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Rethinking Asian American Students' Educational Pathways

Among the nearly 30,000 Asian American students¹ who were enrolled in public higher education institutions in the Fall 2010 in Illinois, more than half were enrolled in public community colleges (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2011). Despite these large numbers, little is known about these students. Stereotypical views of Asian American students portray them as extraordinarily bright and exceptionally hard working. Like any stereotype, there is some truth to this perception; however, many Asian American students face difficulties attending college due to their low-income status and differences in cultures and languages from other student populations attending college. Although many of these students would benefit from additional support to attend college, Asian American students tend not to be considered a minority group that needs special support services under Affirmative Action (Suzuki, 2002). Rather, they are seen as the model minority (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008; Suzuki, 2002)), which leads a wide range of stakeholders, including high school and college counselors and instructors, to overlook their special circumstances. In order for these students to experience success in college and career pathways, their special circumstances need to be understood and addressed (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008).

To raise awareness of institutional supports that Asian American students need to navigate their chosen pathways, I first examine the myth of the "model minority", which is a significant bias that contributes to the neglect of services for Asian American students. Second, I discuss unique features of social capital within institutional settings and ethnic communities that would benefit Asian American students and their families. By social capital, I am referring to social networks that are linked to important education information on institutional supports and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1985; Portes, 2003). These networks are highlighted because of their potential to impact the academic and career success of Asian American students.

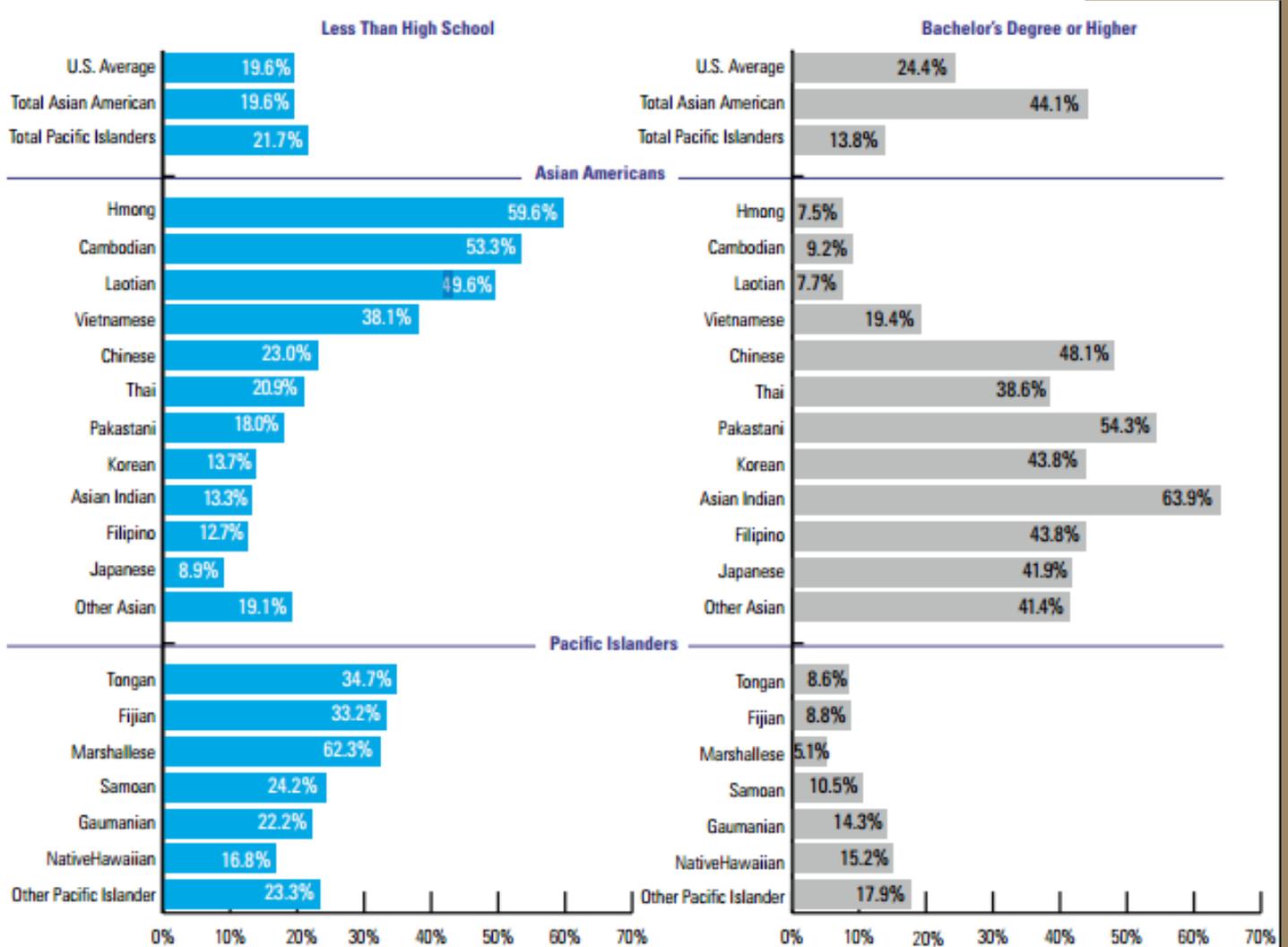
The Myth of "Model Minority"

The myth of the "model minority" suggests Asian Americans are a very successful minority group in terms of their academic achievement and social upwardly mobility, regardless of their socio-economic status. Their hard work and high value for education contributes to this stereotypical perspective. As the result, all groups of Asian American students, including those who have low-income immigrant parents, are regarded as being successful in assimilating into society, including assimilating into college. However, numerous researchers (Ancheta, 2000; CARE, 2008; Chon, 1995; Lee, 1996; Lew, 2003, 2007; Louie, 2001; Pang, Kiang, & Pak, 2004; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999; Yang, 2003) show that Asian Americans' lives are far more diverse and complicated than is commonly understood. The view that all Asian Americans move up the social and economic ladder is very problematic. In fact, there is no single Asian experience, so the monolithic image of one "model minority" should not be applied to all Asian Americans.

