in the 1880s caused by the anti-Chinese sentiment. These movements emphasized the sense of invasion and danger of Asian communities (Lee, 1990), and it was not until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that Asian immigrants were allowed in the U.S. again. Contrasting from the first wave of manual laborers, the new legislation asked for skilled and educated workers (Lee, 1990). Over the next few decades, post-World War II refugees, Asian brides married to U.S. soldiers, and Asian adoptees into U.S. families diversified the Asian American population (Lee, 2015). Despite their different historical backgrounds, the U.S. public often stereotyped Asian Americans as wealthy and privileged, known as a group of "best-educated and fastest-growing" foreigners (The Rise of Asian Americans, 2012).

This perception of Asian Americans as successful immigrants highlights the negotiation between rejection and acceptance in a social scheme that deems them as the model minority. In 1966, William Peterson introduced "model minority" to the U.S. lexicon in a magazine article (p. 21). Through his appraisal of Japanese Americans, he portrayed a successful minority group with desirable qualities thriving in the U.S. (Peterson, 1966). This initiated an ongoing perception of Asian Americans being a high- achieving racial group accumulating wealth, academic success, upward social mobility, and civic obedience in the U.S. (Wong & Halgin, 2006; Chang & Demyan, 2007; Wong, Owen, Tran, Collins & Higgins, 2012). As pointed out by many scholars, this model is contingent on society's selection of accepted ethnic traits listed in the previous sentence and the broader political purpose these groups may serve (Lee, 2015, p.29-30). In other words, the U.S. publicly accepted Asian Americans when their existence and cultural values were in line with a political picture that the U.S. wanted to paint justifying that the U.S. is a merit-based society without prejudices.

On college campuses, the model minority myth introduced a new wave of political opinions towards Asian American students, using their experiences to counter affirmative action led by the civil rights movement. In the middle of the 1990s admissions controversy, Asian Americans were perceived as both victims of admission policies and intruders on college campuses. Media and politicians argued that affirmative action programs negatively impact Asian Americans' acceptance at universities (Lee, 2006). This emphasis on Asian American students' academic success transitioned narratives about Asians in the U.S. from intruders taking away resources to foreigners making positive social contributions. Simultaneously, college campuses alleged that the overrepresentation of Asian Americans in higher education negate their contributions toward diversity (Omi & Takagi, 1996; Lee, 2006). Asian Americans found themselves in an awkward position in political debates as they did not fit into the black-white paradigm that exists within higher education spaces. Described by Sharon Lee (2006) as the racial triangulation and the "racist project" (p. 3), policymakers placed Asians between whites and blacks and changed arguments depending on their needs. In the college admission process, they omitted Asian Americans as a silent minority by arguing that Asians are not underrepresented on college campuses. But on the topic of affirmative action policies, they argued that Asian Americans' opportunities have been undermined by other racial groups. This directly translated to the recent court case led by conservative politicians, who argued that Asian Americans are penalized by Harvard College for taking race into their admission considerations instead of only focusing on merit (Jung, 2018).

Overall, the racial status of Asian American students was in a way de-minoritized because of assumptions of their access to education and wealth. Although a heterogeneous group, Asian American students were positioned by white Americans as a frame of comparison against other racial groups, generating unhealthy interracial competition (Ho & Jackson, 2001). To conclude, the model minority myth underlined an illusion of acceptance for Asian American students in the U.S.: Asian Americans were too accomplished to be minority students but too foreign to be white students. As a result, issues faced by Asian American students, which require further self- education and institutional actions, are often neglected by educators..

Issues faced by Asian American Students Today

With the model minority myth as their backdrop, Asian American students face disparity among their own ethnic groups and social barriers when engaging with today's higher education system. In order to provide further support for Asian American students, educators and practitioners must have an in- depth understanding of their experiences in today's higher education system. This section focuses on educating educators on issues faced by Asian Americans through dissecting wealth and educational disparity among subgroups, negative college climate, and additional academic and mental health barriers.

