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## Increasing the Educational Retention and Attainment Rates of Southeast Asian American College Students Through AANAPISIs

Alice Chu

*Since its emergence in the 1960s, the Model Minority Myth (MMM) has been pervasive in its assumption of Asian Americans as a monolithic racial group of naturally high-achieving individuals. This widely accepted stereotype has not only dismissed the educational challenges that diverse subpopulations may face within the context of higher education, but also made it hard for them to garner targeted resources and support throughout their educational journey. In particular, Southeast Asian American (SEAA) college students have suffered the brunt of the consequences, as their unique challenges and experiences have been heavily erased. Unlike their Asian American peers, Southeast Asian Americans attain postsecondary degrees at significantly lower rates and also exhibit lower rates of student retention overall. However, with the rise of Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), SEAA college students are given renewed hope at a college experience that truly caters to their needs. AANAPISIs across the nation serve as an important access point to higher education for SEAA college students and play an important role in providing academic and co-curricular programming that aims to support this student population's educational attainment. Recognizing this, I will discuss actionable steps that AANAPISI grant-seekers and stakeholders can take to ensure that their campus communities are built to welcome and support the unique experiences and challenges of SEAA student populations. However, in order to build upon the impact and potential that AANAPISIs can have on the educational experience of not only SEAA college students, but all AAPI students in general, it is important for all institutional agents and community members to take action collectively and individually.*

**Keywords:** Southeast Asian American, Model Minority Myth, educational attainment, retention, Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution

Asian Americans remain the fastest growing racial group within the United States (US) today; yet, despite this, national understanding of the racial

and ethnic diversity encompassed within this group is severely limited and misinformed (Eligon, 2020; Museus et al., 2016). Rather than viewing Asian Americans as the complex group of at least 20 diverse subpopulations that they are, the US continues to categorize this population as a monolithic group of individuals (López et al., 2017; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). According to the Model Minority Myth (MMM), a widely adopted stereotype characterizing Asian Americans as naturally high-achieving individuals, this racial group experiences seemingly no challenges toward achieving high levels of academic success and educational attainment (Museus & Mueller, 2018). Harmful assumptions like this not only perpetuate stereotypes deeply rooted in oppression, but also dismiss the academic challenges and needs of subpopulations that do not satisfy these expectations (Assalone & Fann, 2017). In the case of Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA, referring to Asian Americans of Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, or Vietnamese descent), this group of individuals experiences educational realities that starkly contrast that of their Asian American peers. Within the realm of higher education, SEAs earn bachelor's and associates degrees at significantly lower rates than their Asian American counterparts and are twice as likely to transfer out of their institution for nonacademic reasons (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). These harsh realities ultimately illustrate the ways in which SEAA college students have historically been underserved and underrepresented within systems of education. Thus, it is important to center these students in research and understand how institutions can contribute to their increased educational attainment and retention.

Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), one of the newest minority-serving institutions (MSI), have proven to be paramount in the journey toward greater educational attainment and student retention for Asian American college students. By 2018, 47.5% of all associate's degrees and 29.4% of all bachelor's degrees conferred to Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) college students across the US were conferred at either an eligible or a federally funded AANAPISI (Nguyen, 2020). Given that over 1/3 of AAPI college students attend an AANAPISI, these institutions have the opportunity to impact the educational experiences and outcomes of all Asian American student populations, but specifically SEAs (Nguyen, 2020). Therefore, in this paper I will be centering the educational realities of SEAA college students, as they have been historically dismissed from existing narratives, and outlining the ways in which AANAPISIs can positively contribute to this population's educational retention and attain-

ment. By doing so, I hope to provide AANAPISI grant-seekers and stakeholders with a deeper understanding of how they can properly support their Asian American students. In the first couple sections, I will discuss my own positionality in relation to the topic at hand and background on the MMM to provide context on how this stereotype guides educational expectations of all Asian Americans. In the following sections, I will focus on highlighting the educational experiences and outcomes of SEAA college students so that readers can understand the dismissive impact of the MMM on this student population. Finally, I will discuss the presence of AANAPISIs and their role in supporting higher levels of educational retention and attainment for SEAA college students.

