EVERYONE DESERVES TO BE SEEN.

Recommendations for Improved Federal Data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI)

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Postsecondary education has the power to usher graduates toward a better life, higher earnings, and economic and social mobility. Our current systems, however, do not equitably distribute these benefits, leaving students—primarily those who are historically underserved by our education systems, like low-income students and students of color—without the full benefits of a postsecondary credential. Lack of access to education, barriers to postsecondary attainment, and pervasive wage inequities have far-reaching, multi-generational impacts.

Disaggregated data can illuminate where these inequities exist and persist. To ensure these gaps are recognized, the ways in which institutions report data should be designed to ensure that all underserved groups are identified. When federal, state, and institutional policymakers have access to more detailed data, they can enact evidence-based policies that address inequities, like targeted interventions and student supports. In the absence of this data, policymakers are essentially flying blind, resulting in policies that may unwittingly reinforce a status quo that perpetuates the marginalization of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities.[1]

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For example, current postsecondary data systems aggregate the AAPI communities in ways that mask inequities in outcomes. As a field, we should unpack these data by aligning reporting requirements to the categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau (the Census). The Census reports data on at least 25 distinct, self-identified AAPI groups (see Table 1),[2] each with unique linguistic, cultural, and historical differences that often influence AAPIs' outcomes and opportunities throughout their lives.

These race and ethnicity categories are informed by empirical research, collaboration between statistical agencies across the federal government, and engagement of diverse communities. The Census has tested survey questions since the 1970s to improve the design and accuracy of each question, including race and ethnicity questions, especially as perspectives on this topic have evolved. While race and ethnicity are fluid terms and the design of Census questions could still be improved, the Census provides a research-based set of race categories for AAPI groups that can be applied consistently across all federal agencies.[3]

TABLE 1.
Race Groups Reported in 2011-2015 ACS 5-Year Selected Population Tables Based on 2010 Census Counts of at Least a National Population of 7,000

ASIAN SUBGROUPS

- Asian Indian
- Bangladeshi
- Bhutanese
- Burmese
- Cambodian
- Chinese
- Filipino
- Hmong
- Indonesian
- Japanese
- Korean
- Laotian
- Malaysian
- Mongolian
- Nepalese
- Pakistani
- Sri Lankan
- Thai
- Vietnamese

NATIVE HAWAIIAN & OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER SUBGROUPS

- Fijian
- Guamanian or Chamorro
- Native Hawaiian
- Marshallese
- Samoan
- Tongan

For example, Southeast Asian Americans, including people from Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian backgrounds, have experienced mass collective trauma from war, genocide, displacement, and the stressors associated with relocation—such as English language difficulties and cultural conflicts. These experiences have negatively affected their educational outcomes and economic security. Southeast Asian Americans are far less likely to have attended college than other Asian Americans. About one quarter of Southeast Asian American adults have not graduated from high school, compared to only 12 percent of all Asians and 12 percent of all American adults.[4] Furthermore, another 26 percent of Cambodian, 24 percent of Hmong, 31 percent of Lao, and 20 percent of Vietnamese Americans have graduated high school, but have not attended college for any period of time, compared with only 15 percent of all Asian adults and 27 percent of all adults. Southeast Asian Americans are also more likely to have only completed some college and an associate's degree, compared with all Asians.[5]

Such large variation in educational outcomes alone demonstrates that AAPIs should no longer be combined into one or two subgroups in collecting and reporting postsecondary data. Beyond their diversity, AAPIs also are growing at a faster rate than any other racial group. From 2010 to 2018, the Asian American population grew by 28 percent and the Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander population grew by 19 percent, compared with only 6 percent growth for the total U.S. population.[6]

Challenges of the current federal race and ethnicity categories

Under the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) 1997 revised federal standards for race and ethnicity data,[7] data on race and ethnicity must be maintained, collected, and presented by the following minimum categories for all federal reporting purposes: for race—American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White; and for ethnicity—Hispanic or Latino, and Not Hispanic or Latino. Many education data collections, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), follow these guidelines.