Wealth and Education Disparity

Because the model minority myth endorses a problem-free image of Asian Americans and generalizes subgroups, society cannot identify or address individual needs on poverty and education issues in this student group. While Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Koreans represent the largest Asian American ethnic subgroups, about 12% of the Asian

American population includes Hmong, Cambodian, Thai, Pakistani, and other southeast Asian origin groups. When disaggregated by subgroup, southeast Asians in the U.S. earn as low as $36,000 in the median, and eight out of the 19 Asian subgroups had a poverty rate higher than the U.S. average in 2015 (López, Ruiz & Patten, 2017). In perspective, the 2015 U.S. median income per household was $56,516 for all races and $77,166 all Asians (Proctor, Semega & Kollar, 2016, p.15). Statistics like these counter the wealthy and middle-class Asian narratives led by the model minority myth.

For academic and educational support, southeast Asian adults are less likely to have a bachelor's degree, to speak proficient English, or to be American-born compared to their Asian peers (The Rise of Asian Americans, 2012). Besides this, Asian immigrants constituted about 13% of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. in 2015, an identity and area of support that many people overlook (López et al., 2017). These numbers contextualize the experiences of Asian American students in the U.S., implying that the model minority stereotype affects Asian American students differently as it induces more barriers by overlooking southeast Asians.. As illustrated by the provided data, a significant portion of Asian American students are suffering from issues such as low socioeconomic status, undocumented status, lack of social capital, and first-generation college status. But the level of attention they receive in both the social and political sphere is less than visible.

Academic Barriers

The model minority myth leads to less educational resources and more academic barriers for Asian American students. In line with stereotype threat research, studies have found that students did worse on tests when burdened with the model minority expectation, as the fear of failing undermines their actual performance (Cheryan & Bodenhause, 2000). Recent data further reveals that Asian American students do not receive enough academic support (Poon & Byrd, 2013. For example, many Asian American students are first-generation college students, receiving limited to no parental support on their college pathway. Instead of family, they identify counselors and teachers as important support systems for college access and applications (Poon & Byrd, 2013). Society is less likely to contribute resources that would alleviate disadvantages experienced by Asian Americans (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Overall, the perception that Asian American students do not need as much academic support appears to be another myth curated by the model minority narrative. By assuming Asian American students are the student group with the most academic readiness, the K-12 system in the U.S. neglects and deprives them of the support necessary to achieve their actual academic potential.

Campus Climate

Asian American students continue to experience isolation and microaggressions on campuses today, but these incidents are often overlooked or unheard of. Compared to their white peers, Asian American students experience a stronger sense of otherness on college campuses (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). In a 1996 case study on various University of California (UC) campuses, the model minority stereotype led to the tendency of administrators to avoid characterizing harassment against Vietnamese American students as racially driven (Delucchi & Do, 1996). At present, Asian American students still face racism in college as demonstrated by

a more recent UC report. On a campus with the largest Asian representation, 71% of Asian Americans have reported hearing negative comments perpetuating racial stereotypes on their campus (The Racialized Experiences of Asian American, 2016). A 2014 study at a west coast institution echoes this finding by showing that even on a campus with large Asian American presence, Asian American students do not have a sense of belonging. In fact, Asian American students experience significant harassment and less positive cross- racial interactions (Asian Americans and Climate, 2014). While many scholarly works recognize the issues derived from model minority stereotypes, some further indicate that this stereotype minimizes and even excludes Asian Americans from research on race and racial formation (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Contrary to common assumptions, Asian American college experiences still resemble those of other marginalized identities.

Mental Health Barriers

The model minority myth also induces mental health barriers caused by internalized racism. Once students internalize the problem-free aspect of the model minority stereotype, Asian Americans students become more reluctant to share their problems or seek help (Inman & Yeh, 2007). They also experience serious self-doubt and depressive thoughts when they fail to meet social expectations of high achievement (Kim & Park, 2008; Gupta, Szymanski, & Leong, 2011). A 2015 study has examined the comparisons between how Asian American students' personal college expectations differs from how others expect them to succeed in college. Researchers found that Asian American students reported pressure to navigate between the meeting family expectations and fighting against stereotype in colleges (Samura, 2015). To conclude, studies have revealed that among mental health professionals, the model minority stereotype contributed to counselors' misdiagnosis, underdiagnosis, and delayed intervention (Leong & Lau, 2001). In combination with campus climate issues, these studies demonstrate additional stressors experienced by Asian American students led by internalized stereotype threats and illustrate the lack of mental health support for Asian American students.

