As the global work environment continues to evolve, the United States needs to increase its human capital in order remain economically competitive. Whether the nation can meet the demands of the global economy and maintain its standing as a global leader will be tied inextricably to its ability to increase the proportion of Americans with advanced intellectual skills and knowledge, as represented by postsecondary credentials. As the nation continues to grow and the composition of its population shifts, our system of higher education needs to be more conscious of and responsive to these new realities when it comes to developing goals, priorities, and strategies for achieving higher rates of college participation and completion for all Americans.

This article examines America’s higher education policies and practices relative to the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community—a group that is increasingly relevant to the goals of access to and success in college. Beyond headlines in the mainstream media about the high educational attainment of AAPIs (e.g., their high concentration in highly selective institutions), there is a dearth of knowledge about the demography of AAPI students, their educational trajectories, and their postsecondary outcomes.

The perceived success of AAPIs as a whole is heavily influenced by stereotypes and false perceptions that are generalized to all sub-populations of AAPIs. Accordingly, for the most part AAPIs are excluded from broader discourses on equity and social justice. Moreover, AAPIs have been mostly invisible in national, state, and system-wide policy considerations, as well as in the development of campus services and programs (Teranishi, 2010). The prevailing “model minority” myth—that AAPIs are universally successful and do not face academic challenges—has thus been damaging for the AAPI population, particularly for sub-groups with low rates of college participation and degree attainment.
Building on recent studies from the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE), this article suggests why and how we must transcend the model minority myth. Specifically, it examines three sets of facts that illuminate the position of AAPIs in the higher education landscape and their implications for the nation looking forward:

- the AAPI contribution to the changing demographics of the nation as a whole,
- the distribution of AAPI students in institutions by type and location, and
- the special role of AAPI-serving institutions in educating AAPI students.

Understanding the various realities that AAPI students face relative to higher education is key to positive change for both the AAPI community and for the nation at large.

### The AAPI Student Population in Context

Transcending the model minority myth is important not only for AAPI students but for American higher education and society as a whole. Succumbing to any stereotype as the basis for decisions by practitioners and policymakers can of course be unjust and counterproductive. But this is particularly important in the context of racial inequality, not only for historic but for demographic reasons.

The US population is experiencing tremendous changes with regard to its composition and profile. The 2010 census reports that the majority of the increase in the US population in recent decades has been attributable to people who reported their race as other than white—they moved from about 1 in 10 of the population in 1950 to about 1 in 4 by 2000. Given this trend line, minority groups could constitute a new American majority sometime between now and 2050, by which time whites are projected to comprise under half of the total population.

The growth in minority groups can be attributed largely to increases in two populations, Hispanics and AAPIs, with the black population merely maintaining its proportional representation. In fact, between 2000 and 2010, the AAPI population increased at the highest rate of all major racial groups, according to the most recent census data. While the AAPI population was relatively small up to 1960, when it was less than one million persons, it has been growing exponentially ever since, nearly doubling in size every decade. Moreover, projections to 2050 suggest that the growth will continue at a significant pace until AAPIs number nearly 40 million persons.

It is not only important to note how this population is increasing in its size and proportionality; it is critical to understand that AAPIs have a wide range of demographic characteristics. The AAPI racial category consists of 48 different ethnic groups, which occupy positions along the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum, from the poor and underprivileged to the affluent and highly skilled.

Take, for example, the poverty rate among the Hmong (37.8 percent), Cambodians (29.3 percent), Laotians (18.5 percent), and Vietnamese (16.6 percent), which is much greater than is found among Filipinos (6.3 percent), the Japanese (9.7 percent), and Asian Indians (9.8 percent) (CARE, 2008). AAPIs also vary with regard to language background, immigration history, culture, and religion. The universal success story of AAPIs, which is often generalized to the entire population, needs to be reconsidered in the context of this heterogeneity.

With nearly 70 percent of its population born outside the US, immigration is a particularly relevant issue for the AAPI community (Teranishi, 2010). While a significant proportion of immigrants from Asia come to the US already highly educated, others enter from countries that have provided only limited opportunities for educational and social mobility. Pacific Islanders—people with origins in Polynesia, Micronesia, or Melanesia—are a diverse pan-ethnic group in themselves, whose histories include such challenges as the complex relationships of these nations to the US and the struggle for sovereignty. Yet these and other unique circumstances are concealed when Pacific Islanders are grouped with Asian Americans.

