Demographics and Diversity of Asian American College Students

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The Asian American population is one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the United States and in higher education. As a racial category, it is not fixed but a fluid umbrella grouping that has evolved over the past three decades out of “dynamic and complex negotiations between state interests, panethnic demands, and ethnic-specific challenges” (Espiritu and Omi, 2000, p. 43).

The term Asian American originated during the social reform efforts of the late 1960s to end racial discrimination. College activists of different Asian ethnicities adopted it as a panethnic identity to acknowledge their similar treatment as minority group members and as a strategy to form political coalitions for equity and empowerment (Wei, 1993). In the 1970s, the U.S. Census Bureau sought to gather statistics on ethnic groups that government officials deemed similar and created the “Asian or Pacific Islander” (API) category. After Asian and Pacific groups protested the loss of their distinctiveness by this action, the Census Bureau retained separate data collection on ethnic-specific groups in conjunction with a summary API category. At different times, various ethnic-specific groups, including Asian Indians, Pilipinos, and Native Hawaiians, have sought inclusion in or exclusion from the API category because they disagree with it. Such efforts to dispute or expand this racial category to better meet their self-definition and interests will no doubt continue and underscores the complexity of the Asian American population (Espiritu and Omi, 2000).

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Building panethnic coalitions and developing a panethnic identity have been challenging for Asian Americans, especially with the arrival of new groups and differing ethnic-specific group interests (Espiritu, 1992). Nonetheless, **Asian American** (or **Asian Pacific American** or **Asian and Pacific Islander**) is now a term in common use in institutional data and U.S. society. Most important, it has come to represent numerous groupings as if they are a single coherent category.

This chapter provides an overview of the Asian American population, its immigration patterns and trends, current demographics, and higher education statistics and calls attention to its heterogeneity. In this chapter, the term **Asian American** and the data include Pacific Islanders. Asian Americans share commonalities, but they also have differences in such areas as income, ethnicity, culture, and political leanings. The tendency in public policies to exclude Asian Americans or to oversubscribe to their being homogeneous is a disservice to them. For example, Asian American students are both highly visible and invisible on U.S. campuses. They are highly visible in their record numbers and when touted as a “model minority.” At the same time, they often are invisible in campus policies and programs (Hune, 1998). This chapter seeks to better inform professionals in higher education about the demographics and diversity of Asian Americans whose interests and issues vary widely and are underserved. An understanding of the complexity of this population is important in developing policies, programs, and services that are more responsive to the needs of Asian American college students.

**Immigration Patterns and Trends**

Contemporary Asian Americans consist of individuals and descendants of individuals who arrived in the United States first in a trickle and then in two large waves of immigration. Little is known of the early Asian American settlers of the eighteenth century, prior to what is considered the “first wave.” They included Pilipino seamen who left the Spanish galleon trade and formed communities in southeastern Louisiana in the mid-1760s and Asian Indians who arrived on English and American vessels in the 1790s as part of the India trade and served as household servants of sea captains in Massachusetts or fared worse as indentured servants or slaves in Pennsylvania (Okihiro, 1994).

Longtime Asian Americans are descendants of the first wave of Asian migration to the U.S. mainland and Hawaii of the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Nearly one million Asian men and women helped develop the western states. The vast majority of the 370,000 Chinese (1840s to 1880s), 400,000 Japanese (1880s to 1920), and 180,000 Pilipinos, 7,000 Koreans, and 7,000 Asian Indians (1900s to 1930) were laborers (Chan, 1991). Some became small business operators. Their lives were constrained by racial discrimination, economic exploitation, limited political and civil rights, and immigration restrictions that curtailed
family reunification. During World War II, the second generation, that is, children of the first wave, raised war bonds, joined the armed forces, or were confined to internment camps (Chan, 1991). The third generation was part of the 1960s and 1970s college population that sought to transform higher education with demands for access and equity in admissions, ethnic studies programs, and the hiring of more minority faculty (Wei, 1993).

