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# The Importance of Critically Disaggregating Data: The Case of Southeast Asian American College Students

Dina C. Maramba

## Summary

The following policy brief calls for the improvement in data collection of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) and, more specifically, Southeast Asian Americans (SEAs) in order to facilitate college access and success. First, context and the concern for the lack of data are provided. Second, an explanation of the challenges with the existing data and importance of disaggregating data with regard to ethnicity and other important factors such as language and generational status are discussed. Also emphasized is the importance of incorporating the use of qualitative data in the policy decision-making process. Third, suggestions and recommendations that will benefit research and eventually positively influence policy decisions regarding SEAs in education are discussed.

## Context and Concern for the Lack of Data

AAPI college students continue to be one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented populations in higher education. In comparison to other racial groups, empirical research on AAPIs is severely lacking. For example, despite the increasing number of AAPIs entering higher education overall, a recent study conducted on major scholarly journals (Museus, 2009b) revealed that only 1 percent of articles focused specifically on Asian Americans. Thus, the little research that exists provides only a partial picture of the college experiences and issues concerning AAPI students in higher education.

Though there are a myriad of root causes for the lack of research on AAPI college students, three will be discussed here.

First, the pervasive model minority stereotype continues to plague the discourse on AAPIs. The many misperceptions associated with this stereotype that suggest all AAPI students are academically successful have created a skewed view of them for higher education institutions, especially with regard to serving the needs and concerns of AAPI college students. Second, attempting to capture an accurate picture of specific AAPIs, which include forty-eight ethnic groups within this category, is virtually impossible (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2010).

Third, the lumping together of these diverse ethnic groups fails to provide a clear understanding of the multiplicity and complexity that exists within the AAPI group (Hune, 2002; Maramba, 2008a). Diversity within the AAPI grouping varies, for example, with regard to ethnicity, language, religion, U.S. generational status, social class, and family characteristics (Yeh, 2004). These differences are critical to understanding the AAPI subpopulations. Thus, a number of researchers have advocated considering these factors when assessing the needs and concerns of AAPI college students.

### Challenges of Existing Data and Research

Researchers who study the AAPI population have long stressed the need to disaggregate existing data on AAPIs. The limited data that exists indicates that there are large disparities among the AAPI ethnic groups. One such group, SEAAs, namely, Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese, offers a particular challenge to the discourse on AAPIs.

Upon closer examination, SEAAs have some of the highest poverty rates among communities of color with 37.8 percent of the Hmong, 29.3 percent of the Cambodians, 18.5 percent of Laotians, and 16.6 percent of the Vietnamese living in poverty compared to the national average of 12.4 percent (Reeves and Bennett, 2004; Teranishi, 2010). With regard to educational attainment, the rate of SEAAs with less than a high school education is considerably high (Hmong, 59.6%; Cambodian, 53.3%; Lao, 49.6%; and Vietnamese, 38.1%) (Reeves and Bennett, 2004; Teranishi, 2010). Moreover, the number of those who obtain a bachelor of arts degree or higher is disproportionately low (Hmong, 7.5%; Cambodian, 9.2%; Lao, 7.7%; and Vietnamese, 19.4%) compared to the national average of 25.9 percent (Reeves and Bennett, 2004; Teranishi, 2010).

Despite the popular notion that most AAPIs attend Ivy League institutions, the majority enrolls in public institutions. Moreover, SEAs are less likely than other AAPI groups to attend selective institutions. They are also more likely than other AAPI groups to attend a community college after high school (CARE, 2010). Also worth noting is that although many SEAs enroll in college, they are less likely than other AAPIs to earn a degree (Laotians, 49.2%; Cambodians, 48.2%; Hmong, 45.5%; and Vietnamese, 36.7%) (CARE, 2010). In addition, they are twice as likely to transfer out of school for nonacademic reasons (CARE, 2010). With regard to financing college, SEAs compared to their Asian American counterparts are more likely to need more financial support (Chang et al., 2007). The existing statistical data on SEAs are useful and have brought the need for increased research on this population to the surface. More specifically, although the few available quantitative data (e.g., U.S. Census and National Center for Education Studies data) provide a broad picture of issues that need to be addressed, gaps remain.