Thus, while the AAPI population represents a single group in certain contexts, such as for interracial group comparisons, it is equally important to understand the ways in which a complex set of social realities obtain for individuals and communities that fall within this category. The boundaries that define the AAPI racial category are socially constructed and need to be placed in a social, political, and institutional context.

The differences in the backgrounds of AAPI students have a number of implications for their educational attainment. Despite high rates for AAPIs in the aggregate, large sectors of the AAPI population suffer from high secondary school drop-out rates, low rates of college participation, and low two- and four-year college completion rates. Figure 1 illustrates the variation in educational attainment among AAPI students of differing ethnic backgrounds.

These data reveal two important facts. First, while the college completion agenda is primarily focused on increasing the proportion of already-enrolled college students who succeed in college, access to higher education remains a significant challenge for many marginalized and vulnerable AAPI sub-populations. Statistics on educational attainment for a number of these sub-groups are representative of

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“Minority groups could constitute a new American majority sometime between now and 2050.”

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this problem. Consider that 55 to 65 percent of Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander adults have never enrolled in postsecondary education of any kind. Indeed, 40 percent of Southeast Asians do not even complete high school (not in figure).

Second, these data reveal the significant challenges that marginalized and vulnerable groups of AAPI students have with regard to degree attainment. Approximately half of Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander students leave college without earning a degree, which is three to five times the likelihood that East Asians and South Asians will drop out (CARE, 2011). Conversely, East Asians and South Asians not only have a greater likelihood of having an undergraduate college degree—they are also more apt to earn an advanced degree. Unfortunately, these differential outcomes among AAPIs are concealed by aggregated data and result in at-risk sub-groups being overlooked and underserved.

An investment in better data for the AAPI sub-populations is essential for understanding how and why differences emerge within those populations, which is important if we are to better serve marginalized and vulnerable AAPI students. Policymakers, institutional leaders, and practitioners need to advocate and work toward more accurate and refined data collection disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration and generational status. As Herbert Barringer, in *Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States* said of the AAPI population, “Practically or theoretically, it makes little sense to lump together Americans of Asian origin, much less those of Asian and Pacific origin” (1995, pg. 2). There is no single narrative that can capture the range of educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes of AAPI sub-populations.

**AAPI Enrollment in American Higher Education**

The changing trends in US demography, especially among young Americans, have profound implications for our education system. Public K–12 enrollment of AAPIs, for example, grew four-fold in the 30-year period between 1979 and 2009, from 600,000 to 2.5 million. Enrollment projections are showing that this trend will continue through 2019. While the proportional representation of whites and blacks in the schools is projected to decrease by 4 percent each, Hispanics are projected to increase by 36 percent, AAPIs by 31 percent, and Native Americans by 13 percent (National Center on Education Statistics, 2011).

Fueled in part by the changing demographics of elementary- and secondary-education students, American higher education has also experienced profound changes. AAPI college enrollment grew five-fold between 1979 and 2009, from 235,000 to 1.3 million (NCES, 2011). And while college enrollment is projected to increase for all racial groups, AAPIs are projected to experience a particularly high propor-
tional increase of 30 percent between 2009 and 2019. Given these trends, it is important to understand the representation and outcomes of AAPI students in different postsecondary institutional contexts.

While educators and policymakers have focused on AAPI students in highly selective institutions, those in other sectors of higher education, such as community colleges, receive little attention. Yet lower tuition, open admissions, and proximity to home are all important factors in the decision to attend a community college for a sizeable proportion of AAPI college students, like they are for many others. In fact, in 2005 the largest sector of AAPI college enrollment, at 47.3 percent, was in the community college sector (Teranishi, 2010). While AAPIs made up less than 5 percent of the national population in 2007, they represented nearly 7 percent of all community college students.

These trends are likely to continue, with AAPI enrollment at community colleges outpacing growth in all other sectors of higher education. Between 1990 and 2000, the AAPI population at community colleges increased by nearly 73.3 percent, compared to an increase of 42.2 percent in the public four-year institutions (Teranishi, 2010) (see Figure 2).