Most Asian Americans today, however, are part of the second migration wave, whose experiences in Asia and the United States are distinct from the Americans born of the first wave. Recent immigrants, notably large numbers of Chinese, Pilipinos, Koreans, and Asian Indians, gained entry after the 1965 Immigration Act. That act and subsequent others ended Asian immigration restrictions of the earlier period, promoted family reunification, and gave preferences to professionals in fields in short supply in the United States (scientists, doctors, nurses, high-tech specialists) and to unskilled workers willing to take jobs shunned by domestic American workers (garment workers, small retailers).

New Asian Americans are also refugees, an outcome of U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. Nearly one million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians immigrated under the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, the 1980 Refugee Act, and the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act. Some had privileged backgrounds or social networks to facilitate their adjustment, but most arrived impoverished and have had to rebuild lives torn apart by war, dislocation, and trauma (Chan, 1991). Recent arrivals benefited from an improved civil rights environment and new economic and political opportunities, including the elimination of legal forms of racial discrimination and affirmative action policies, which have since been eroded. Although overt forms of racism have diminished, subtle forms persist, and Asian Americans continue to be victims of racial violence and hate crimes (Umemoto, 2000).

The post-1965 arrivals have dramatically changed U.S. and Asian American demographics. The Asian American population has grown from 1.5 million in 1970 to 3.7 million in 1980 to 7.3 million in 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b). In June 2000, it was estimated at 11.1 million, or 4 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Longtime Asian American communities have also been transformed. New Asian Americans are more heterogeneous, representing a vast array of homelands, class backgrounds, languages, and religions. The Asia Pacific region is now a primary source of U.S. immigration, providing about one-third of the nation’s annual quota. While the sending states bemoan the “brain drain” and loss of labor power, the United States as a receiving state is a beneficiary. If the nation’s need for professionals and unskilled workers persists, as is highly likely, the Asian American population will continue to increase and diversify through new immigration in the twenty-first century. In short, Asian Americans are an integral part of the economic, cultural, and political life of the nation, including its colleges and universities.
Current Demographic Data

An analysis of data on Asian Americans from the 1990 census (the most thorough assessment until 2000 census data are available) uncovers important differences among and within the many ethnic groups that make up the population.

**National and Ethnic Diversity.** In 1990, Asian Americans accounted for 3 percent of the nation’s population, but within the umbrella API category, the census identified fifty-seven groups, attesting to its heterogeneity. Six groups comprised the vast majority: the Chinese (22.6 percent of all APIs), Pilipinos (19.3 percent), Japanese (11.7 percent), Asian Indians (11.2 percent), Koreans (11.0 percent), and Vietnamese (8.4 percent). Smaller groups include Native Hawaiians, Hmong, Laotians, Thais, Samoans, Guamanians, Burmese, Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Indonesians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Tongans, Fijians, Palauians, and Tahitians (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b).

There is diversity within groups as well. For example, Asians from India differ in religion, language, and social background as well as in generation in the United States. To add to the complexity, many Asian Americans are multiracial. They are often misrepresented in the census, in higher education, and elsewhere and find that their issues are ignored (Espiritu and Omi, 2000).

**Native-Born Versus Foreign-Born.** Recent arrivals have shifted Asian Americans from a native-born to a predominantly foreign-born population. In 1990, some 63.1 percent were born in a country other than the United States, compared with 36 percent of Hispanics and 3.3 percent of whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993a). Foreign-born status differs across Asian American groups. For example, Japanese Americans are primarily U.S.-born, while Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong Americans are largely foreign-born, reflecting their post-1975 refugee status (Hune and Chan, 1997).