### **Author's Positionality**

As a Chinese-American student currently pursuing my Master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration, I am only just now coming to the full realization of how systems of higher education have continuously harmed and dismissed the educational realities of all Asian American student populations. While I was pursuing my bachelor's degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I constantly battled with the impossible expectations that the MMM placed on members of my racial group. Why were Asian Americans expected to succeed naturally through their courses, and most importantly, why was I built to feel shame when I failed to do so? Up until now, these dangerous stereotypes invaded my individual belief system and became deeply ingrained within my mind as a true measure of my self-worth. Now that I am able to recognize the impacts that these stereotypes have had on me, I want to dedicate my energy toward dispelling these erroneous assumptions and drawing attention to the ways in which they have and continue to oppress and disadvantage Asian American subpopulations within higher education. My hope as a future practitioner within Student Affairs is to support Asian American student populations on their academic journeys, no matter where that may lead them. As such, it is extremely important that I not only recognize and unpack how the MMM affects the AAPI student experience, but also encourage other institutional practitioners, educators, and allies to do the same. My primary audience for this research paper remains AANAPISI grant-seekers and stakeholders; however, I hope that all staff, faculty, and community members recognize that AAPI visibility within higher education is the responsibility of all affiliated individuals.

## Impact of the Model Minority Myth (MMM)

Since the 1960s, Asian American populations have been living under the monolithic stereotype known as the MMM (Poon et al., 2016). Origins of this term can be traced back to the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, when Asian Americans' success was used as justification to reject accusations of racial injustice and oppression in America by Black folk (Poon et al., 2016). The MMM posits that all Asian Americans are naturally high-achieving individuals, with the insinuation that this population experiences no real challenges toward their achievements (Assalone & Fann, 2017). Although widely perceived as a compliment toward Asian Americans' work ethic and potential, the MMM ultimately harbors dismissive undertones of Asian Americans and their individual experiences (Chang & Villazor, 2007). Instead of understanding the diverse populations that make up Asian Americans, the MMM instead lumps them all together and assumes vast generalizations about their success (Poon et al., 2016). Contrary to the homogeneous identity of Asian Americans that the MMM perpetuates, the Pew Research Center notes at least 20 different subpopulations of Asian Americans in the US (López et al., 2017). However, due to the persisting nature of this myth, the diversity within these subpopulations continues to be dismissed and oppressed within society. Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group within the US, yet research on this population remains sparse and fails to disaggregate between distinct subpopulations, which only reinforces the MMM (Eligon, 2020; Maramba, 2011; Museus et al., 2016). Because of the MMM, Asian Americans' identities and experiences have suffered erasure; this can be found further illustrated through systems of higher education, where SEAs regularly suffer at the hands of this myth.

When the MMM is widely accepted as the truth, as it far too often is, it contributes to the misunderstanding and lack of support that SEAA college students experience within higher education (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Due to the erroneous assumptions of this myth, many SEAA students continue to be underserved within higher education (Alcantar, Nguyen, & Maramba, 2019). The MMM preserves the idea that all Asian American college students are naturally born high achievers and will be able to obtain their degrees without any challenges (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Pervasive mindsets such as this only further contribute to the erasure of the SEAA college student experience (Alcantar, Nguyen, & Maramba, 2019). Although

East Asian American college students tend to exhibit relatively high rates of degree attainment (e.g., Taiwanese 74.1%; Chinese 51.5%; Korean 53.9%), these rates are significantly lower for SEAAs (e.g., Vietnamese 25.8%; Cambodian 14.1%; Hmong 14.7%; Laotian 12.4%) (Teranishi et al., 2015). Despite this reality, institutions rarely focus their support and retention efforts on SEAAs, leaving these students inadequately prepared for college (Her, 2014). Unfortunately, these injustices are hardly ever addressed because of the generalizations that the MMM endorses (Her, 2014). When institutions and their community members entertain such myths, it contributes to the unhealthy cycle of harm that exists within higher education and is the reason why SEAA college students struggle with educational attainment (Poon et al., 2016). Therefore, it becomes important for all institutions, staff, and faculty members to center the experiences and challenges of SEAA college students. Only by understanding the ways in which the MMM impacts their individual ability to support these student populations will institutional agents be able to effectively advocate on their behalf.

