

Over 40 Percent: Asian Americans and the Road(s) to Community Colleges

Project Report Submitted to USC CERPP

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This study examines 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% of Asian American undergraduates enrolled in higher education attend community college institutions. Little empirical research has been conducted on their experiences in the community college system. We used USC CERPP funds to conduct 52 interviews with Asian American community college/transfer students at the University of California, Riverside, Riverside Community College, California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton College, and Pierce Community College. The primary research question guiding the study was: Why did these students decide to enroll in community colleges?

Background

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.

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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 including narratives of Asian American students who have attended community college and/or have gone on to transfer to a four-year institution, this project seeks to identify patterns and trends in the experiences of Asian American community college students.

This study also seeks 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% of Asian American undergraduates attend such institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). 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.

Significance

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 tuition costs rise, community colleges play a particular role in opening the door to higher education for immigrant and first-generation college students. By providing an in-depth examination of Asian American student experiences in the community college system, this study identifies information that can help community colleges and four-year institutions better live up to their democratic ideals of serving all students.

Furthermore, 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 contributes to a fuller, multidimensional understanding of these students' experiences in higher education.

Theoretical Foundations

The most common model used to explain students' college choice process is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of predisposition, search, and choice. One critique of the model is that it suggests a linear sequence search process that does not adequately capture the experiences of students of color and community college students (Townsend, 2003). While some of the students in the study entered the community college through a process that more closely paralleled the predisposition, search, and choice sequence, a number of students faced numerous challenges and bumps on the road to attending community college and transferring, including switching colleges, attending multiple institutions simultaneously, academic failure, and leaving college altogether for

periods of time. These bumps in the road to and through college take on special salience for Asian American students because such challenges run counter to the public's overriding perception of them (Park & Teranishi, 2008). Because the dominant, entrenched view of Asian American students is one of monolithic success due to the model minority stereotype (Lee, 1996; Suzuki, 2002; Ng, Lee, & Park, 2007), the public and even Asian Americans themselves are sometimes puzzled at how to recognize the phenomena of setbacks or even failure by Asian Americans in the educational system (Louie, 2004).

Thus, in addition to utilizing Hossler and Gallagher's framework to examine how some Asian American students decide to attend community college, I propose an emerging framework of educational heterogeneity to better understand the experiences of Asian Americans in educational settings. This concept of educational heterogeneity draws a special focus to the variation in Asian American educational experiences, with a particular attention on experiences that depart from the educational success traditionally associated with Asian Americans, and in particular, East Asian American populations. The concept of educational heterogeneity is heavily influenced by the field of Asian American Studies and in particular Lisa Lowe's (1991) landmark essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," which articulates the diversity and multidimensionality of Asian American communities. Conceptualizations of Asian American educational heterogeneity could also consider intersections between multiple spheres of identity such as socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation (Ng et al., 2007). Similarly, scholars utilizing critical race theory have made similar

arguments emphasizing intersectionality and within-group variation (Buena Vista, Jayakumar, & Misa, 2009).

Asian American educational heterogeneity is also influenced by those who advocate for an “anti-deficit” approach to understanding Black, Latino/a, and Native American educational experiences (Bensimon, 2005; Harper, 2006; Valencia, 1997). Such scholars argue that the discourse around minority education overemphasizes students’ failures and deficits without recognizing how institutions fail students, as well as students’ assets and achievements. The scenario is actually reversed for Asian Americans, where the public uncritically focuses on educational achievements, attributing such successes to culture and extraordinary motivation. Just as an anti-deficit framework challenges the public to look beyond a deficit based framing of Black, Latino/a, and Native American students, an educational heterogeneity framework urges us to look beyond portrayals of Asian Americans as a monolithically successful population in order to see the variation in students’ experiences.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative methodology as a means to explore the experiences of Asian American college students with the community college and transfer process. Preliminary findings in this report come from the 41 interviews that were conducted by myself and Yen Ling Shek with transfer students at the University of California, Riverside (UCR), California State University Fullerton (CSUF), and current community college students at Riverside Community College (RCC) and Fullerton Junior College (FJC). UCR was selected for several reasons, among them its large Asian American (38%) and transfer student populations. While it is a member of the highly

competitive UC system, it is among the least selective of the UC campuses. Unlike other UC campuses that only accept transfer students for fall quarter enrollment, UCR accepts transfer students on a quarterly basis. Although the study's generalizability is limited due to its qualitative nature, selecting UCR possibly allows my findings to have implications for understanding student experiences at both higher and mid-selectivity institutions. RCC was chosen because it is one of the top feeder institutions to UCR due to its proximity to the institution. CSUF and FJC were chosen to study another university-feeder community college relationship in the Southern California area, as well as to study the dynamics of a CSU institution. Eleven additional interviews were conducted by research consultant Christine Corrales with students from Pierce Community college; these interviews were still being transcribed at the time of the report.

