



Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in California: How Higher Education Diversity Benefits Our Communities

March 2014

Executive Summary: *As a coalition primarily of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) civil rights and higher education groups, we present this policy report to dispel public misconceptions that have recently surfaced around efforts to diversify higher education. In fact, AAPIs have deep and abiding reasons to support college and university diversity. Reports in the media about Proposition 209 (which banned affirmative action) greatly benefiting AAPI admissions and about the role of SAT scores are misleading and contradicted by the evidence. Contrary to the harmful “model minority” myth, many AAPI ethnic groups face considerable educational disadvantages and have lower rates of college access. A substantial body of social science shows that AAPI students benefit from exposure to diversity in the classroom. Finally, public higher education is a “positive sum game” investment that supports the hopes and aspirations of California’s young people and it also pays off economically. More opportunities for AAPIs will be created if we turn our collective focus toward reversing the tide of long-term higher education disinvestment that has eroded opportunities and threatens California’s future global competitiveness.*

Affirmative action enjoys solid support among Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. Nearly two decades ago, California voters approved Proposition 209, which prohibited race-conscious programs to promote equal opportunity in education, employment and contracting. However, representative polling indicated that three-fifths of Asian Americans (and roughly three-quarters of African Americans and Latinos) voted against the proposition.¹ In fact, a majority of both Asian American Democrats and Republicans voted against Prop 209.² Likewise, the 2012 *National*

Asian American Survey found that a strong majority of AAPIs support affirmative action.³

Today Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial/ethnic group in America; California is home to over 6 million Asian Americans (including 1.2 million in Los Angeles) and California’s Pacific Islander communities are also experiencing significant growth.⁴ AAPIs are a growing force in electoral politics, and AAPI voices are vital in the policy debates of our day, including around diversity.⁵

Introduction – The Deeper Roots of Diversity

As a result of the historic civil rights struggles that Asian Americans participated with other communities of color, Asian Americans secured greater rights and opportunities in America.⁶ Race-conscious admissions programs opened the doors of opportunity for many Asian Americans in the 1960s and 1970s,⁷ and into the 1980s and 1990s affirmative action programs were an important tool for several underrepresented AAPI communities (e.g., Filipinos, Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders) in broadening their access to the University of California prior to Prop 209.⁸

Consequently, though AAPIs still face “glass ceiling” barriers in managerial sectors⁹ and in business and public contracting,¹⁰ today’s California -- in which AAPIs serve as university chancellors, college presidents, executives of major corporations and supreme court justices – is difficult to imagine without the groundwork laid by strong multi-racial efforts to transform the opportunity structure in our society, including through affirmative action.

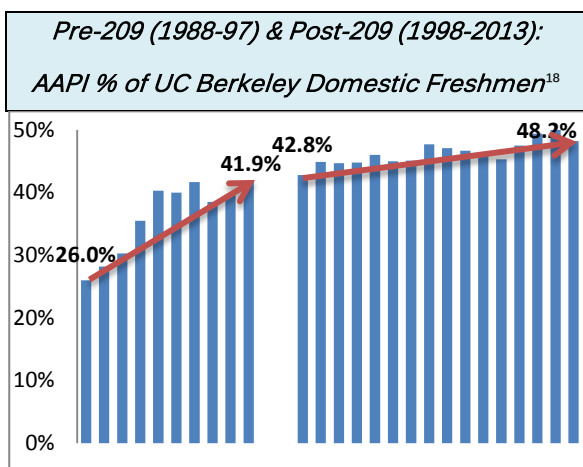
AAPI communities have nuanced views about affirmative action and our organizations are consciously aware that ideological groups aiming to eliminate equal opportunity programs often try to eviscerate this nuance¹¹ by misappropriating AAPIs through “racial wedge” strategies that serve their own political ends.¹² But as Professor Mari Matsuda famously said, “We will not be used.”¹³ We are also aware that some within AAPI communities can at times advance perspectives about diversity that stem from a narrow and misguided sense of self-interest.¹⁴ In the remaining sections of this report we show how affirmative action, in fact, supports our deeper interests within AAPI communities.

“It would be a tragedy if our nation’s colleges and universities slipped backward now, denying access to talented but disadvantaged youth and eroding the diversity that helps to prepare leaders.”