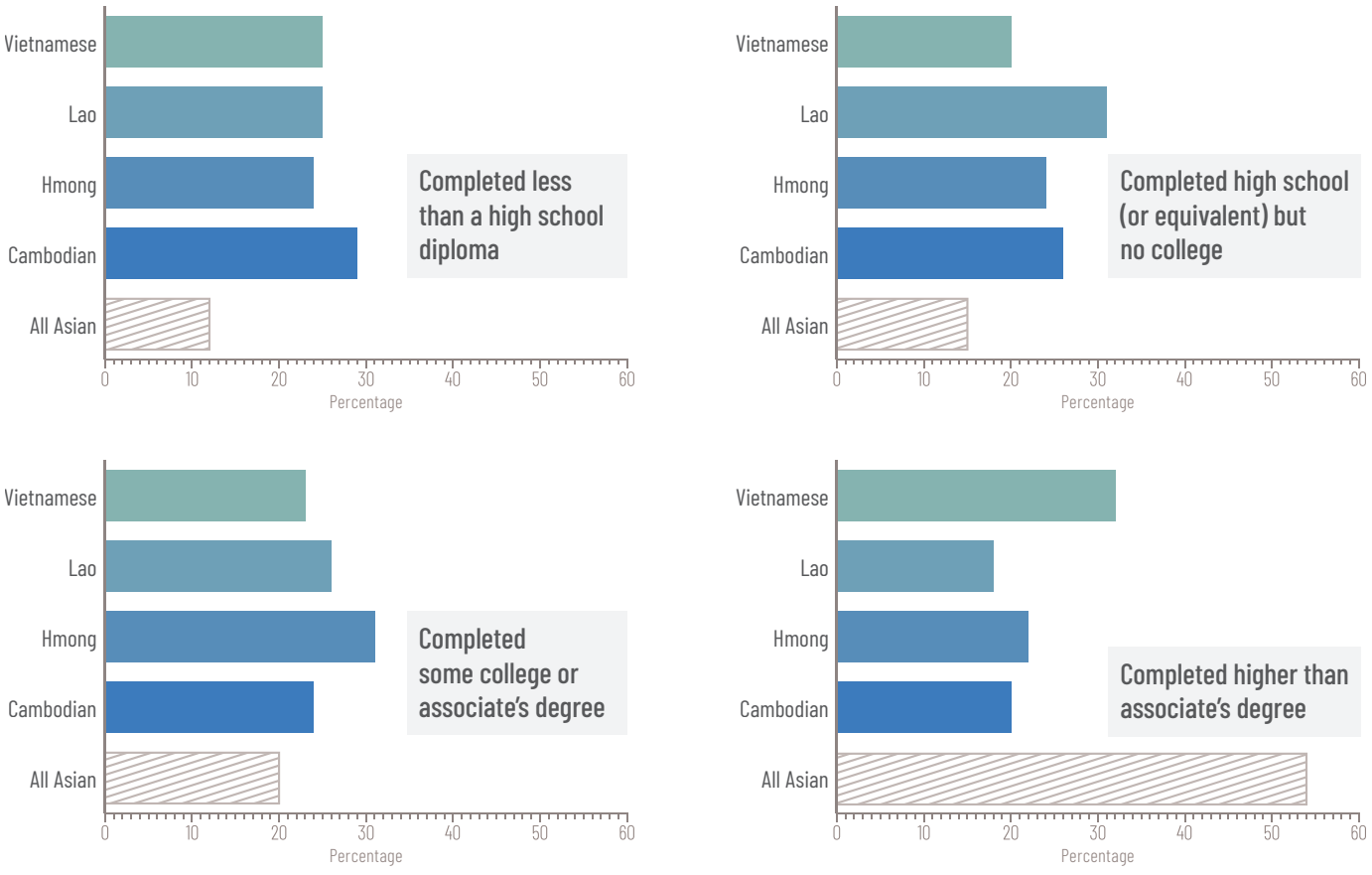
When institutions report data under the "Asian" or "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" categories, these broad categories conceal differences and inequities within the AAPI student subgroup (see Figure 1) and hamper policymakers' ability to take evidence-based action. These current data collection and reporting policies perpetuate the myth of the "model minority," which posits that Asian Americans have overcome racism through hard work and education and should serve as the model for other minority groups.[8] This myth diminishes the diversity that exists within the AAPI community and over-aggregates their experiences by masking—and thus perpetuating—inequities in how postsecondary systems serve students.