Recruitment for the UCR portion of the sample primarily occurred via email. The UCR Registrar provided contact information for all Asian American transfer students and one email was sent inviting students to participate in a one-time interview. Additionally, recruitment fliers were hung around campus. Only one participant responded to the flier. The rest of the sample consisted of students who responded to the email. In the case of RCC students, I hung recruitment fliers around campus and passed out fliers in an area with high foot traffic. CSUF students were recruited through emails that were sent primarily to students enrolled in Asian American Studies classes at CSUF and campus fliers.

The primary criteria used to select participants from the pool of interested students were gender and ethnicity; I sought to obtain a rough balance between male and female students and a diverse representation of various Asian ethnic subgroups. An

overriding factor in assembling the sample was simply students' availability due to scheduling. All students were given a \$15 Starbucks gift card as a thank you for participating. All interviews took place either at Starbucks or at the UCR campus; most lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.

Interviews mainly consisted of students' pre-college educational experiences, students' experiences with the community college, including the college choice process, the transfer process, and the transition to UCR. An outside vendor transcribed all interviews. All participants received pseudonyms.

Preliminary Findings

In this section I address the question of why these students attended community colleges. Within the area of why students attended community colleges, I cover three categories of motivations: cost, strategy, and a second chance. By far the most frequently listed reason was cost. In a number of cases, students could not afford to attend a four-year institution right away or could not justify the extra expense, as Mai, a Vietnamese American female attending FJC noted:

I knew that my parents weren't going to afford going to a four-year university, so I decided why waste the money or why apply. I didn't apply to any schools. I knew I was going to go straight there.

Students also listed family concerns such as having other siblings already in college or who were going to attend college. In other cases, students' families likely could have afforded a state four-year institution but the added bonus of saving money was an incentive to attend a community college. Because of the density of Southern California educational institutions, respondents noted that community college was affordable and close to home.

A second identified motivation for attending community college was what I labeled strategy. These were actually students who applied to four-year institutions but were not accepted or decided not to go. While the majority of students went into community college with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution, some students' aspirations were targeted at certain institutions and they viewed community college as a strategy to be able to attend the institution of their choice. For instance, some participants did not get into the UC institution of their choice, or were unsatisfied with the colleges they got into. Linda was a Vietnamese American student who took Advanced Placement courses at a predominantly Asian American high school that was known for being highly competitive. She explained:

Well, actually I applied to other colleges too, like Cal State Fullerton, UCR, UCI and stuff, but I didn't get into the ones that I wanted, but I got into Cal State Fullerton and UCR, but I mean, since the budget crisis and all that, the economy is going down, I figured I could save a lot more money going to FJC and I live around here too, like five minutes away from FJC, so it's to my advantage, it benefits me especially with gas and everything. I actually wanted to go to UCI and then maybe I think UCSD, but then I didn't get in, but I'm planning to transfer after two years from FJC to UCI. Yeah, that's my plan.

Once again, costs came into play: Unable to get into the UC of her choice, she decided to save money and attend FJC. Tom, an Indian American student, actually wanted to go directly to a community college because he heard that he had a better chance of being able to transfer into a UC from a community college than if he attended a CSU institution due to transfer articulation agreements.

I decided to go to Mt. SAC pretty much because I wanted to transfer out and it would be a lot easier to transfer out of a community college rather than from a Cal State, especially with the types of schools that I wanted to go to.

Interestingly, Tom's parents wanted him to attend a CSU institution because they wanted him to go straight into a four-year institution. He originally enrolled in CSUF but then

ended up taking classes at a community college simultaneously because he could not get the classes he wanted or need to take at CSUF. Then he decided that it would be advantageous for him to apply for transfer to a UC school as a community college student instead of a CSUF student, so he left CSUF and enrolled at community college. His case was somewhat exceptional, but the trend of students applying to college but deciding to attend community college because they were unsatisfied with their options was not unusual.