-- **Chang-Lin Tien**, former UC Berkeley Chancellor and the first AAPI to head a leading U.S. university

Prop 209, SATs and AAPIs—Don’t Be Misled

Too often AAPIs are portrayed in a confused manner that greatly exaggerates the impact of Prop 209 on AAPI enrollments overall.¹⁵ Such claims about Prop 209 echo older “Asian invasion” stereotypes that have long-plagued our communities.¹⁶ However, studies refute such claims about Prop 209 and AAPIs.¹⁷ As the chart below illustrates, **it is problematic to assume that Prop 209 ushered in big gains for AAPIs.** At UC Berkeley in the nine years prior to Prop 209 AAPI freshmen increased nearly 16 points (from 26% to 41.9%), but in the much longer 16-year period under Prop 209 AAPIs only increased another 6 points (to 48.2%).



Contrary to simplistic claims in the popular discourse and in the minds of some parents, **SAT scores cannot (and do not) serve as the sole measure of “merit,”** for this would devalue other important factors. One example is the UC system’s recent freshman eligibility changes, which included eliminating the SAT subject tests

as a requirement and expanding Eligibility in Local Context (ELC) to cover students with grades in the top 9% of his/her high school. Notably, the UC faculty admissions committee finds that so far these new changes are associated with UC freshman (including thousands of AAPIs) having higher college GPAs and lower dropout rates in their first term at UC even though there was not a corresponding rise in freshman SAT scores.¹⁹

“Standardized test scores and academic performance must be reviewed in the context of factors that impact test performance, including students’ personal and academic circumstances (e.g. low-income status, access to honors courses, and the college-going culture of the school)... Campuses should base an admission decision on the total information about achievement using multiple criteria in the applicant file.”
-- UC faculty admissions committee (“BOARS”) ²⁰

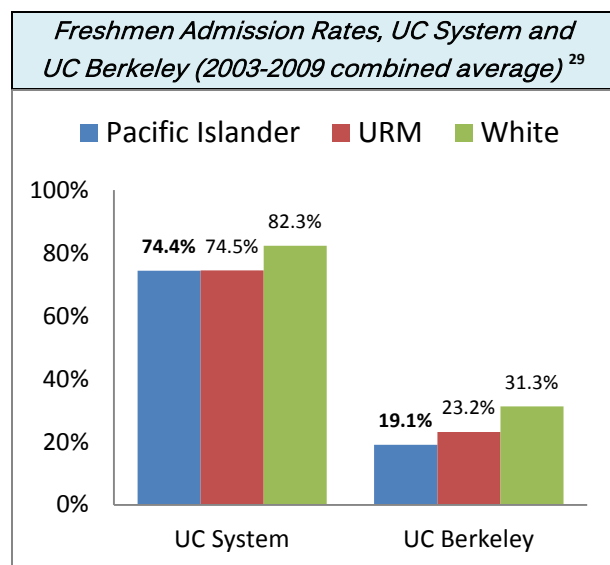
Recent claims that consideration of diversity favors or disfavors different groups by hundreds of points on the SAT²¹ are misleading to parents, and we deplore the divisiveness these claims sew in our communities. Such claims often rely on studies by Espenshade that have no relevance to California public universities for two reasons. First, the Espenshade estimates rely on older (1997) admissions data from a few elite *private* universities. Second, his estimates have little to do with affirmative action, as 85% of the simulated gains for AAPIs in such a model are attributable to ending “negative action” differentials that Asian Americans face relative to white applicants.²² Such “negative action” at East Coast private universities cannot be explained by affirmative action programs.²³ By contrast, in the UC system for example, the freshmen admission rate for Asian Americans is higher than the overall admission rate in 2013,

and there is not credible evidence of meaningful “negative action” against AAPIs either today²⁴ or in the 1990s before Prop 209. Espenshade’s work has been criticized for presenting a problematic picture of AAPIs and for falsely pitting AAPIs against the interests of African Americans and Latinos in higher education.²⁵

Many AAPI Groups Face Low Representation

As noted in the CARE “iCount” report for the White House’s Initiative on AAPIs, lack of disaggregated data “conceals the unique challenges faced by AAPIs” and “the aggregation of AAPI sub-groups into a single data category is a civil rights issue for the AAPI community.”²⁶ Specific examples from the iCount report included a case study of UC based on newly available disaggregated data, finding that many groups were below their proportion of the state population in UC Berkeley’s applicant pool: “Low representation among AAPI applicants is a particularly problematic trend for Pacific Islanders (Samoans, Guamanians, Tongans, and Native Hawaiians), Southeast Asians (Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong, and Vietnamese), and Filipinos.” The report found similar patterns in UCLA’s admit pool.²⁷

