

Trends in Admissions for
Asian Americans in Colleges and Universities:
Higher Education Policy

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Gaining access to prestigious institutions of higher education will continue to be a top priority for most Asian American families, even if admissions into such institutions become increasingly competitive and the cost of attending them becomes prohibitive. Less noticeable, but just as important, is the quality of education or the lack of it given to even larger numbers of Asian Americans from immigrant and working class backgrounds in community colleges and state universities and colleges.

This article explores the future trends and emerging issues in these two sectors of higher education for Asian Americans as they look to the 21st century. I shall begin with a historical background and analysis of patterns on Asian enrollments in higher education, setting the stage for a proper understanding of several current controversies over the so-called "over-representation of Asian American students," "model minority," and "reverse discrimination." This will be followed by a discussion on what we can expect in the early decades of the 21st century and what Asian Americans must do to protect their rights and the rights of others.

**Historical Patterns of
Asian American Enrollments**

Historically, two distinctive patterns of Asian enrollment in higher education can be identified. On the one hand, most of the elite, church-

affiliated universities and colleges made a point of recruiting some exceptional students directly from Asian countries partly to enhance the work of American missionaries in Asia and partly to help train leaders knowledgeable and friendly to the U.S. For example, all Ivy League universities and most of the elite liberal arts colleges maintained the presence of a small group of foreign students from Asian countries. Upon graduation these foreign students returned to their countries to become government officials, educators, professors, and church leaders. This explains the high visibility and prestige these institutions enjoy throughout East Asia to this date.

Foreign graduate students from Asian countries increased sharply during the Cold War as higher education expanded rapidly with federal assistance and as U.S. industries, especially the hi-tech industries and research universities, eagerly absorbed them into their work forces. Instead of returning to their home countries after the completion of their training, most of "the best and brightest" settled permanently in the U.S. For example, about 100,000 Chinese graduate students came to the U.S. for advanced degrees between 1950 and 1983 and most of them, about 85 percent, stayed and raised their children in the U.S. In the process, they disproportionately increased the percentage of high achievers among the Asian American population and contributed inadvertently to the stereotype of Asian Americans as a "model" or "super" minority. This explains also the eagerness and determination, including willingness to incur financial sacrifices, with which they send their children to these same institutions.

On the other hand, the American-born Asians were ironically kept out of these same institutions because of overt discriminatory policies against racial minorities and women. In spite of their low socioeconomic status, the children of working class immigrants from Asia in the pre-World War II period were encouraged and motivated to pursue the highest possible education accessible and affordable to them. The hope and sole strategy within the Asian American communities was to use education to overcome poverty and prejudice for the next generation. Unfortunately most institutions of higher education and graduate professional schools maintained policies of either excluding outright Asian American students or limiting their access to a tiny annual quota. The high cost of entering the elite private colleges and universities also effec-

tively prevented the highly motivated, but working class Asian American children from entering these institutions. Historically, about the only institution readily accessible to them before World War II was the tuition-free University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles. It was this opening that set the precedence and established the patterns for future generations for Asian Americans seeking affordable quality higher education. To most Asian Americans to this date, the University of California still represents their best hope of getting admitted without prejudice and receiving a high quality education their parents can afford to pay.

The most significant increase in Asian American enrollment in higher education began in the mid-1970s. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 406,000 Asian Americans in all types of institutions of higher education in 1988. As a percentage of total enrollment in higher education, Asian Americans represented only 3.8 percent in 1988, a very substantial increase from 1.8 percent in 1976. In the same period, the percentage of Whites dropped from 82.6 percent to 78.8 percent and black students declined from 9.4 percent to 8.7 percent while the Hispanic share rose from 3.5 percent to 5.2 percent. (There were 881,000 Blacks and 587,000 Hispanics in colleges and universities in 1988).

It is important to note that the increase occurred across the spectrum of higher education, from the most elite private universities to the small liberal arts colleges, from the top public research universities to the two-year community colleges. Needless to say, the University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles continue to be among the most popular choices, again, because of their quality, accessibility, and low cost. Other public Ivies, such as Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, for the same reasons, have also seen their Asian American enrollments go up.