The need for increased qualitative data is equally important. To date, just as there is a lack of quantitative data, empirical qualitative data is severely needed. The emergence of a few qualitative studies on AAPIs has further provided us with critical and in-depth information about the challenges that AAPIs face in educational institutions (e.g., Hune, 2002; Hune and Chan, 2000; Kiang, 2006; Suzuki, 2002). These studies have given us an emerging picture of the AAPI experiences in K-12 and address other prevalent issues affecting the population in general. Qualitative research approaches have contributed to new understandings about AAPIs as a general category as well as given insight about specific AAPI ethnicities. These studies have also challenged existing policies and practices in the K-12 arena (e.g., Kiang, 2006; Lee, 1996, 2005, 2006; Lew, 2004a, 2004b).

In addition, research on AAPIs at the higher education level, although few in number (e.g., Chang et al., 2007; Hune, 2002; Maramba, 2008a; Museus, 2009a; Park et al., 2008), have addressed the challenges that AAPI students face in postsecondary environments. Moreover, some higher education researchers have also studied specific AAPI ethnicities (e.g., Maramba, 2008a, 2008b; Museus and Maramba, 2011) including an emerging number focusing on SEAA college students (e.g., Chhuon and Hudley, 2008;

Dao, 1991; Museus, 2009b; Teranishi and Nguyen, 2009). For example, Chhuon and Hudley (2008) examined the college experiences of Cambodian Americans and emphasized the importance of how keeping strong connections with their communities enhanced academic success during college. Additionally, in their study of SEAA youth in California, Teranishi and Nguyen (2009) underscored the significance of the effects of ethnic segregation and isolation on the college-going aspirations and preparation of this population. These critical examinations of AAPIs with regard to specific ethnicities must continue. Moreover, these qualitative studies also demonstrate the significance and the need for more research in this area. In sum, research on AAPIs reveals the value that qualitative data complemented with quantitative data provide in informing and eventually creating more effective policies that affect AAPIs.

The concern regarding data on SEAs is not only the lack thereof but also the necessity of more critical data, quantitative and qualitative, for policy makers to use in effective decision-making and implementation.

### Recommendations for Research and Policy

These concerns regarding SEAA college students have grave implications for research and its relationship to policy. Without the availability of data, ineffective or even nonexistent policies may result. Although the current data on SEAs is very useful, a number of areas in research can be vastly improved in order to provide information that will allow for effective decision making for policy makers. The following are suggestions and recommendations that will benefit research and eventually positively influence policy decisions regarding SEAs.

- Aggressive steps toward supporting research on SEAs need to continue. Investment, for example, through funded research grants can encourage additional research in this area. In addition, collaboration of various entities must take place. More specifically, empirical research studies and data collected by research faculty as well as the important work of community organizations should be further supported. For example, organizations such as the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center and the National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans are key components in helping advance the concerns of SEAs.

Collaboration among researchers, faculty, and community organizations supported through funding may help identify needs and drive research on SEAs.

- The effective utilization of varied research methodologies by researchers and policy makers is vital. Although quantitative data are critical in understanding this population, qualitative empirical data are equally valuable. Utilizing qualitative data during the policy-making process can often be overlooked, dismissed, or misperceived as anecdotal and unimportant. Although quantitative data may explain trends, qualitative data elucidates why these trends are occurring. Understanding the complementary relationship of quantitative and qualitative data is particularly important in studying populations that are underserved and underrepresented in educational institutions, such as SEAs. Furthermore, comparative and longitudinal studies are also important toward documenting inequities across groups and change over time.
- Most importantly, the effective collection of data by educational institutions at all stages of the pipeline is critical. As asserted by a number of researchers, not only is it important to collect data on Asian Americans, but also it is imperative to collect data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender separately, race/ethnicity and gender combined, socioeconomic class, and other variables. Data concerning generational status, language used at home and at school, and parents' educational background and income are especially useful in addressing the needs of SEAA students. These types of data are vital for researchers and policy makers to understand critically the contextual relationships and inextricable links amongst them. Most importantly, when higher education institutions collect data on SEAA students at various stages and places of their college/university participation (e.g., admissions, retention, persistence, financial aid needs, and graduate enrollment), the needs and progress or lack of advancement of SEAA students will be better understood. This understanding will translate into more effective support services and policy implementation for SEAA students at all educational levels.

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