Pacific Islanders, for example, face extensive barriers to opportunity in higher education, and have among the lowest rates of college-going and degree completion nationwide and in California.²⁸ The chart below illustrates this challenge, and confirms that over an eight year span, Pacific Islanders’ admission rates to the UC system were the same as the groups traditionally defined as “underrepresented minorities” (URMs) – i.e., African Americans, Latinos and American Indians combined – and at UC Berkeley, the most selective campus, Pacific Islander admission rates were lower than URM rates.



AAPIs and Others Share Educational Benefits

In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized that student body diversity “promotes ‘cross-racial understanding,’ helps to break down racial stereotypes, and ‘enables [students] to better understand persons of different races’” and the Court found that these benefits “are substantial.” 539 U.S. 306, 330 (2003). An extensive body of social science research corroborates these benefits for students, including AAPI students.³⁰ For example, students attending institutions that are more engaged with diversity exhibit higher levels of personal change in their knowledge of people of different races or cultures and in their ability to get along with people from different racial or cultural backgrounds.³¹

Large-scale studies analyzing and synthesizing the research literature (“meta-analytic” studies) document the following **benefits in higher education**:

- Diversity experiences are positively related to cognitive skills development.³²
- Greater intergroup contact is associated with lower levels of prejudice.³³
- Cross-group friendships promote positive

intergroup attitudes.³⁴

Enhanced “pluralistic orientations”³⁵ and cross-cultural competencies³⁶ are critical to the success in the global economy.

AAPIs directly benefit from diversity in the classroom and surrounding informal learning environments in college.³⁷ AAPIs also benefit from diverse learning environments in *indirect* ways. For instance, one important study found that college seniors who interacted more frequently with students of other races exhibited the following patterns, “Black students’ contact with Asians was related to improved attitudes toward Hispanics and Whites, and their interactions with Hispanics and Whites were both related to improved attitudes toward Asians.”³⁸ AAPIs’ attitudes about others also improve through the same process.³⁹

“I have become convinced of the importance of affirmative action by study and experience, but I was not always persuaded of the justice of affirmative action.... I have learned how affirmative action can work for society....Asian Americans can add innovations to the case for affirmative action and strengthen it.”

--Frank H. Wu, Chancellor & Dean, UC Hastings College of the Law; author of *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*

In light of the above evidence, it is not surprising that AAPI college students’ support for affirmative action *increases* as they progress from being freshmen to seniors.⁴⁰ And racial diversity is particularly important in professional schools settings where the negative impact of Prop 209 has been the most dramatic. Several studies show that diversity in the classroom helps AAPIs and others enhance their competencies as future physicians⁴¹ and as future lawyers and community/civic leaders.⁴²

Higher Education – An Investment in Our Young People and California's Economic Prosperity

Higher education is a “positive sum game” for our students and our society. Investment in California public higher education pays off not just for students who receive a college education; the State's (and the taxpayers') investment is returned several times over through increased tax revenues and lowered costs for prisons and other programs.⁴³ Accordingly, AAPIs have a strong interest in ensuring that the overall public higher education system is sound and capable of meeting the needs of California's future economy. While Proposition 30 is an important indicator that we have begun to turn a corner, this comes against a backdrop in which California's General Fund spending on prisons increased three times faster than for higher education (UC and Cal State) since the 1990s.⁴⁴ Such long-term disinvestment in higher education has troubling enrollment consequences for California students from all backgrounds (including AAPIs).⁴⁵

One concrete example where disinvestment impacts AAPIs is that the UC system is carrying thousands of “unfunded” California resident students who are not supported by the State. A few years ago UC Berkeley significantly scaled back on the number of unfunded students it would enroll, and the number of California resident AAPIs in the freshman class dropped from 1,776 annually in 2006-09 to 1,440 annually in 2010-13 (a 19% decline).⁴⁶ To place things in perspective, this drop of 336 AAPI students is more than double the total number of African American and American Indian California resident freshmen enrolling annually at UC Berkeley in recent years. These figures are a reminder of the fact that misplaced attacks on

diversity efforts distract us from our more fundamental challenge: As Californians all of us, including AAPIs, must come together to expand and support our excellent universities in order to secure a brighter future for our young people.

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