### **Southeast Asian Americans and Higher Education**

In comparison to their Asian American peers, SEAAs share drastically different socioeconomic statuses and educational realities that affect their ability to access higher education and contribute to lower levels of educational attainment outcomes (National CAPACD, 2013; Teranishi et al., 2015). Many SEAAs identify as low-income and first generation individuals, making their pathway to higher education that much more challenging as they have to navigate both lack of financial support and social capital (Nguyen et al., 2020). Factors such as these, which provide prospective students with important resources and knowledge, serve as crucial barriers to educational access that ultimately hinder degree attainment for SEAAs (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Furthermore, when SEAAs do pursue higher education, they enroll overwhelmingly at two-year colleges as opposed to four-year institutions and are more likely to enroll as nontraditional students (i.e., delayed enrollment, part-time, single parent, work full time while enrolled) (Teranishi, 2012; Teranishi et al., 2015). Compounded with the influence of the MMM, the educational realities and hindrances that SEAA college students face are only further exacerbated. In this way, these distinct challenges make it harder for SEAA college students to access institutions of higher education and ensure their retention while they are there.

For SEAA college students who are able to access higher education, they unfortunately find themselves faced with a plethora of additional challenges that interfere with their retention and ultimate degree attainment (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Compared to their Asian American counterparts, SEAA college students tend to earn bachelor's and associate's degrees at significantly lower rates and are twice as likely to transfer out of their institution for non-academic reasons; this is due to many individual and institutional factors that impact the educational and social experiences of SEAA student populations (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Starting off with the fact that a majority of SEAA students are enrolled at two-year community colleges, this presents itself as one of the main challenges (Teranishi et al., 2015). Although community colleges are a great option that provide increased opportunities for participation in higher education, research has found that over half of all students who enroll in community colleges are in need of remediation (Fong et al., 2017; Teranishi et al., 2015). Remedial courses are mandatory, non-degree coursework that aim to prepare students for college-level coursework (Kane et al., 2020). For every remedial course that community college students are required to complete, their chances at transferring to a four-year institution or earning a postsecondary degree decreases exponentially (Teranishi et al., 2015). Remedial coursework tends to exhaust financial resources, time, and energy; and at the end of the day, it does not contribute to degree requirements (Shapiro et al., 2012). The demands of remedial coursework make it difficult for SEAA community college students' educational attainment, as many students placed in these courses never even finish them, yet alone attain a degree (Johnson, 2020). Additionally, institutional involvement and campus climate also play an important role in the ability of SEAA college students to continue on in their educational journey.

SEAA college students' comfortability and perceived success within systems of higher education depend heavily on the institution's ability to support their needs and encourage a welcoming environment (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). For the most part, SEAA students remain highly underserved within higher education institutions (Xiong, 2019). Due to the impacts of the MMM, many institutions incorrectly assume that no Asian American college students require specialized resources or targeted attention throughout their educational journeys (Poon et al., 2016). Although many institutions do provide basic educational support services, SEAA students either remain unaware of how to access these resources or struggle to connect with staff members who do not fully understand their unique challenges (Xiong, 2019). Circumstances

such as these make it hard for SEAs to seek out proper support systems and resources throughout their time at higher education institutions. Beyond this, campus climate is also a very important contributor to SEAA student retention (Nguyen et al., 2018). SEAA students enter institutions with cultural backgrounds that heavily influence their identities (Yosso, 2005). When their cultural background is nurtured and developed within their campus communities it can help them build a sense of belonging, which will positively impact their educational engagement and outcomes (Museus & Mueller, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018). Compared to their East Asian counterparts, however, SEAA student populations have shown to experience lower levels of sense of belonging (Nguyen et al., 2018). Therefore, when institutions do not prioritize bridging the gap between SEAA students' individual cultural and community culture, students will be less likely to persist throughout higher education (Museus et al., 2016). In order to support the educational attainment and retention of SEAA college students, institutions must acknowledge the role that they play in doing so.

