

*Over 40 Percent: Asian American Student Pathways
through the Community College System*

USC CERPP Grant Proposal

2. Proposed Title, *Over 40 Percent: Asian American Student Pathways through the Community College System*

3. Abstract: This project seeks to shed light on the experiences of Asian American students in the community college system. Despite the common stereotype that Asian Americans primarily attend elite, highly selective institutions as the “model minority” of higher education and society, consistently over 40 percent of Asian American undergraduates enrolled in higher education attend community college institutions. Surprisingly, barely any empirical research has been conducted on their experiences in the community college system. The proposed study will concentrate on their decision-making processes in enrolling in community colleges and their experiences or attitudes surrounding transfer to four-year institutions.

4. Project Narrative

A. Research Description

Goals: The goals of this project are to add to the knowledge base in two areas: Community colleges and Asian Americans enrollment trends in higher education. Community colleges play a pivotal role in expanding access to higher education, especially for lower-income and first-generation college students (Bailey & Morest, 2006). However, one challenge that these institutions face is effectively promoting transfer and completion at four-year institutions. While descriptive data signals that Asian Americans have higher rates of transfer than Black and Latino/a students (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004), we know very little about how Asian American students approach the community college, from the decision to attend to how they navigate the transfer process.

There is also a greater need for research on the experiences of Asian American students within community colleges: Existing research suggests that Asian American students encounter difficulties in seeking advice from academic counselors at community colleges (Pope, 2002), and other work points to student perceptions of racism from faculty in such institutions (Chang, 2005). By interviewing both Asian American students currently attending a community college and those who have transferred to a four-year institution, this project seeks to identify patterns and trends in the experiences of Asian American students who have gone through the community college system.

A second goal of the proposed study is to expand the knowledge base around Asian American students' college-going behavior and college-choice process. While some studies have probed Asian American student experiences in this area (see for example Louie, 2004; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004) very few empirical studies have focused specifically on their presence in community colleges even though consistently over 40 percent of Asian American undergraduates attend such institutions. Asian American student enrollment at public community colleges actually outpaced Asian American enrollment at four-year institutions from 1990 to 2000, suggesting that the two-year sector is playing an increasingly important role for Asian Americans (Lew, Wang, & Chang, 2005; Shuang, 2005; Teranishi, 2008). Thus, this study plans to contribute to a fuller understanding of this understudied population in higher education.

Importance: The primary importance of this study lies in the democratic function of the community college. As an agent of opportunity, community colleges play a pivotal role by expanding access for students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher

education. As the country continues to diversify and the price of higher education rises, community colleges play a particular role in opening the door to higher education for immigrant and first-generation college students. At the same time, students face multiple challenges to navigating the community college system, such as difficulty in obtaining information on transfer requirements. By providing an in-depth examination of Asian American student experiences in the community college system, this study hopes to identify information that can help community colleges better live up to their democratic ideals of serving all students. As the Asian American population in higher education continues to grow, understanding their experiences in the community college system may unearth lessons that can help community college practitioners and policymakers understand how to better assist all populations in higher education.

It is also anticipated that Asian American students may encounter unique challenges within the community college system. Many misconceptions exist about the educational experiences of Asian American students in general, as they are stereotyped as being a uniformly successful group in academe. Thus, this study on the different pathways that Asian American students take in accessing and navigating the community college system will contribute to a fuller, multidimensional understanding of these students' experiences in higher education.

Work Already Completed: An IRB application has been submitted to the UCLA Office for Protection of Research Subjects, including a more detailed description of the study design and the interview protocols that will be utilized.

B. Research Design

A target of 24 interviews will be conducted by the Principal Investigator from March to June 2008 with students from two institutions: University of California, Riverside (UCR) and Riverside Community College (RCC). The hope is to recruit both students who have successfully transferred to a four-year institution as well as those who are currently attending a two-year institution. The PI will work to recruit a variety of Asian Americans from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and immigrant subgroups. A data request has been filed with UCR to obtain contact information for all Asian American transfer students. Participants will also be recruited through fliers and emails sent through student group listservs, and students will be offered a \$15 monetary incentive to participate. Additionally, 2-4 interviews will be conducted with administrators such as student affairs administrators or academic counselors involved in transfer support programs at both institutions regarding their experiences with Asian American transfer/community college students.

Interviews will be conducted by the PI and are anticipated to last approximately one hour. Interviews will address aspects of students' experience with the community college, including the college choice process, aspirations for transfer, and experiences in the community college. Upon completion and transcription of the interviews, the PI and a graduate assistant will code the interviews for salient themes and patterns before drafting the final manuscript(s).

C. Planned Outcomes

The planned outcomes for the proposed study include presentation(s) at national conferences (e.g., Association for the Study of Higher Education, American Educational Research Association, and/or Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education) and

submission of the final draft of the paper to a nationally recognized peer review journals such as the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *The Review of Higher Education*, or *The Journal of Higher Education*. Because of the large amount of data that will likely be generated through interviews, the hope is to produce two journal articles for review: One article more suited towards a practitioner audience and one geared towards a more research-focused audience. Also the PI will seek guidance from two organizations, the California Community College Collective and the University of California Asian American and Pacific Islander Multi-campus Research Program, on how to disseminate findings effectively to policy audiences.

5. Project Bibliography

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