**Language Diversity and Proficiency.** Asian Americans are diverse in native language and English language ability. English is generally the first and often the only language of the American-born. In contrast, most foreign-born Asian Americans speak a language other than English. Many are fluently bilingual and even multilingual or speak more than one dialect of their native Asian language. Those with limited English proficiency generally live in households where a language other than English predominates (Hune and Chan, 1997).

**Geographical Location and Housing Characteristics.** Asian Americans are both highly concentrated in cities and one region of the United States and geographically dispersed across the nation. In 1990, they resided in every state, but nearly 58 percent of them lived in the West, home to only 21 percent of the U.S. population as a whole. Nearly 70 percent were in six states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, New York, Texas, and Washington.
Asian Americans are highly urbanized, more than any other racial or ethnic group, and that adds to their household expenses. In metropolitan areas, Asian American families were far more likely than whites (24 percent versus 3 percent) to live in crowded conditions (Hune and Chan, 1997).

**Family Characteristics.** In 1990, Asian American families were generally headed by married couples (82 percent), much like all U.S. families (79.5 percent). Their average family size (3.74 persons) was smaller than that of Hispanic families (3.84 persons) but greater than that of white families (3.06 persons), black families (3.46 persons), and American Indian families (3.57 persons). Asian American family size also varied, ranging from 6.4 persons for Hmong Americans to 3.1 persons for Japanese Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993a).

**Income and Poverty.** National data and notions of a racial minority “success story” should be viewed cautiously. Asian American median family income was the highest ($46,637) among all racial and ethnic groups in 1998, yet per capita income for Asian Americans ($18,709) was lower than the per capita income of white households ($22,952) (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). The number of wage earners per family and their location help explain this. In part, due to their lower per capita income than whites and their need for mutual support, Asian Americans had the highest percentage of three or more wage earners per family among all racial and ethnic groups in 1990. They also were concentrated in high-income, high-cost urbanized areas (Hune and Chan, 1997).

Aggregated per capita income can hide differences among Asian American groups. Disaggregated data are available in the 1990 census but not in current statistics. They reveal that Japanese, Asian Indian, and Chinese Americans, many of whom are professionals, earned more than the national per capita average of $14,420, but other Asian Americans, including all Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander groups, earned significantly less, with a low of $2,692 per capita income for Hmong Americans. Although the poverty rates for Asian American groups are much lower than for African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians, they are nearly double the rates for whites. Therefore, certain Asian American groups are at economic risk (Hune and Chan, 1997).

**Labor Participation and Occupational Characteristics.** Asian Americans have a higher rate of labor participation than the overall U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b). In 1990 census occupational data, Asian American employment in technical sales and administrative support (33 percent) and service (14.6 percent) was similar to all Americans (32 and 13.2 percent). More Asian Americans (31.2 percent) were in the managerial and professional specialty than all Americans (26 percent). However, gross census occupational categories do not adequately measure status, work conditions, opportunities, or lack of them. For example, some Asian Americans brought capital and professional expertise to the United States and do manage other workers. Other Asian American professionals have
reached middle management in the public or private sphere, but many report a glass ceiling blocking their advancement. Still others are called “managers” but work in small family businesses with low returns and long hours and often at risk of physical harm. Participation in various occupational categories also differs by ethnicity. For example, 43.6 percent of Asian Indians were managers or professionals, compared with 5 percent of Laotians. These disparities reflect differences in education and skills of recent arrivals (Hune and Chan, 1997; Woo, 1994).

**Educational Data, Trends, and Issues**

Asian American educational attainment is generally high, but national data are misleading. In the western region only, where the Asian American population is concentrated, educational attainment is less than that of whites in some respects. It is also bimodal; some Asian Americans have many years of schooling, and others have very little. In 1990, of persons twenty-five years old and over in the West, 10.8 percent of Asian Americans had an eighth-grade education or less, 83.9 percent had a high school diploma or more, and 34.7 percent had a bachelor’s degree or more, compared to 3.1, 90.3, and 28.1 percent for whites, respectively. Asian American women had less education than their male counterparts but completed college at a higher rate (32.5 percent) than white women (23.8 percent) (Hune and Chan, 1997).

