

Foreword

## AANAPISIs, COVID-19, and Asian Pacific Islander American Students

Julie Ajinkya, APIA Scholars

The COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to American higher education continues to be felt on a wide scale. While students' paths are interrupted, learning pedagogies try to go on and offline, and institutions find themselves calculating record decreases in enrollment, certain institutions find themselves at intersections of disadvantage. Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) find themselves facing the dual challenges of economic insecurity in communities made up largely of essential workers whose work and wages have been drastically impacted by the pandemic and simultaneously fielding the increase in anti-Asian hatred and violence sparked by misplaced blame and frustration over the roots of the coronavirus. It is many of these colleges and universities that stand out for their ability to help APIA<sup>1</sup> students understand and navigate their own role in higher education during these trying times.

APIA Scholars was founded in 2003 to raise national awareness about the diverse needs of APIA students and has been advocating for systemic change for many years, including direct advocacy for the AANAPISI federal designation. Despite the harmful model minority myth that posits APIAs as uniformly successful, educated, and affluent, it has been well-documented that income inequality among APIA groups far surpasses that of other racial and ethnic groups. Over the last two decades, APIA Scholars has proudly served more than 7,500 scholars by providing financial support for their college costs—two-thirds of whom live at or below poverty level and three-quarters of whom are first-generation college students—as well as supportive

programming with mentors, industry experts, and community leaders to ensure that student access turns into student success.

Importantly, we do not do this alone, but in partnership with the colleges and universities who enroll our students. AANAPISIs have been particularly important partners in our efforts to serve students since this federal designation was created in 2007, given that these institutions educate nearly half of APIA students across the nation. It is on these campuses where we can start thinking about APIA student success at scale—how to build systems of mental health support, networks of belonging and mentorship, and thriving career pipelines into various industries.

We often hear from our network of APIA students that they appreciate their AANAPISI programs “understanding their identities and how it shapes their college experience.” AANAPISI leaders on campuses also highlight the important role these programs play in the larger higher education landscape. As Robert Teranishi, Professor of Social Science and Comparative Education, the Morgan and Helen Chu Endowed Chair in Asian American Studies, and director for the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at the University of California Los Angeles states, “[AANAPISIs] are on the front line of and provide important lessons for expanding opportunities and reducing barriers to higher education for low-income AAPI students.”

Furthermore, Arlene Daus-Mabual, Director for Asian American and Pacific Islander Student Services and Faculty Lecturer in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, argues,

Interventions and services that center on race and ethnicity play a central role in college student development. That is why AANAPISIs are so important for our community. It is imperative to create spaces within higher education where students learn about their ethnic identity, how to critically question and analyze the root of problems of the oppression we face and find ways to be active participants in society for equity and social justice.

It should be no surprise then when we observe the notable “Stop AAPI Hate” campaign emerge from an institution (San Francisco State University), which is also home to a long-standing AANAPISI program that has continued to work in partnership with a flourishing Asian American Studies Department. While the campaign does the critical work of documenting the drastic increase in violent incidents of anti-Asian hatred during the COVID-19 pandemic, its origins in the

university's Asian American Studies Department shares the consciousness that has become a common trait to many AANAPISI programs. Countering this violence through education about APIA history and focusing on student persistence and success both critically center APIA students and their communities.

The current discrimination that many students and communities face echoes previous waves of anti-Asian sentiment, yet also distinctly interacts with the national racial justice reckoning spurred by George Floyd's murder in 2020. Students learn about the through line that connects anti-Asian racism during today's pandemic with the anti-Asian racism that targeted South Asians after 9/11, as well as the anti-Asian racism that targeted East Asians in the 1980s and resulted in the country's first federal civil rights trial for an Asian American after Vincent Chin's murder. The true grievance against the APIA individual is not being white, and therefore being assumed to be *less* American, if American at all. In truth, it often seems the only thing our 50+ communities have in common is that none of us are *assumed* to be American. Across different histories of immigration, asylum, adoption, and colonization, what we share is that no group is ever seen as *de facto* American unless they inhabit a white body.

Yet it is AANAPISIs that do the hard work of trying to make rhyme or reason out of the racialization of our many, many groups with one another. AANAPISIs do the hard work of knowing the differences among our communities, all the while detecting the similar barriers that many students face in today's higher education. Today's student is more likely to be working outside of classes, taking care of dependents, and food insecure than any other time in history. This means that today's student supports and strategies for success must necessarily look different than most of our higher education system's past.

Despite the need for greater awareness about not only APIA students, but the institutions that serve them, AANAPISIs have remained at the margins in higher education policy. It remains the hard-to-pro- nounce acronym that people avoided saying out loud and bulldoze over in conversations about Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs); more often, it is silently acknowledged in text but rarely named, being further marginalized by its implicit inclusion in legislation or measures that serve Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and "other MSIs." The newest addition to the MSI landscape

in our system of higher education, AANAPISIs still struggle to be included in conversations around postsecondary equity and racial justice, despite the outsized impact they have on educating underserved APIA students.

And despite this need for greater investment, AANAPISIs have been chronically underfunded since their establishment and remain the category of MSI with the lowest levels of Title III and V funding. For example, in FY 2021, AANAPISI appropriations received only 1 percent of all Title III and V funding for MSIs, totaling just \$9.8 million. Per capita, AANAPISIs receive the least amount of federal funding compared to all other MSIs, averaging \$59,606 per AANAPISI compared to \$589,167 per HSI.<sup>2</sup>

Because of historic inequities baked into federal funding formulas, even relief funds have been distributed inequitably, overlooking the disparate impact of the pandemic on different populations.

We also know that all APIA students are not getting the support they need to succeed. For instance, APIA students seek out mental health treatments at the lowest rate of any race or ethnicity, despite experiencing heightened stress and discrimination. Due to language barriers, lack of diversity among providers, community stigma, and insufficient health coverage, APIA students are also far less likely to receive mental health care, even if they are courageous enough to seek it. The colleges and universities that understand these barriers will be the institutions that develop meaningful strategies to help students tackle them.

This is the moment to build an infrastructure and community of institutions that works for the diverse needs of the rapidly growing APIA student population. We can look to our counterparts from other communities and learn from them, but we should avoid replicating mistakes or systems that do not accomplish what our students and communities need. Further research should inform policy makers and practitioners about best practices for APIA student success, and how institutions can serve them at scale. It is incumbent upon our community of students, practitioners, and advocates to continue to amplify the important role that AANAPISIs play in our communities, particularly during times of social and economic upheaval like this pandemic, but otherwise as well, as the institutions across our nation that are serving three-quarters of low-income AAPI students.

## NOTES

1. APIA is used in this text to denote Asian Pacific Islander American students, inclusive of all Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islander communities.
2. Nguyen, M. H., Espinoza, K. J., Gogue, D. T.-L., & Dinh, D. (2020, September). *Looking to the Next Decade: Strengthening Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions through Policy and Practice*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED608022.pdf> (accessed January 31, 2022).

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