### **What Are Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI)?**

Minority-serving institutions (MSI) play an important role in serving historically marginalized student populations and prioritizing specialized strategies to improve the educational outcomes of their students (Nguyen et al., 2020). Of the MSIs, AANAPISIs are one of the newest institution types to become federally designated (Mac et al., 2019). These institutions were established by congress in 2008 as part of a national effort by policymakers and community organizers to dispute the harmful assumptions of the MMM and call attention to the educational challenges of diverse Asian American subpopulations (Mac et al., 2019). The establishment of AANAPISIs demonstrated both the federal government's official acknowledgement of the varying educational realities amongst Asian American subpopulations and the national commitment to address their educational challenges and needs (Nguyen, 2020). In order for higher education institutions to be federally recognized as an AANAPISI, they must enroll at least 10 percent Asian American Native American Pacific Islander (AANAPI) full-time students, with at least 50 percent of these students identifying as low-income (Teranishi et al., 2015). Institutions that qualify are able to apply for federal funding and support so that they can establish and maintain educational programs, outreach initiatives, and other support services to benefit the educational experiences of

AANAPI college students (Catalozzi et al., 2019). AANAPISI funding strategies and initiatives focus primarily on providing culturally relevant curriculum and resources (Alcantar, Nguyen, & Maramba, 2019). Since their emergence in 2008, there are at least 217 institutions that satisfy the initial requirements and are categorized as AANAPISIs; of these institutions, 38 have been granted federal funding and support (Nguyen et al., 2020). The resources provided through these pathways allow institutions to understand and enrich the educational experiences of their AANAPI students. Thus, unsurprisingly, AANAPISIs serve as an important point of access to higher education for Asian Americans, specifically SEAAAs.

AANAPISIs play an important role in facilitating the educational retention and attainment of AAPI college students (Nguyen et al., 2020). Of the over 4,000 institutions that are established within the US, AANAPISIs only comprise approximately 5.1% of these colleges; however, research shows that they enroll nearly 40% of all AAPI students who attend higher education (Nguyen et al., 2020). Additionally, as previously stated, 47.5% of all associate's degrees and 29.4% of all bachelor's degrees conferred to Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) college students across the US were conferred at either an eligible or a federally funded AANAPISI by 2018 (Nguyen, 2020). This research illustrates not only the impact that these institutions have on students through providing culturally conscious learning environments, but also how important these developmental qualities are to AAPI students. Furthermore, research has found that attending an AANAPISI can yield many positive benefits for AAPI college students. For example, students who attended an AANAPISI proved to have higher retention and degree attainment rates than students who did not attend an AANAPISI (Nguyen et al., 2020). Increased educational outcomes are largely attributed to AANAPISI funding strategies that focus on developing academic skills and support systems, as well as encouraging campus climates that contribute to positive psychosocial outcomes in students (e.g., sense of belonging on campus, faculty-student and student-peer relations, etc.) (Alcantar, Pazich, & Teranishi, 2019). Given their reach to AAPI college students, it's important to recognize the specific ways in which AANAPISI institutions have already and could continue to serve SEAA college students and increase their visibility within higher education.