The last subset of students that I address saw community college as a second chance opportunity. Within this subset of students, two key patterns that emerged were students needing a second chance because they did not feel ready for college after high school and students encountering academic challenges. Derek, a Vietnamese American RCC student, returned to college after a three year hiatus:

As soon as I graduated, I went to RCC and I dropped out for about three years. I personally think it was because I wasn't ready for college. I was more concerned with partying, having fun, and stuff like that. I wasn't really disciplined enough to really take school seriously, but after through some life experiences and going out there and experiencing life, the more I realized how important education is, I just kind of came back.

Derek described himself as a below average student during high school. In another section, he called himself "unmotivated" and talked about initially going to college mainly to please his parents. Sandra was a Filipina American RCC student who actually began college at a four-year institution, UCR. She spent a year and a half there before leaving. She spoke positively about the beginning of college, but explained how she struggled to keep her grades up:

I just got so unmotivated to go to school. I actually got on academic probation. Before I got kicked out, I actually dropped out, so I didn't want my parents to know for the longest time and then from there, it's just like, "When are you going

to go back to school,” and stuff like that. I was like, “Oh, my God, this sucks.” I actually went to Chaffey. I went to Chaffey and I failed all my classes there and then I went back to RCC and then I was like, “You know what, this time I’m going to make it work. I don’t want to keep failing at everything I do, so I’m just going to make it work this time.”

Both Derek and Sandra talked about how they felt like untypical Asian American students, and this difference was heightened by what they saw as a failure to live up to parental expectations. Sandra actually avoided telling her parents altogether that she left UCR. After UCR she attended another junior college, Chaffey, but could not get back on track academically. Eventually she went to RCC and was determined to succeed there.

While not all of the students in the sample encountered challenges to the extent of Derek and Sandra, their stories were not isolated occurrences. Over and over students told me narratives that directly countered the model minority myth: students who dropped out of high school because they felt apathetic about their studies, students who did drugs and got in with the wrong crowd, students who entered college but struggled with the transition. For these students, community college was a second chance, a way to turn their lives around.

While the primary question guiding this report was “why did these students enroll in community colleges,” the question remains of what, if anything, is distinctive about Asian American community college experiences. We found many experiences that seemed like they would cut across any racial/ethnic group, from attending multiple community colleges at once in order to get the classes needed to working part-time or full-time while juggling a full load of classes to complaints about parking. Additionally, we did not conduct a comparative study between Asian Americans and other racial/ethnic groups, which would have enabled our ability to draw comparisons. In the future we hope

to explore this area by comparing our findings with findings in the literature on the experiences of Black, Latino/a, and White students in the community college system, as well as quantitative trends data on different population groups. Based on the data that we did collect and are still analyzing, I will summarize three observations from preliminary analysis that seemed to contribute to the generally positive experiences that students in our sample had at community colleges: First, the majority—not all, but at least 50%—of participants had plans to transfer from the start of enrollment. Some transfer students observed that they felt they were exceptional in being able to leave community college after two to four years, expressing that they knew many students who had been taking classes for seven to eight years and were still no closer to transferring. How does this differ from the general population, most of whom report similar aspirations to transfer? Future research will elaborate on whether distinctiveness exists for Asian Americans in this area. While we do not suggest there is anything particularly unique to racial/ethnic identity in area (for instance, that Asian Americans are an exceptional model minority), Asian American transfer patterns may be facilitated by certain attributes that are more commonly found within the Asian American community college population such as being more likely to be traditionally aged or closer to the traditional 18-24 college range.

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Second, students appeared to be able to obtain help and guidance on the transfer process when they needed it. While some students expressed frustration that going to multiple counselors would get you different answers on questions, most felt that counselors were accessible and helpful. Another hindrance was finding out that different institutions (UCs versus CSUs, admittance to certain majors) had different transfer requirements. Online resources played a particularly key role for many students as a

centralized source of information. Once again, there may not be anything inherently “Asian American” in these experiences, however there may be certain trends and patterns linked to social capital networks and high online connectivity within Asian American communities that may illuminate how Asian American students are able to access the information they need that facilitates transfer. For instance, many, although not all, of the students in our study came from well-resourced high schools, meaning that they would have social networks of peers who were either already at four-year institutions or navigating the community college/transfer system who could be potential sources of information.

Third, some students felt that attributes that they associated with being Asian American such as parents or just general expectations from society put a certain amount of pressure on them to persevere in their education. However, it should be noted that because over half of our participants were transfer students, the “success” stories may be overrepresented in our sample—these are the students who have made it. Further analysis of the Pierce Community College sample, which is still being transcribed, will likely add additional breadth to the range of experiences that students are having in the community college. We also do not include a detailed analysis of some of the challenges that some students reported upon transferring to the four-year institution, but future write-ups will address this issue.

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