FIGURE 1.

Differences in Highest Level of Educational Attainment for Adults Age 25 and Older Among AAPI Student Subgroups

Source: 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year estimates, a product of the U.S. Census Bureau

Figures rounded to nearest whole number.



While the 1997 standards constitute the minimum set of categories, OMB makes clear that "the collection of greater detail is encouraged"[9] as long as subcategories can be aggregated to the minimum race and ethnicity categories. Yet institutions often deprioritize disaggregating data beyond what is mandated or required by the federal government.[10]

Policy recommendations: Disaggregating AAPI data in postsecondary data collections

To provide policymakers and institutions with the information necessary to design evidence-based policies that support postsecondary success of AAPI students, policymakers must amend federal data collections to include disaggregates within the "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" categories. This disaggregation would better contextualize the diverse historical and socioeconomic characteristics and needs of the AAPI community. Congress, the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and colleges and universities all have an opportunity to lead the way on this critical policy change.

1

LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS:

Congress should pass laws that require government agencies and postsecondary institutions to disaggregate AAPI data to ensure that all students are represented in policy and programmatic decisions. A federal mandate ensures consistency in how data are disaggregated and reported through clear guidance.

At a minimum, IPEDS should require colleges and universities to disaggregate race data for AAPI ethnic groups based on the nine categories listed as checkbox options in the decennial Census[11] and the American Community Survey (ACS).[12] These categories are: Chinese; Filipino; Asian Indian; Vietnamese; Korean; Japanese; Native Hawaiian; Samoan; and Chamorro. Two additional checkbox options also include "Other Asian" and "Other Pacific Islander," the instructions for which describe examples of other options for respondents to self-identify via write-in option.[13]

Policymakers also should require the disaggregation of AAPI data in any comprehensive postsecondary data system reform, especially since a federal student-level data network would ease institutional reporting burdens over time. Currently, institutions calculate hundreds of metrics on enrollment, completion, financial metrics, and more, which they further analyze for different subsets of students. Under current proposals for a federal student-level data network, institutions would simply report the student-level data—which should include student-level demographic data by AAPI subgroups—to the National Center for Education Statistics, which would then calculate institution-level metrics.[14]

2

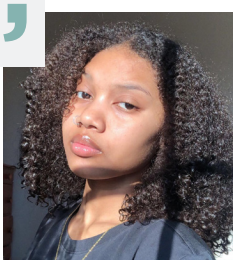
AGENCY POLICIES:

The U.S. Department of Education should revise its 2007 guidance on maintaining, collecting, and reporting racial and ethnic data to require postsecondary institutions to report disaggregated AAPI data in data systems such as IPEDS.

Some federal agencies have already implemented policies that require disaggregation of AAPI data. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services collects demographic data using the disaggregated race and ethnicity categories of the ACS and the decennial Census for all national population health surveys.[15]

ED has previously recognized the need for disaggregated data on AAPIs. In 2012, ED opened a Request for Information on practices and policies within existing educational entities for disaggregating data on AAPI subgroups, which generated 711 public comments. The vast majority (84 percent) of individual and organizational comments supported disaggregating AAPI data, and 40 out of 104 educational entities (e.g., institutions of higher education, local and state education agencies) reported in their comments that they were already disaggregating their data.[16]

In 2016, ED launched the Asian American and Pacific Islander Data Disaggregation Initiative Grant Competition (D2 Program).[17] Housed in the Office of English Language Acquisition, the D2 Program provided grants to state education agencies to collect and analyze data on English Learner students disaggregated by AAPI subgroups in order to close opportunity gaps.



Deijah Prak Preaster,
ARISE Youth Leader

AAPI data equity personally matters to me because everyone deserves to be seen. As a young person who identifies as biracial – Khmer and Black – I always feel left out, particularly when filling out school forms, job applications, and internship opportunities. I am always forced to check off the 'other' box for the question on ethnicity. The feeling of not being counted or seen hurts; it makes me feel my identity does not matter. It is important to disaggregate data so that resources can properly be allocated to those who need them. I think that everyone just wants – and deserves – to be heard and counted. Data equity is a step in that direction."