Several factors account for the sharp increase which continues to this date. First and foremost, the removal of the restrictive racial quotas allocated to immigrants from Asian countries in 1965 caused a sudden surge in Asian immigrants, many of whom were either child-bearing women or women with young children who reached college-age by the mid-1970s. Second, the African American civil rights movement forced the elite universities and colleges to open their doors for the first time to domestic racial minorities and women through affirmative action programs. Most of these universities and colleges soon discovered a huge reservoir of Asian American applicants, many of whom possessed both

academic qualifications and financial resources. This development allowed Asian American high school graduates for the first time to have more choices of universities and colleges beyond the University of California and a few public universities in metropolitan areas with high concentrations of Asian Americans and caused a steady decline in the matriculation rates at UC Berkeley and UCLA. Third, the U.S.-China detente in 1972 and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 precipitated a major geopolitical realignment in East and Southeast Asia and ushered in a new era of political instability for Asian dictatorial regimes sponsored and protected, up until then, by the U.S. As a result, many upper- and middle-class families from South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore decided to move to the U.S. for a more secure and brighter future for their children through education. Most in this group knew the reputation of the elite private universities and pushed their children to gain admissions into them. Lastly, the evacuation of refugees from Vietnam in 1975 and the "Boat People" crisis in 1978 eventually brought over one million refugees from Indochina, many of whom came also with the hope of giving their children a chance to start anew in the U.S. through education.

The above factors led to a rapid increase of Asian American enrollments in several major sectors of higher education in the early 1980s, especially among the most select private universities and colleges in the East Coast and at UC Berkeley and UCLA, the two historically favored institutions for Asian Americans. By about 1983, most of the Ivy League universities, MIT, Cal Tech, Johns Hopkins, Julliard School of Music, and the University of Chicago had at least 10 percent Asian American undergraduates, and by 1990 even the top elite liberal arts colleges were enrolling anywhere from 7 percent to 17 percent (e.g., 8 percent at Amherst, Swarthmore, and Williams; 7 percent at Oberlin; 9 percent at Reed; 14 percent at Pomona and Bryn Mawr; 17 percent at Wellesley and Barnard; and 9 percent at Smith). At UC Berkeley and UCLA, Asian American freshman enrollments increased at such alarming rates that they threatened to outnumber the dominant white student population.

In fact, the rapid rise of Asian American enrollments among these universities led some—for example, Brown, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, MIT, UC Berkeley, and UCLA—to review and revise their respective admission policies in such a way as to cause either an unexpected slowdown or

a decline in the admission of Asian American applicants. Allegations of discrimination and use of illegal means, including alleged quotas for Asian Americans, led to several self-studies by some institutions (Brown, Princeton, MIT, and Stanford) and external investigations by government agencies at the federal and state levels in the late 1980s (audit on UC Berkeley by the California Auditor General and investigation of Harvard and UCLA by the U.S. Office for Civil Rights). Even though these self-studies and investigations have yielded mixed findings, they brought about several far-reaching changes in admission policies, most notably at Stanford, UC Berkeley, and UCLA, and resulted in significant increases in Asian American admissions in most institutions. For example, the freshman class of Harvard, Yale, and Stanford in 1990 had respectively 20 percent, 15 percent, and 24 percent Asian Americans and for the first time in history, Asian American freshmen outnumbered Whites in both UC Berkeley and UCLA in 1990.

Enrollment by Class and National Origin

The national attention given to the Asian American struggle against discriminatory admission policies and their phenomenal success in gaining access to the most prestigious institutions and in fighting against racial discrimination among the top universities and colleges in the United States should not in any way obscure the less publicized struggles by the majority of Asian Americans seeking access to basic and general education necessary to survive and compete in the job market.

As mentioned above, a total of 406,000 Asian Americans were in higher education in 1988. In spite of their smaller population (7.3 million, or 2.9 percent of the total U.S. population in 1990), the enrollment of Asian Americans was equal to Hispanics in private institutions (3.2 percent) and four-year institutions (4.6 percent), but the enrollment of Asian Americans was substantially less than Hispanics in public institutions (4 percent to 5.8 percent) and two-year institutions (4.1 percent to 7.9 percent). In other words, between 1976 and 1988, the representation of Asian American students in higher education more than doubled (1.8 percent to 3.8 percent), and more Asian Americans were enrolled in public institutions (4 percent) and in two-year institutions (4.1 percent), as opposed to private institutions (3.2 percent) and four-year institutions (3.6 percent).

Without doubt, the highly visible presence of Asian Americans in the top private and public universities in the U.S. has overshadowed the vast majority of Asian Americans from working class background, most of whom belong to the immigrant generation. Their numerical presence in the public institutions and in the two-year community colleges represent the values they attach to degrees in higher education, even if they are severely limited by their language background, cultural difference, academic preparation, and financial capability.