Recommendation for Practitioners

Recognizing these challenges and barriers derived from the model minority stereotype, practitioners and institutions need to initiate awareness and support of Asian American students and staff. Practitioners working with Asian American students need to understand the multi-layered identity impacting Asian American students beyond the basic acknowledgment of their cultural backgrounds. Having such awareness allows practitioners to combat biases, thus alleviating the negligence caused by the model minority stereotype and introducing intentional support. Self-educating, disaggregating demographic data, and supporting Asian American resources center and staff are all intentional practices that can better serve Asian American students.

Expanding Asian American Identity Development Theories

To better provide student support and combat implicit biases, this paper suggests practitioners renew their understanding of Asian American identity development. Although Social Justice and Inclusion is one of the core student affairs competencies (American College

Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015), the current widely utilized student identity development curricula lack content regarding diverse Asian American identities (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quay, 2016). This limitation produces practitioners who miss opportunities to support Asian American students since they are unaware of the complexity and importance of Asian American identity. In a 2011 study, Asian American and Asian international college students reported their sense of racial identity and ethnic identity as two positive indicators for their psychological well-being (Iwanmoto & Liu, 2010), therefore mediating academic and mental stress. This study also highlighted the differences between one's racial awareness and ethnic awareness, pinpointing the importance of enabling Asian American students' awareness of their racial and ethnic relationships (Iwanmoto & Liu, 2010).

Before one can support students' individual identity development, practitioners need to first address their own blind spots and biases caused by model minority myth through self-education. With the rise of Asian American studies, recent scholars have been proposing new theories that capture the multiple identities Asian American students have to navigate, such as bicultural identity integration and transnationalism. Several studies have redefined bicultural individuals as people who can identify and navigate between two cultures (Nguyen, Huynh, & Benet-Martínez, 2009; Mok & Morris, 2009). Within this framework, Asian Americans who perceive their different cultures as compatible have higher self-esteem, lower depression, and a more diverse social network than those who view their different cultures as conflicting (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008; Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2007; Mok, Morris, Benet-Martínez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007). Another recent identity framework, transnationalism, has expanded the analysis of Asian American identity by adding international influences as a factor in one's cultural identity formation. Transnationalism criticizes other theories' single-dimension approaches which only focus on ethnic or cultural backgrounds. It raises awareness on the Asian diaspora that was driven by new labor markets formed through global capitalism while prioritizing migrants' social class (for example, white-collar workers versus blue-collar workers) as another important factor in shaping the Asian American experience (Tunc, Marino, & Kim, 2012; Yang, 2005).

While different in their approaches, both theories demand more conscious recognition for Asian American student groups' dispositions by emphasizing intersectionality. Therefore, practitioners should expand their understanding of Asian American diversity and identities to better understand the transitional experiences of these students. Such efforts include but are not limited to renovating curricula to increase literature dissecting multi-dimensional Asian American student identities, updating diversity training to include more issues faced by Asian American students, supporting relevant workshops at conferences, and expanding programs that focus on helping Asian American students to process multiple impacting issues. Tangible resources for practitioners to self- educate include *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015), *The Making of Asian America: A History* by Erika Lee (2016), and *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* by Frank Wu (2003).

Understanding Data Disaggregation

To better identify support that caters to each student's needs, this paper highlights the importance of disaggregated data for more in- depth analysis. Since the 1900s, U.S.

government has been modifying and expanding its inclusion of additional racial and ethnic groups on the census. As of 2010, there were only seven response categories for Asian groups on the national census data. Within this categorization, other Asian was meant to include all those who do not identify as Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). As discussed in earlier sections, this type of overgeneralization does not support the diverse experiences embedded in different Asian communities. In the recognition of Asian diversity, several legislations have attempted to disaggregate Asian American data in different regions (Wang, 2017; Fuchs, 2016). These legislations aim to override the effect of model minority stereotype by exposing disparities within Asian American communities. However, local Chinese American communities have challenged these issues in fear of losing access to school admissions or experiencing racial profiling (Fuchs, 2016; Wang, 2017; Jarwala, 2018).