In part, this complexity reflects the varied educational and occupational background of post-1965 immigrants and refugees. High educational attainment, whether earned in the United States or abroad, has not resulted in Asian American income parity with whites, however. In 1993, the median annual earnings of full-time workers twenty-five years of age and older with a bachelor’s degree or more were $36,844 for Asian Americans, compared to $41,094 for whites and $40,240 for all Americans (Hune and Chan, 1997).

The high participation rate of Asian Americans in higher education reflects their demographic trends and high school achievements. Although high school achievement is uneven across Asian American groups and within each group, many more Asian American youth than those of other racial and ethnic groups expect to attend and complete college. They also spend more hours studying and take more academic courses in high school than other racial and ethnic groups, and this enhances their college eligibility. In 1990, the Asian American college enrollment rate was 55.1 percent, compared to 34.4 percent for all Americans aged eighteen to twenty-four years. However, it differs widely within the Asian American population, from 66.5 percent for Chinese Americans and 63.5 percent for Japanese Americans to 28.9 percent and 26.3 percent for Native Hawaiians and Laotian Americans, respectively (Hune and Chan, 1997; U.S. Census Bureau, 1993a).
Current Higher Education Enrollment Data. In 1997, Asian Americans made up nearly 6 percent of all students enrolled in higher education but only about 4 percent of the U.S. population. By education level, they accounted for 6 percent of all undergraduates, nearly 5 percent of graduate enrollment, and 22 percent of professional school enrollment. In contrast, the comparative percentages for other groups were as follows: whites, 70.5, 72.0, and 74.0 percent; African Americans, 11.0, 7.5, and 7.0 percent; Hispanics, 9.0, 4.5, and 5.0 percent; and American Indians, 1.5, 0.5, and less than 1 percent (Wilds, 2000).

Women in general are attending college in record numbers. Asian American women have made great strides over the past decade but lag behind women of other racial and ethnic groups. Women made up 51 percent of all Asian American students in 1997, somewhat less than for all students (56 percent) and for whites (56 percent) (Wilds, 2000).

In 1997, some 60.4 percent of Asian American undergraduates attended four-year institutions, with the remainder at two-year institutions, a consistent trend over the past decade. This is similar to all undergraduates (61 percent) and to whites (63 percent). Like other minority groups, the vast majority (79.2 percent) of Asian Americans are enrolled in public institutions (Wilds, 2000).

Degrees Earned. In 1997, Asian Americans earned 4.4 percent of all associate degrees, 5.8 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, 4.5 percent of all master’s degrees, and 9 percent of all first professional degrees (Wilds, 2000).

U.S. institutions educate foreign or international students, especially at the post-baccalaureate level, as well as U.S. citizens and residents. Foreign students earned 35 percent of all doctorates awarded in the United States in 1997. To more accurately measure the representation and progress (or lack of it) of Asian American students in the academic pipeline, institutions need to treat international students from Asia, the majority of whom return to their homelands, and Asian Americans, who are members of a U.S. racial minority group, as two distinct populations. For example, in 1997, Asian foreign students received 7,688 doctorates, or about 18 percent of all doctorates awarded in the United States. In contrast, Asian Americans earned 1,329 doctorates that year, or 3 percent of all doctoral degrees overall and 4.8 percent of all doctorates earned by U.S. citizens (Wilds, 2000).