Typical of this kind of enrollment are students at California State University at San Francisco and the City College of San Francisco located in a region known for not just its Asian American concentration but also proximity to two of the top universities in the U.S.: UC Berkeley and Stanford University, both of which have high Asian American enrollments. In 1991, CSU San Francisco reported 33 percent Asian Americans out of a total undergraduate student body of 14,672, and the City College of San Francisco had over 40 percent out of 70,000 part-time and full-time students. Students enrolled in these two institutions receive either general education or job-related training programs. In City College, the largest single bloc of Asian American students are enrolled in survival English classes. Through basic English classes and job training programs, they learn to survive in their new, adopted country. Their perennial problems are having to wait for a long time to get into the English classes and getting trained for jobs that hopefully will still exist when they leave school.

In short, the patterns of Asian American enrollment in higher education reflect the bifurcated Asian American population. In general, the children from the middle class are motivated to attend the very top public and private universities and colleges across the nation while the children of the working class pursue higher education on the basis of their needs and academic and financial ability.

However, it would be a mistake to assume all Asian American college-age children attend colleges of different types. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 34.3 percent of all Asian Americans were college graduates in 1980. However, only 2.9 percent among Hmong, 5.6 percent among Laotians, 7.7 percent among Cambodians, and 12.9 percent among Vietnamese were college graduates. In fact, a very significant percentage of college-age Asian Americans is not attending college. They tend to be the poor, non-English-speaking immigrants who invariably

are compelled to do menial jobs with Asian American employers who frequently do not even pay the minimal wage. In spite of their high propensity toward college attendance, not all Asian Americans are high achievers in education and not all Asian Americans are enrolled in the high-prestige universities and colleges, as the popular stereotype of “model minority” implies. In fact, the stereotype has had an adverse impact on Asian American youth.

Even though there are no data collected on the national origins of Asian Americans in higher education, an informal survey of Asian American students in the Ivy League universities and in the University of California show very clearly that Chinese Americans, South Asian Americans, Japanese Americans and Korean Americans are well represented at the undergraduate level, and Chinese Americans and South Asian Americans are best represented at the graduate level. Among the least represented are the Indochinese Americans, and within this group, Vietnamese Americans far outnumber the Hmong, Laotians, and Cambodians.

Therefore, the two major factors that determine college attendance rates and the types of institutions Asian American students attend are socio-economic status and national origin. To achieve a better understanding of Asian Americans in higher education, we need more refined and reliable data collection. Just as important is the need not to make generalizations on Asian American success in higher education. This brief analysis demonstrates the diversity and disparity among Asian Americans in higher education.

Future Trends in Asian American Enrollments

Will the patterns of Asian American enrollment in higher education outlined above persist in the next two decades or so? If these patterns persist, how will different types of institutions of higher education respond to the steady rise of Asian American enrollment? How well will they meet the diverse educational needs of Asian American students? Will the foreign students from Asian countries continue to come to the U.S. for advanced degrees and settle as permanent residents?

Even though the Cold War has ended and many of the immigrant-sending countries in East Asia have become developed countries in recent years, there is no reason to doubt that the well-established patterns of immigration in the past three decades and thus the patterns of Asian

American enrollment in higher education will not persist.

This conclusion is based on the following reasons. First, the Asian immigrants from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Indochina in the last two decades will be eligible to sponsor their relatives to come to the U.S. Unless there is a change in the U.S. immigration law, the influx of Asian immigrants will continue, even though the reasons for emigration may be different from the previous period. Second, the lure of better economic opportunity and a better chance to provide a college education for their children will continue to stimulate additional emigration from Asian countries. Third, the U.S. will remain a main attraction for ambitious students from Asian countries where research universities are either non-existent or too few to meet their demands. In spite of the high cultural value and social prestige assigned to education in most East Asian and Southeast Asian societies, education in most of these countries remains largely inaccessible to most people. Access to education is highly restrictive because of exorbitant tuition and keen competition for access to a small handful of institutions. Several Asian countries are trying to build world-class research universities, but it will be a long time before they can become competitive. Many of these foreign students will eventually establish families in the U.S. and send their children to college.

In other words, the growth rates and enrollment patterns of Asian Americans in higher education established since the mid-1970s will continue in the foreseeable future, indeed, well into the next century. This means that the pool of highly motivated and competitive Asian American applicants to all types of institutions of higher education will continue to swell.

Emerging Issues

This being the case, Asian Americans can expect steeper competition for access into top universities and colleges as university resources shrink and tuition and admission standards are raised. Similarly, the children of working class immigrants will continue to seek access to higher education even though they will find access increasingly difficult as public universities raise their admissions standards and community colleges cut their services for survival English and job training programs.