Similar community divisions are also observed in affirmative action issues. In recent years, while most Asian Americans remained supportive of affirmative action or race- conscious admission practices (73% supportive), Chinese Americans have made a significant drop in their support from an initial 78% support rate in 2012 to 41% by 2016 (Survey Roundup: Asian American Attitudes on Affirmative Action, n.d). Some scholars speculate that this phenomenon is related to the Chinese community's impression of data disaggregation as racial profiling, along with their economic privileges and incognizance on disadvantageous Asian Americans' issues (Wang, 2017; Ramakrishnan, 2017). Echoing the earlier demonstration on wealth and educational disparity among Asian subgroups, these contrasting reactions towards social and political issues make data disaggregation even more relevant.

Without proper data, institutions and practitioners cannot assess risks and develop informed support for diverse group of students. To better strategize support, private institutions can collect the needed data pertaining to Asian American students through student registration. For public institutions, practitioners can collect voluntary information from the student body, such as including demographics in orientation assessments or residential life program evaluations. Partnering with school cultural organizations, hosting focus groups, and collaborating with student government can also help practitioners to gain access to voluntary information that can shape better institutional support. Once obtained, practitioners can develop an assessment plan to review their departmental initiatives and goals. For example, if there is a certain percentage of a particular group of Asian students studying on this campus or living in the local community, and the participation rate for this student group is consistently low in leadership programs, practitioners should assess what the institution is doing to actively support and outreach to this student group. To learn more about data segregation, institutions can refer to organizations such as Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) Data.com that have free and accessible resources for policy research demographic data on Asian American students.

Supporting Cultural Centers, Programs, and Resources

Lastly, this paper asks institutions to provide resources to Asian American students on remaining involved in or building connections with Asian American organizations, as these organizations are crucial in unpacking diverse narratives and providing assistance for Asian American college students. A study has shown that Asian ethnic student organizations can

increase students' sense of cultural belonging, their motivation for self-advocacy and institutional change, and the acceptance of their culture and expression (Museus, 2008). Similar to their black and Hispanic peers, Asian Americans need representation in leadership roles and campus involvement to break down barriers, and they need empowerment when negotiating and navigating racial and ethnic identities. As indicated by the annual report from UCLA, student organizations help to create inclusive, educational space for the Asian American community on their college campuses (The Racialized Experiences of Asian American, 2016).

Additionally, supportive school agents can improve Asian American students' college experiences by providing access to social capital. Specifically, school agents like advisors with the same cultural and racial background help southeast Asian students by developing mentorship as role models and providing educational and social resources for students (Museus & Mueller, 2018). Aside from giving help when students seek them, proactive approaches such as outreach programs or consistent encouragement have important benefits on southeast Asian students, since many of them were not aware of school resources or the social climate in college due to first-generation college student status (Museus & Mueller, 2018). In simple terms, Asian cultural organizations and resourceful student affairs professionals can reduce the sense of otherness experienced by Asian American students in higher education. This requires institutions to evaluate their budgetary and human resources support for establishing and maintaining cultural centers and resources, as well as to reflect the body composition of university staff and their cultural competencies. Existing local resource centers such as the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) by UCLA, or national initiatives such as the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) program by the U.S. government provide helpful guides or resources for institutions to benchmark and educate.

Conclusion

By the end of this paper, one should have gained broad but useful insights to unpack their assumptions about Asian American students. As Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) have emphasized, society must understand the race and racialization of Asian Americans to fully comprehend the experience of Asian American students. By diving into the history of Asian immigrants and the model minority discourse, the system of oppression that continues to marginalize these groups becomes apparent, and the social construct of being an Asian American appears to compound. Although Asian American communities have dedicated their efforts to deconstructing the oversimplified narratives created by model minority stereotypes, intentional support for Asian Americans should remain a constant reflection for practitioners and institutions working with Asian American students. On an individual level, practitioners need to connect the past cultural history and the cultivation of self-advocacy to expand their understanding of Asian American issues, and to take active steps to self-educate and challenge assumptions. On an organizational level, the field of higher education needs to unpack false assumptions by generating more narratives. For institutions that have limited access to Asian American centers or resource programs, organizational assessment can still inspect ways in which diversity initiatives are or are not including Asian American students: Are staff aware of recent issues faced by Asian American population and their impact on students? Does the department organize cultural education programs outside of the Lunar New Year celebration?

And does the institution recognize the challenges faced by Asian American students masked under the assumed visibility on campus and stereotypes.

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