Figure 1 shows the range of educational attainment among various Asian American sub-groups is large. The average percentage of the US population that is 25 years and older that has less than high school diploma is 19.6% compared to the average percentage of 59.6% for Hmong, 53.1% for Cambodian, 49.6% for Laotian, 38.1% for Vietnamese, 23% for the Chinese, and 20.9% for Thai students. Also, the percentage

¹ In the data book published by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), the category of Asian students based on "race or national origin" indicates Asian Americans. Non-resident aliens are reported separately.

who earned a Bachelors' degree or higher is lower among the Hmong (7.5%), the Cambodian (9.2%), the Laotian (7.7%), and the Vietnamese (19.4%) students than the US average (24.4%). Taking these statistics into account, we can see how the "model minority" stereotype does not accurately reflect the educational attainment of sub-groups of Asian American students.



Note: Percent distribution of population 25 years and older.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Summary File 1, 2000.

Figure 1. Educational Attainment among Asian Americans, 2000

The Definition of Social Capital

Social capital can be broadly understood in two different settings: (a) in school settings, and (b) within communities. Boudieu (1985) defines capital as "accumulated labor and has a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being" (p. 241). In this vein, first, social capital at educational institutions can be defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). Extending this concept to Asian American students and their parents, social capital in school settings then works as a direct channel to access important educational information, resources and supports. Moreover, Bourdieu (1985) observes that social capital is not freely given in the form of membership in a school setting, rather

it requires efforts by institutional personnel to establish social networks with students and their parents. As such, students' and parents' access to resources and information is expanded through social networks formed with the assistance of school counselors, instructors, and/or administrators.

At a community setting, Coleman (1988) defines social capital as consisting of "closed systems of advantageous networks in a community, which allow parents to establish norms and reinforce each other's sanctioning of the children" (p. 241). Furthermore, based on their research on a Chinese American community, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) denote the significance of strong social closure that ties the members of a community to observe certain social norms and rules. Within a community exhibiting closure, Coleman and Hoffer claim that social capital works as a public good, which benefits all members of the community. However, without social closure, there is no active interaction between parents and their children, and/or other community members. Moreover, there is no exchange of educational information or advice on parenting among community members. For this reason (and others mentioned earlier), it is important to understand Asian American students' and their parents' social networks both in the school setting and within their ethnic communities.

Reexamination of Asian Americans' Social Capital

Karp, O'Gara, and Hughes (2008) point out that although community colleges provide low tuition and open access to postsecondary educational opportunities, especially to those students with low socio-economic status, gaps in educational opportunities still exist. When students drop out or withdraw from their programs of study, it is easy to blame the students rather than the system that failed to meet their needs. Asian American students and their parents who have limited social networks within high schools and community colleges have difficulty accessing even the most basic information and transition services from high school and community college personnel (Kao, 2007; Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Lew, 2003, 2007; also see Abelmann, 2009; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Regarding this, Karp, O'Gara, and Hughes (2008) explain that, when the relationship between students and institutional personnel (i.e. counselors, instructors, administrators, and other staff) is depersonalized, students tend to receive poor information.

Because their connections to educational resources are often weak, Asian American students and their parents are often depend on social networks operating within co-ethnic communities to get academic and career information (Abelmann, 2011; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999; Yang, 2003). Notwithstanding the benefits of their ethnic networks, researchers point out that access to relevant information varies according to students' socio-economic status (Abelmann, 2011; Lee, 1996; Lew, 2007). For example, among Korean American students who are considered a group having a high percentage of B.A. degrees (see figure 1), low-income Korean American students had substantially different experiences with academic achievement and social networks than students from (upper) middle-class families. Lew's study (2007) of Korean immigrant youths in a GED program in New York showed these youths had to take care of academic decisions by themselves. Their parents lacked economic resources, hampering their capability to get educational and career information and limiting the time they spent supporting their children's education. Lew (2007) mentioned that "poor Korean immigrant youths lacked strong social capital and ties to co-ethnic networks that sanction social norms which might be beneficial for their academic success" (p. 379).

With respect to careers, rather than pursue careers that interest them, middle-class Asian American students tend to follow their family's career choices, or follow older counterparts among their family members or within their ethnic communities (Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). Thus Tang, Fouad and Smith suggest that counselors need to consider Asian American students' family backgrounds and understand parental expectations and family obligations. Moreover, qualitative research on Chinese Americans and Korean Americans shows that low-income students struggle with low-academic achievement and even drop out of high school (Book, 2004; Lee, 1996; Lew, 2007). Again, these findings contrast with stereotypes of Chinese Americans and Korean Americans who are thought to be universally successful in their academic achievements and upward social mobility.

Conclusion

In this brief, I examined the myth of “model minority” pertaining to Asian American students, which undermines their diversity. The paper also points to problems that Asian Americans experience due to their lack of social networks, and it discusses the differences that sub-groups of Asian American students experience with respect to their social networks within ethnic and socio-economic groups.² Overall, it is important for high school and community college personnel to recognize the diversity of the Asian American student population, their lack of social networks in educational settings, including high schools and community colleges, and the impact of the students’ socio-economic status on their academic success and career choices.

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² However, there is very limited research which examines the differences of social capital between low-income and upper/middle-class Asian American families.

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