Four major issues are likely to incite public debates:

First, the debate over the so-called "overrepresentation" of Asian Americans at the top national universities and colleges is likely to continue because the percentage of Asian Americans admitted each year will continue to rise. Among the top public universities, the percentage of Asian American freshmen exceeded Whites at UC Berkeley and UCLA last year. In fact, the gap will continue to widen as the Asian American applicant pools in these two public institutions expand and the white pools shrink. For the first time this year, the pool of Asian American applicants to UCLA surpassed Whites while the number of Asian American applicants at Berkeley closed in on the white applicants. Likewise, although at a slower rate, both in numbers and percentages, the admissions of Asian Americans among the nation's top private universities and colleges are rising steadily. The percentages of Asian Americans in the 1991 freshman class at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford reached 19 percent, 15 percent and 24 percent respectively.

Second, the perceived overrepresentation of Asian American students in these institutions will intensify the ongoing national debate over the usefulness of some of the traditional universal meritocratic criteria that began in the early 1980s when several universities noted the alarming growth rates of Asian American students on their campuses. The debate is likely to center on the proper weight to be assigned to traditional academic criteria (test scores and GPA) and non-academic criteria of infinite variety (extracurricular activities, leadership quality, race, socioeconomic status, geographic location, age, disability, music or athletic talent, veteran status, career choice, children of VIP, "legacy" status, i.e., children of alumni, etc.) Behind this debate is the issue of overrepresentation and how best to achieve a balanced, diverse student body without abandoning these institutions' commitment to the principle of academic excellence. Since the leaders of the U.S. have historically come out of these world-class universities and colleges, the hidden agenda and ultimate issue behind the overrepresentation debate may very well be the future leadership in the U.S. and how we conceive our national identity. This, in fact, was the real issue behind the three-century-old "Jewish Question" until it was finally overcome in the late 1950s.

Third, just as important on the other side of this debate on overrepresentation is whether affirmative action programs designed to correct past injustices against racial minorities are being eroded by rising

Asian American enrollment on the one hand *or* are rapidly becoming an obstacle for more Asian Americans seeking to gain access to these same institutions. At the heart of the debate over the merit, legitimacy, and legality of affirmative action programs is whether the *Bakke* decision (1978) should be left alone or challenged. Under *Bakke*, the U.S. Supreme Court permitted universities to establish temporary affirmative action programs not only to correct past injustices against racial minorities but also to create a diverse student body for reasons, presumably, of pedagogy, as long as race, color, or national origin is not the sole basis for framing such programs. At issue therefore are the fairness and longevity of such programs under *Bakke*. Led by Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds, Gary Curran of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, conservative Whites and some Asian Americans have been using the legitimate complaints of Asian Americans to advance their objective to dismantle affirmative action programs through the Office for Civil Rights since the late 1980s. They consider such programs unfair and no longer necessary. The recent decision by OCR to conduct compliance review at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UCLA, and UC San Diego is further indication of this line of thinking and attack.

Fourth, the shrinking public and private resources for higher education, the virtually mandatory college degrees for success in the job market, and the anticipated rise in demand for access to higher education in the next decade are forcing institutions of higher education to raise tuition and admission standards as convenient devices to reject applicants. Unfortunately, the net result of this strategy is to force, in mass, middle- and lower-middle-class applicants to seek admission into the less selective and cheaper public universities, compelling these institutions also to raise their fees and admission requirements. The end result is the displacement of large numbers of working class children from these traditionally affordable institutions. For example, the University of California system has nearly doubled its fees in the past two years alone. Many Asian American students from the working class will find it increasingly difficult to gain access to these institutions. They will be compelled to look to community colleges where fees, likewise, have been moving up steadily. Under this bumping process, Asian Americans will probably continue to do well because of their commitment to higher education and their willingness to sacrifice for the sake of education. This means that they will become

more visible and “overrepresented” at all levels of the educational hierarchy, a condition most conducive to multiracial conflict.

Asian American Response to Emerging Issues

Given the scenario outlined above, Asian Americans must chart their course of actions along the following lines:

- Asian Americans must actively monitor and participate in the ongoing debate over the criteria for admissions and be prepared to take action against any unfair targeting of Asian Americans for exclusion;
- As a racial minority who have benefitted and will continue to benefit from affirmative action programs in other sectors of the society, Asian Americans must continue to support legitimate affirmative action programs on the one hand and forcefully oppose efforts by Whites and some Asian Americans to challenge and dismantle such program under *Bakke*;
- Because affirmative action programs are defined legally as transitional programs whose usefulness will eventually expire, Asian Americans must support efforts to gradually shift the predominantly race-based affirmative action programs to class-based affirmative action programs. Such programs in the long run will benefit all races in a society in which the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer; and
- Asian Americans must work with institutions of higher education to develop English language and job training programs that will adequately serve the needs of working class Asian immigrants.