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AN UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD: THE COMPLEX EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Julie J. Park



ABOUT THE ESSAY

This essay is part of a portfolio of work on race and ethnicity in higher education. *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report* and its accompanying microsite provide a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by offering a comprehensive review of the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.

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Visit www.equityinhighered.org to learn more about ACE's work on race and ethnicity in higher education and to download the full report containing more than 200 indicators on race and ethnicity. Also available on the site are downloadable figures, detailed data, and other resources on race and ethnicity in higher education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie J. Park is an associate professor of education at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research addresses how race, religion, and social class affect diversity and equity in higher education, including the diverse experiences of Asian American college students. She is currently the principal investigator on a project funded by the National Science Foundation: "Connections Matter: The Impact of Social Capital and Social Ties for STEM College Students."

Her book *Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data* (Harvard Education Press, 2018) tackles misconceptions about how race and diversity work in higher education. She is also the author of *When Diversity Drops: Race, Religion, and Affirmative Action in Higher Education* (Rutgers University Press, 2013), an examination of how universities are affected by bans on affirmative action.

She is an associate editor for the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Besides being published in academic journals, her commentary has also appeared in venues like *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Park earned her PhD in education from UCLA (higher education and organizational change), with a graduate concentration in Asian American Studies, and BA at Vanderbilt University (sociology, English, and women's studies).



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Introduction

Growing up in Ohio as the child of Korean immigrants, I had a narrow view of who Asian Americans were. I grew up in a relatively affluent suburb, and most of my Asian American friends were the children of similarly well-educated immigrants. Although my sister and I were among the only Asians in our elementary school, by high school, my Advanced Placement classes were about one-fourth Asian: quite a bit considering that Asian Americans were probably only 5 percent of the school district. Most years, my high school sent a kid to Harvard, and most years that person was Asian American.

When I moved to California as a graduate student, I was surprised to find out that over 40 percent of Asian Americans in higher education enroll not at places like Harvard, but at community colleges—great places to get an education, but less in alignment with stereotypes of Asian Americans. I met Asian American high school dropouts, Asian Americans who never went to college, and Asian Americans who started college but left. As I started doing research, I encountered story after story of Asian Americans who had been put on academic probation but never told their parents, or Asian Americans who left college and needed a second (or third) chance at getting a degree. And if I had been a little more aware growing up, I would have noticed that there was growing economic diversity in my local Korean immigrant community in the Midwest. Beyond the bubble of my peer group, many of the Korean American kids in my hometown came from working class backgrounds, and definitely not everyone went to college.

It's easy to think that my Asian American experience is emblematic of the Asian American story, the one that defines most, if not all of the community. This assumption is deeply and patently false, but it is constantly reinforced by the media and high-profile incidents from the pending lawsuit at Harvard to the controversy over elite high school admissions in New York City. Asian Americans are viewed by many as the success story of American education, but there is more than meets the eye.

“Asians Are Doing Great!”: Misconceptions About Asian Americans

I often hear two common narratives on Asian Americans in higher education—the first is that they're doing great, and the second is that they really aren't doing so well. The data on Asian Americans in ACE's *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* report could be used to confirm either (Espinosa et al. 2019). The “Asians are doing great” narrative pops up often, given that today's news is dominated by allegations of universities and even high schools that are so overwhelmed with highly qualified Asian Americans that they're resorting to discrimination to keep them out. Allegations that I deeply disagree with. In full disclosure, I served as a consulting expert on the side of Harvard in the ongoing case *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*; all views here are my own.

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Across many of the findings and data from ACE's report, Asian Americans often look like they are doing pretty well. Overall, Asian Americans have the highest level of postsecondary degree attainment. Regardless of economic background, they are far more likely to enroll in highly selective universities than their peers of other racial and ethnic groups.

Fortunately, the *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* report doesn't leave us there. It disaggregates the Asian American sample when possible, highlighting that while Asian Americans on the whole have the highest levels of educational attainment, attainment varies widely by ethnic subgroup. For example, although 73.2 percent of Korean Americans ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in college, only 44.3 percent of those with origins in the Philippines are. The data also highlight that 37 percent of Asian Americans who take the GED® test do not pass. These data lead me to the second narrative that I hear in educational circles about Asian Americans: "See, Asian Americans have problems too!" I often hear something like this following the presentation of disaggregated data, or accompanying an argument *for* disaggregating the data.

"See, Asian Americans Have Problems Too": Another Side of the Story

This second narrative focusing on disadvantage has much truth to it—Asian Americans of all ethnicities (e.g., Korean, Cambodian, and many others) encounter challenges in education. However, this approach of focusing solely on the lower educational outcomes that many Asian American face can also be problematic and incomplete. As OiYan Poon and colleagues (2016) contend, primarily defining populations by their "issues" can reinforce limited, deficit perspectives of Southeast Asian American, Pacific Islander, and low-income Asian Americans. This approach focusing more on deficits can lead to these populations being solely defined by deficiencies (which are often framed as personal or cultural shortcomings) instead of recognizing and addressing the structural, institutionalized racism and barriers that limit opportunity. For instance, Bic Ngo, Vichet Chhuon, Stacey J. Lee, and others have documented the systemic racism and challenges that Southeast Asian American youth face in the K–12 education system.

The "Success Frame" and "Stereotype Lift": Who Is Doing Well, Not So Well, and Why

As important as it is to address the structural and institutional barriers encountered by Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and low-income Asian Americans, we also need to address the structural advantages experienced by a substantial portion of the Asian American community.