AAPI students in community colleges are different from their peers at four-year institutions. Recent studies by the CARE Project (2010) have found that among recent cohorts of AAPI community college students, 62.9 percent enrolled part time and 31.7 percent delayed matriculation by two years or more after high school (versus only 7.6 percent who did so at four-year institutions). With an average age of 27.3 years, (40.5 percent are older than 25), AAPIs at community colleges are also more likely than their peers at four-year institutions to be non-traditional students.

AAPI community college students face challenges related to academic preparation as well. They are more likely than AAPIs at four-year institutions to enter college with low levels of academic preparation in English and mathematics. In 2003, 55.2 percent of AAPI students entering two-year colleges had taken no math courses beyond Algebra II in high school, compared to only 12.7 percent of those entering four-year institutions in that same year.

All told, AAPI students in community colleges have many of the risk factors that are correlated with lower rates of persistence and completion among two-year college students. Compared to those in four-year institutions, AAPI community college students are more likely to delay enrollment, enroll as part-time students, have dependents, be single parents, and work full time (35 hours or more a week) while enrolled. AAPI community college students are also more likely to be the first in their families to attend college and less likely to have parents with college degrees (CARE,

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**Figure 2**

**Percent of AAPI Total Enrollment in Public Two- and Four-Year Institutions, 1985–2005**

![Figure 2](image)

Note: The two bars for each time period do not add up to 100% because they report only on enrollment in public colleges and do not include private institutions.

Source: IPEDS, US Department of Education, Fall Enrollment Survey
2010), and a high proportion of AAPI college students come from low-income backgrounds: One-third of first-time, full-time AAPI college students have families that earn less than $40,000 per year (Chang, et al., 2007).

AAPIs at community colleges are also distinct from other students who attend those colleges. They are more likely, for example, to have recently immigrated to the US and have a history of foreign schooling (Chang et al., 2007). They are hence more likely to face barriers related to language background. In 2008, 36.8 percent of foreign-born AAPIs and 44.7 percent of US-born AAPIs reported English as their primary language, compared to 56.3 percent of Latinos, 91.3 percent of blacks, 91.1 percent of Native Americans, and 96.1 percent of whites in community colleges (CARE, 2010).

AAPI students who enter college with less command of the English language are particularly vulnerable to the policies and practices that relegate remedial English courses to two-year institutions: A study by Chang, Park, Lin, Poon and Nakanishi (2007) found that one in five AAPI students needed remediation in English. As state systems increasingly designate two-year institutions as the primary sites for developmental education, the impact on AAPI English language learners needs further attention.

Beyond these differences, studies have found that AAPI students face a variety of challenges on college campuses in terms of engagement, including a reluctance to use support services such as academic tutoring centers, career services, and counseling; difficulty finding supportive classroom environments; a lack of culturally relevant curricular and extracurricular activities; a perception of pervasive discrimination on campus; and the challenge of resisting insidious stereotypes of AAPI students (Kiang, 1992; Kotori & Malaney, 2003; Osakima, 1995; Teranishi, 2010). These findings underscore the importance of transcending the model minority myth.

**Minority–Serving Institutions For AAPI Students**

One effective policy effort to address the challenges facing students of color is the federal investment in minority-serving institutions (MSIs). For example, the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) federal program, initially authorized by the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, is a competitive grant process for institutions with at least a 10 percent enrollment of AAPI students and a minimum percentage of low-income students similar to that in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (Santiago, 2006). As of 2011, there were 52 institutions with the AANAPISI designation, 21 of which have been funded and more than half of which are community colleges (see Table 1).

The AANAPISI program, one of the most significant investments the federal government has ever made for the AAPI college student population, is notable for at least three reasons. First, it acknowledges the unique challenges facing AAPI students in college access and completion. Second, the program represents a significant commitment of much-needed resources to improving the postsecondary completion rates of AAPI and low-income students. Third, it acknowledges how campuses can be sites for responding to the impediments AAPI students encounter.

Enrollment trends for AAPIs have implications for policy strategies that target these students. AAPI undergraduates are highly concentrated in a small number of postsecondary institutions: As of 2009, nearly two-thirds were in 200 institutions (CARE, 2010). Combined, the first 15 funded AANAPISI campuses enrolled nearly 10 percent of AAPI undergraduates in Title IV degree-granting institutions, while they constitute only 1.5 percent of the nation’s total undergraduate population.