## How AANAPISIs Can and Should Support SEAA College Students

In order to improve the SEAA college student experience, it is important for AANAPISIs to understand the many initiatives that they can specifically prioritize to benefit this student population. Most importantly, institutions should be more intentional about their SEAA staff and faculty representation, as they are historically underrepresented within higher education (Center, 2013). SEAA staff and faculty play a significant role in not only facilitating SEAA students' transition to postsecondary education, but also providing and building social capital for them (Museus & Mueller, 2018). One of the many barriers that SEAA students face within higher education is directly related to their overwhelming identities as first-generation college students (Alcantar, Nguyen, & Maramba, 2019). Because their parents, guardians, and loved ones do not always have first-hand experience with higher education, it can be hard for these students to access the necessary resources and support systems that may be available to them (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Since SEAA staff and faculty understand and most likely have experienced these unique challenges themselves, they prove to be important caring agents that will aid in both the matriculation and retention of SEAA students in higher education (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Moreover, SEAA staff and faculty representation within the institutional setting provides social capital to these students and can influence positive campus climates (Museus & Mueller, 2018). Social capital references how networks and institutional agents provide individuals the ability to navigate complex systems of education, as well as access to resources and opportunities (Museus & Mueller, 2018). Social capital is crucial to the educational attainment and retention of SEAA college students, as research shows that it is linked to positive experiences and educational outcomes (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Building social capital with individuals of common background will ultimately empower SEAA college students to persist in higher education. Additionally, the presence of SEAA staff and faculty in positions of power allow these professionals to promote positive campus climates that bolster SEAA visibility. Therefore, increasing representation should be an important objective for institutions; however, there are also other impactful changes that should be made.

AANAPISIs need to consider how they can alter their resources and curriculum to target SEAA college students. Although many institutions already offer support services to their student communities, AANAPISIs specifically need to consider how they can further tailor these offerings to not only cater to

SEAA student populations, but also make them more accessible to these students. For example, AANAPISIs can offer SEAA peer mentorship programs, academic counseling, or even learning communities that are specially aimed toward confronting the academic challenges that these students encounter throughout their educational journeys. Intentional initiatives such as these will ultimately connect these students with community and create affinity, while also illustrating institutional dedication toward SEAA student visibility and retention. Furthermore, another consideration for AANAPISIs is to engage students in culturally relevant and responsive curriculum by creating space for SEAA students to learn more about their cultural backgrounds through the establishment of cohesive Asian American studies programs or grounding teaching practices and curriculum in cultural theories and/or methods. Through fostering learning environments that center their individual identity and cultural backgrounds, SEAA students will have the opportunity to engage deeper in their learning and benefit from curriculums that are intentional and culturally responsive (Catallozi et al., 2019). Additionally, given that so much of Asian American understanding within society is influenced by stereotypes perpetuated through the MMM, this solution would provide a way for Asian American students to reclaim the way they interact with and understand their cultures and identities. By committing themselves to these changes, AANAPISIs will undoubtedly provide more healthy multicultural learning environments that positively contribute to the educational attainment and retention of all Asian American students.

### **Implications**

AANAPISIs are an important factor in educational access, attainment, and retention for SEAA college students (Teranishi, 2012). However, there are still many barriers working against this student population that hinder their chances for degree attainment. In order to continue serving SEAA college students, it is important to understand how institutional agents, community members, and researchers can further contribute to SEAA visibility in higher education.

#### **Implications for AANAPISIs**

Unlike other MSIs, AANAPISIs are not explicitly founded on missions to support their intended student populations (Mac et al., 2019). In order to be categorized as an AANAPISI, institutions just have to enroll at least 10 percent

AANAPI full-time students, with at least 50 percent of these students identifying as low-income (Teranishi et al., 2015). Because of this, however, many AANAPISIs are still predominantly white institutions (PWI) with campus cultures that disproportionately serve white-identifying student populations and interests (Mac et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this means that these institutions could serve as dangerous environments where stereotypes perpetuated by the MMM continue to thrive, persist, and cause harm to Asian American students. Therefore, it becomes absolutely imperative that AANAPISIs keep this in mind and evaluate how their institutional histories and priorities hinder their ability to support Asian American student populations to the best of their abilities. Additionally, because AANAPISI categorization is not dependent on institutional missions, this also means that many institutions that are currently classified as AANAPISIs may not even realize that they enroll such significant populations of Asian American college students. As a result, the reality may very well be that many Asian American students attending AANAPISIs still remain severely misunderstood and underserved. Consequently, these injustices only further perpetuate cycles of harm that dismiss the educational challenges that diverse Asian American subpopulations experience in higher education and contribute to their invisibility. Therefore, regardless of whether or not AANAPISIs receive federal funding, it is paramount that these institutions recognize their responsibility to prioritize and cater resources toward their Asian American student populations.