There *is* a third narrative I hear. It's something along the lines of: "As an aggregate group, Asian Americans are doing well, but when you disaggregate, you see they're very diverse and certain groups face more challenges." This statement is accurate, but it doesn't provide an explanation for *why* this diversity exists beyond the idea that certain groups face more barriers. Does that

mean that other Asian ethnic-subgroups generally experience just typical or average educational opportunity, or are they experiencing certain advantages when it comes to education?

As important as it is to address the structural and institutional barriers encountered by Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and low-income Asian Americans, we also need to address the structural advantages experienced by a

substantial portion of the Asian American community. By structural advantages, I'm referring to the way that many—not all, but many—Asian Americans have more access to resources like higher-quality public schools, supplemental educational resources (e.g., SAT prep), and communities that reinforce high, and arguably rigid, standards of academic performance.

How did this context come about? Prior to 1965, Asian immigration was severely restricted with policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act. The 1965 immigration reform opened the doors to large waves of immigration from Asia with preference given to well-educated individuals. Many immigrants, like my parents, came for graduate study and stayed to raise families.

As explained in *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015), this well-educated wave of immigrants largely set the pace in terms of fostering high expectations for their children. Over time, these expectations—what Lee and Zhou call “the success frame”—came to be associated with being Asian American. Expectations around high achievement that were initially more a byproduct of this group of immigrants coming from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds became associated with ethnicity, even though later waves of migration had more economic diversity. Obviously, not all Asian Americans lived up to these exacting standards—the majority of Asian Americans do not attend highly selective institutions. However, East and South Asian American communities, although increasingly economically diverse themselves, set up structures in their communities to help turn aspirations into realities.

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These resources—a combination of community, business, and religious organizations that foster community norms—facilitated the flow of information around education. They exchanged important information about where to get after-school tutoring or SAT prep, the best school districts in which to live, and the like. These expectations became reinforced by numerous outlets like ethnic-language newspapers, which often sport advertisements for such services, fostering a sense of what is normal or at least expected for many Asian American youth.

As Lee and Zhou (2015) explain, there are real drawbacks to the “success frame” mentality and the infrastructure built to support it, especially in the arena of mental health for many youth who do not fit the mold. Pressure from the “success frame” mentality is so immense that Asian American college students are more likely than Whites to consider and attempt suicide (Kisch, Leino, and Silverman 2005). Further, a study by Columbia University researchers suggests that while Asian Americans receive advantages in the realm of education, they have less return on investment on their degrees when they enter the labor market. As stated in the study: “Asian ethnic groups are over-credentialed with regards to education to achieve parity with whites in the labor market” (Tran, Lee, and Huang 2019).

Still, there are educational advantages for a substantial portion of the Asian American population that other communities of color generally do not experience. For instance, many teachers expect many Asian American students to succeed, and give them the benefit of the doubt when they flounder, a phenomenon known as “stereotype lift.” There are information networks within East Asian American communities in particular that

help many Asian immigrant parents secure resources for their children, for example, by strategically moving to a good school district. Some Asian Americans face less discrimination in securing housing or financing a mortgage relative to other communities of color.

The experiences highlighted above do not define all Asian American students—far from it—but they facilitate opportunity for a substantial portion of the community. In our highly justified effort as researchers to bring attention to how different ethnic subgroups experience incredible educational challenges, sometimes we pay less attention to why certain facets of the Asian American community are reaching higher levels of educational attainment. Or we recognize disparities, but don't actually talk about why certain groups are doing better. We need to pay attention to the background behind these trends in order to understand why some educational outcomes for Asian Americans, on the aggregate, are higher than other groups. It is not because Asian Americans are magically smarter, but because they either already come in with some level of advantage (like my family, for example) or are able to benefit from a system that encourages them to adhere a certain set of norms and expectations. Relative to other communities of color, the system tends to work more in their favor, particularly when it comes to education.

Advantages and Disadvantages in an Unequal Playing Field

Speaking in broad brushstrokes, many East Asian Americans, generally the most “privileged” group within Asian America, experience hardship and institutionalized racism. Still, the fact that Asian Americans experience racism inside and outside of educational spaces does not negate the advantages that many Asian

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Americans experience, even when such advantages co-exist with forms of oppression. The data on Asian Americans complicate the simple narrative that people either have it “good” or “bad.” This makes for more complicated policymaking, but perhaps will help challenge the policy community to look beyond simple binaries, and provide more context to understand the complex

and unequal playing field that influences educational inequality.

So what do we do with this information? ACE's *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* report provides context that should help readers understand why, on many measures, Asian Americans as an aggregate group have better outcomes than other groups, while recognizing the diversity that exists within the Asian American community. The solution isn't to blame other groups or tell them to “just be like Asians,” but to think about what mechanisms facilitate opportunity and success for different communities and commit to investing in these resources.

Finally, we need to roll the curtain back on advantages that different populations experience to recognize that our playing field is far from equal. We have to make the system work in favor of *all* students, not just affluent Whites and some Asian Americans. It's about bolstering K–12 education for everyone, pushing back against school re-segregation, and building on the assets that already exist within communities of color. It's about states reinvesting in public higher education, and making it more affordable so more people can see a four-year degree as a viable option. There's no shortage of work that needs to be done, and we owe it to our students of all races to build a better world for them and the generations to come.

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