Women in all racial and ethnic groups now earn more associate, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees than their male counterparts. Of all Asian American degrees in 1997, women obtained 57 percent of associate degrees, 53 percent of bachelor’s degrees, and 54 percent of master’s degrees. Men generally continue to earn more first professional and doctoral degrees than women. In 1997, Asian American women earned 46 percent of all Asian American first professional degrees, an increase from 37 percent in 1987, and 43 percent of all Asian American doctorates, up from 32 percent in 1987 (Wilds, 2000).
Fields of Study. In 1997, business was the leading field of study for all bachelor’s degree recipients and for Asian American baccalaureates. By gender, it was followed by engineering, the biological and life sciences, and social sciences for Asian American men and biological and life sciences, the social sciences, and health professions for Asian American women. Education was the first choice of all master’s degree students, followed by business. In contrast, Asian Americans chose business first, followed by engineering for male students and education and the health professions for female students. Education, followed closely by the life sciences and social sciences, led in doctorates earned by U.S. citizens, while Asian American doctorates chose the life sciences as their leading major, followed by engineering and the physical sciences (Wilds, 2000).

In summary, the Asian American population that has emerged through past and present immigration is fluid, complex, and heterogeneous. As the population increases largely through new immigration, the number of Asian American college students also grows. Their educational pipeline is not free-flowing, however. There are constrictions, especially by gender and at the doctoral level. Disparities also exist within the population by ethnic group. The interests and career goals of Asian American college students are complex and diverse as well. In many aspects, they resemble all students in the United States. In other areas, their educational status reflects family class background and level of acculturation, as well as racial and gender barriers in higher education (Hune, 1998; Hune and Chan, 1997).

Asian American educational data also have limitations. Data derived from the U.S. census are deceptive in conflating the human capital of Asian immigrants educated abroad with those schooled in the United States. Nonetheless, census data do disaggregate by Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic group and reveal significant differences within the API population. As other available data on Asian American students, notably institutional data, are generally aggregated, great care must be taken in interpreting them. Such data homogenize them and conceal individual and group distinctions that require attention.

Implications for Policies, Programs, and Services

The use of Asian American as an umbrella category in public policy is helpful, but it can obscure demographic differences that need to be addressed to benefit specific Asian and Pacific groups and individuals. Aggregated data suggest that Asian Americans are members of a “success story,” while disaggregated U.S. census data challenge this notion by uncovering differences in ethnicity, income, education, family size, language proficiency, and other aspects. An understanding of Asian American college students as a diverse population with ethnic-specific and need-specific concerns can help higher education professionals serve them better.
National educational statistics are limited and may not reflect individual campus demographics. To develop appropriate policies, programs, and services for Asian American students, institutions need to collect both aggregate and ethnic-specific data on their Asian American campus population. Considering Asian foreign students and Asian Americans, a racial minority group, as two distinct populations with their own needs and concerns also can enhance services to both communities.

Statistics are only part of the story. In numerous qualitative studies, including campus diversity reports, Asian American students, faculty, and staff have documented their issues and voiced their neglect by professionals in higher education (Hune and Chan, 1997). Acknowledging the presence of Asian American students is not the same as recognizing their educational needs and concerns. Asian American students identify access and equity in academic and student services as issues along with a chilly classroom climate; racial and ethnic stereotyping by faculty, staff, and other students; and the lack of advisement and support for their integration into campus life (Osajima, 1995; Woo, 1997). Ethnic-specific and need-specific policies and programs may be required to enhance the academic progress of groups at risk, especially Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander groups. First-generation Asian American college students and those from low-income households are less familiar with U.S. institutions, values, and culture and seek support to negotiate college, where they feel like “outsiders.” Students who have limited English or speak with an accent report language bias and discrimination and find they can be penalized academically. Female students, in particular, find barriers in the classroom and advisement and can experience sexual harassment. And racial incidents and hate crimes against Asian American students need to be taken seriously by higher education professionals (Hune, 1998).

Asian Americans are heterogeneous, and so are their educational needs. Their issues also change, reflecting the population’s dynamics. Knowledge of Asian American demographics, diversity, and concerns can do much toward developing relevant higher education policies, programs, and services for Asian American students. Most important, student affairs professionals have a critical role to play in addressing and making visible the needs and concerns of Asian American college students.

References


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