When considering federal funding for AANAPISIs, this may be another factor that contributes to the lack of support for these MSIs. Although there are over 200 eligible AANAPISI institutions, one of the highest amounts amongst MSIs, they are also one of the least-funded (Nguyen et al., 2020). Despite federal recognition of the educational challenges that Asian American students undoubtedly face in higher education, there remains very limited resources toward combating such challenges and investing in the Asian American college student experience. For institutions that do attempt to apply for the federal AANAPISI grant, it remains very competitive (Nguyen, 2020; Teranishi, 2011). Currently, only 38 out of over 200 AANAPISIs have been granted federal funding from the US Department of Education to implement academic and co-curricular resources for AAPI college students (Nguyen, 2020). Additionally, because AANAPISI categorization is so susceptible to swings in enrollment patterns, institutions are further deterred from embracing their AANAPISI status and applying for the federal grant (Alcantar, Pazich, & Teranishi, 2019). Due to the lack of permanency of the grant, many

institutions might not find it beneficial to focus so much time and energy on securing funding that could be taken away at any moment. However, regardless of funding, all AANAPISIs need to commit themselves to establishing programs and initiatives that will serve AAPI college students and increase their overall retention. Like this, they can contribute to efforts that serve the needs of diverse Asian American subpopulations that will work to debunk harmful stereotypes of the MMM. Without federal funding, institutions can achieve this goal by redirecting their interests and budget allocations toward historically marginalized and underserved student populations. For institutions that do receive the AANAPISI grant, they should remain intentional with their efforts by investing portions of the funding in lasting efforts such as professional development and curriculum development. In this way, AANAPISIs can adequately center AAPI college students' educational experiences and minimize the challenges that they face.

### **Implications for Institutional Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**

In order to make higher education institutions a positive experience for SEAA college students to thrive individually, institutional staff, faculty, and administrators must help to promote positive campus climates for all Asian American students. Moving forward, institutional staff and faculty need to prioritize their personal education about Asian American students. In order to understand these diverse subpopulations properly, educators need to acknowledge how the MMM has influenced their understanding of this racial group and how that differs from reality. Once they commit themselves to their personal growth and learning, they will be able to interact with SEAA college students better and understand how they can support their academic journeys within higher education. Furthermore, institutional agents need to contribute to influencing a positive campus climate that encourages multicultural connections and understanding amongst students and community members. When students of color feel welcome and accepted within their campus environments, this can positively contribute to their comfortability and educational persistence (Museus et al., 2016; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Like this, institutional staff, faculty, and administrators can positively shape the social experiences of SEAA college students on campus.

Institutional agents are the driving force behind institutions themselves, so it is important for affiliated staff and faculty members to recognize the role they play in influencing institutional interests and policies. AANAPISIs initially

emerged from the overwhelming advocacy and support by policymakers and community organizers, so there can be power in numbers that can mimic these same results on the institutional level. Staff and faculty can affect change by teaching and practicing from a social justice lens that advocates for greater visibility of historically marginalized student populations and empowers these individuals by centering their voices and experiences. On the other hand, mid- and senior-level administrators can employ their positionality and power to create and support policies that are in the best interests of Asian American college students in their spheres of influence. In this way, these efforts will move us one step closer toward recognizing Asian Americans as the ethnically diverse population that they are.

### **Conclusion**

For decades, Asian Americans have been suffering at the hands of the MMM, which effectively erases their diverse lived experiences. Namely, SEAA college students have been deeply impacted by these stereotypes as their unique academic challenges are dismissed and their needs remain underserved within the realm of higher education. To mitigate these challenges, AANAPISIs have emerged to encourage greater visibility of AAPI college students and ultimately increase overall educational attainment and retention amongst SEAs. Although these MSIs are a step in the right direction, there are still many ways in which current AANAPISIs can further influence long-lasting educational developments and all institutional agents can facilitate transformative change. By collectively mobilizing our voices and efforts, institutions and community members can ensure that SEAs no longer struggle in silence and instead feel empowered to reach their full potential.

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