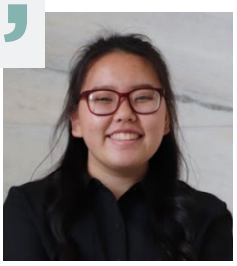
3

INSTITUTIONAL DATA COLLECTION:

Institutions should initiate widespread disaggregation of AAPI data by updating their own data collection practices.

Institutions can pave the way for more widespread reform in data disaggregation. For instance, the University of California (UC) system collects demographic data disaggregated by AAPI groups at the time of application. The UC system uses the data internally to determine trends in student outcomes, help campuses understand the needs of their various student communities to better allocate academic and social resources, and identify any inequities in their programs for subgroups of students.[18] The University of Hawai'i (UH) similarly collects detailed ethnicity data through the common application used by all UH campuses.[19]

Amending data collections should not necessarily mean undue burden for institutions. By including a few additional fields in the race/ethnicity section of a student's online application, institutions can collect data that better reflects the diversity of the AAPI community without dramatically increasing administrative burden. UC collects disaggregated AAPI demographic data in this manner through the system's online admissions application. When the University updated its data collection system in 2008 to nearly triple the number of AAPI options for students to self-identify, adapting data collection "simply required staff to define and add new values."[20]



Eva Moua, High School Senior in Minnesota, Co-President of Hmong Club

> Without data disaggregation, this system makes students like me invisible, our needs are downplayed, and resources aren't offered. Data disaggregation allows for students like me to be seen, to get the resources we need, and to reach our fullest potential.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Enhancing AAPI data collection beyond Census categories and maximizing data usability

Current Census race categories offer only a starting point for disaggregating AAPI student data. Moving forward, other AAPI groups, such as those listed as examples for a write-in option on the Census and the ACS, should also be given distinct categories at the point of data collection. The groups currently listed on the Census only as write-in examples under "Other Pacific Islander" (Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese) and "Other Asian" (Cambodian, Hmong) are among those that face the lowest educational outcomes of all AAPI groups.[21] Other groups, like Laotian Americans, similarly face significant challenges in higher education, and yet, they are rendered even more unseen in education data as they are not afforded even a write-in example on the 2020 Census.[22]

According to research from the Census Bureau's 2015 National Content Test, question formats with detailed checkbox options, rather than write-in areas, elicited improved levels of detailed responses across all of the major race and ethnicity groups.[23] In order to yield the most accurate data on diverse student groups—and therefore information on how to best support diverse student groups toward postsecondary success—institutions should incorporate checkbox categories for detailed AAPI groups even beyond those included in the Census.

While accurately reflecting the diversity of the AAPI population, all data must be treated with strong privacy and security protections. Effective protocols will need to suppress some results due to small sample sizes, in order to maintain individual confidentiality. To maximize the usability of data and maintain confidentiality, data systems should explore methodological solutions, such as aggregating together multiple years of data to increase sample sizes in a way that allows for further disaggregation.

State and local governments should supplement existing data when national samples are not large enough to report and analyze detailed AAPI ethnicity groups. Such state and local data may also better inform policies to serve local populations, and they can be updated according to demographic changes in a given community. For example, Minnesota's All Kids Count Act requires the state's Department of Education to make frequent updates to disaggregated race and ethnicity categories based on population counts.[24] [25]

Conclusion

The benefits of disaggregating AAPI data are well worth the investment, while failure to act could mean further marginalizing students. With detailed race and ethnicity data, policymakers and institutions can properly identify the AAPI subgroups currently underrepresented in higher education and improve public programs—in education and beyond—to better serve all students and ensure that all students are able to equitably reap the benefits of higher education.

When individuals are invisible in data, they remain invisible in policy conversations, which are more important than ever in times of crisis and upheaval. By neglecting to disaggregate data and perpetuating invisibility in data collections, policymakers at all levels—federal, state, and institutional—will continue to fail and disenfranchise AAPI students across the country. Missing the life-changing opportunity of higher education is a major loss not only for these students, but for their families, communities, institutions, and our nation as a whole. ▪

Endnotes

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