In sheer numbers too, AANAPISIs are enrolling and conferring degrees to a significant number of AAPI students. In 2009, for example, the first 15 AANAPISI campuses enrolled nearly 89,000 AAPI undergraduates and awarded them nearly 9,500 associate’s and bachelor’s degrees (NCES, 2009). And in 2007, institutions that met the criteria for AANAPISI funding enrolled 75 percent of the low-income AAPI students in US higher education (Congressional Research Service, 2009).

AANAPISIs engage in a range of initiatives to increase access to and success in college for AAPI students. The federal funding is being used for the development of student learning communities, first-year experience programs, academic and personal counselors and advisors, and tutoring programs. These programs are improving the quality of students’ experiences during college, increasing persistence,
and connecting students with services that they may have not have utilized without the resources.

Funding is being used for program development as well, which includes improving academic quality, increasing the quantity and variety of courses being offered, and boosting student participation in certain academic programs. AANA-PISI funding is also being used to provide students with increased access to leadership-development and mentorship opportunities aimed at increasing their academic experience during college and career success after graduation. Other uses of the funding include new research about the AAPI population; staff-development opportunities to help administrators, faculty, and staff better understand the complexities of the AAPI population; and infrastructure development.

There is a need for greater awareness about the AANAPI-SI program and the ways in which it responds to the unique needs of AAPI students. A new organization, the AAPI Association for Colleges and Universities (APIACU) will support the work of AANAPISIs, promote their development and access to resources, and sustain contact and coordinate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>Higher Education Sector</th>
<th>Percent AAPI Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palau Community College</td>
<td>Palau</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>99.8 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Samoa Community College</td>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>91.1 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Guam</td>
<td>Guam</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>90.9 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guam Community College</td>
<td>Guam</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>79.2 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hawaii at Hilo</td>
<td>HI</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>54.1 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission College</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>48.1 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Anza College</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>37.1 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City College of San Francisco</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>35.8 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose State University</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>34.2 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laney College</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>29.3 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California State University, East Bay</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>26.4 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt. San Antonio College</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>24.8 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUNY Queens College</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>22.6 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>22.4 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastline Community College</td>
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<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>19.9 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sacramento State University</td>
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<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>19.2 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Richland College</td>
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<td>15.2 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Maryland-College Park</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>14.4 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Monica College</td>
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<td>14.1 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Massachusetts-Boston</td>
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<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>11.6 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Seattle Community College</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>11.5 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Undergraduate enrollment calculated using 12-month unduplicated headcount for 2008-09, the most recent year available in IPEDS.

efforts among campuses. APIACU can also liaise with other MSI umbrella organizations, such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF), and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Greater awareness and contact between AANAPISIs and other MSIs will lead to more collaborative efforts to strengthen the MSI program as a whole.

**Conclusion**

Research, practice, and policy that take into account the experiences of AAPIs and their unique needs can better address America’s federal policy priorities. Unfortunately, AAPI students are frequently overlooked and underserved throughout the education pipeline.

Analysis that compares AAPIs to other racial and ethnic populations is fundamentally flawed because the data on which such analysis is based conceal a wide range of outcomes for AAPIs. What is actually occurring among AAPIs is a bi-modal distribution of high rates of success on the one hand and a unique configuration of barriers and challenges on the other.

The AAPI population is a socially constructed category of people with a high degree of heterogeneity with regard to ethnicity, immigration history, language, religion, and social status. Generalizations about AAPI students miss high secondary school drop-out rates, low rates of college participation, and low college completion rates among some of its sub-populations. Disaggregated data reveal a wide range of characteristics and the needs and challenges of its most vulnerable sub-groups.

For institutional leaders, this article is a call to action. It is important to disaggregate the data about your institution’s AAPI student population and then act accordingly. Are your regional recruitment efforts reaching the most marginalized and vulnerable sub-groups in the AAPI community, for instance? Do certain support services need to be developed or enhanced for them? Is there additional information you need to have in order to respond more effectively to the unique needs and challenges of your current AAPI student body? These questions are applicable to all postsecondary institutions—highly selective, moderately selective, or non-selective; public or private; two- or four-year; and those with high or low concentrations of AAPI students.

US higher education must take advantage of all its potential, which entails recognizing the importance of equity and inclusion. Our ability to increase the proportion of Americans with postsecondary knowledge, skills, and credentials can only be achieved through a fundamental change in how we support the participation of all Americans, including underrepresented racial minority groups, low-income students, immigrants, and language minorities—the fastest-growing segments of our nation’s population.