



Southeast Asia Resource Action Center

Southeast Asian Americans and Higher Education

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1. Southeast Asian Americans – Not the “Model Minority”:

Although many Americans whose ancestors are from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (“Southeast Asian Americans”) have achieved tremendous success in higher education, many others have found it difficult to succeed academically. Available data indicate that the educational profiles of many Southeast Asian American ethnic groups more closely resemble those of African American, Hispanic, and Native American communities, than they resemble those of Americans whose ancestors are from Europe. However, patterns of Southeast Asian American educational difficulty remain invisible to most policymakers.

Policymakers, educators, and community leaders must recognize that Southeast Asian Americans are not part of some fictional “model minority” that succeeds easily in the United States. The 1990 Census – which will remain the most recent source of national educational data for the ethnic groups until the release of full 2000 Census results in the fall of 2003 – found striking evidence of disparities between groups. While 18 percent of Americans overall aged twenty-five and over held bachelor's degrees or higher, and approximately 37 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs) overall in that age group held degrees, only between 3 and 7 percent of Americans with heritage from Cambodia and Laos held such degrees, and only 17 percent of people with Vietnamese heritage held them.

Even nearly three decades after the beginning of the refugee flight from Southeast Asia to the U.S., many members continue to struggle with formal education due to a variety of factors, including limited English proficiency (LEP); discrimination; systematic miscommunication between students, parents, and teachers; and widespread feelings of alienation from mainstream schools.

Often, these difficulties are invisible to policymakers because of the ways in which educational and other data are disaggregated – or separated out – for various ethnic and linguistic groups by statistical research institutions, including those in the Government. Typically, data are only disaggregated for broad racial categories – such as APIAs – and for Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. Less commonly, data are disaggregated for larger ethnic groups such as “Mexican,” “Chinese,” and so on. Very rarely are data disaggregated for Southeast Asian American groups, although Vietnamese are more commonly described separately than are other Southeast Asian Americans.

For example, in 1999 the influential College Board released a report entitled *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement* that neglected to examine any disaggregated data for APIAs.² As a result, the report neglected to recommend that special efforts be target to any APIA group. Spurred to action by the report's omissions, the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) under the leadership of Congressman Robert Underwood of Guam, together with SEARAC, gathered community scholars together for a "Summit on the Status of Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian Americans in Higher Education" in May of 2001. As Mr. Underwood stated in his introduction to the Summit, "Misconceptions by institutions and policymakers continue to persist regarding Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in higher education due to the fact that our data continues to be aggregated in the overall Asian and Pacific Islander category."

According to the 2000 Census 1,814,301 people in the United States reported heritage in Cambodia, Laos, and/or Vietnam: 206,052 from Cambodia, 384,513 from Laos (including 186,310 Hmong), and 1,223,736 from Vietnam.³ They accounted for approximately .64 per cent of the total U.S. population, and 15.2 per cent of the total number of people reporting Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage.⁴

² *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement* is accessible at <http://www.collegeboard.com/research/abstract/0.1273.3876.00.html>. Information from the Summit and other materials are now being incorporated into a policy report. Details on the Summit, which was generously supported by State Farm and other funders, are available at <http://www.searac.org/highedsummit.html>.

³ See the attachment for detailed data on Southeast Asian American population, immigration, refugee arrival, and naturalization. Ethnic groups from Cambodia include Khmer, or Cambodian, the dominant lowland ethnic group; Cham, a

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Census 2000 counted more people in the U.S. reporting Southeast Asian heritage than it reported people living in many of the country's major cities, including Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Diego, and Dallas. It also reported more Southeast Asians in the U.S. than people living in the District of Columbia or in fourteen states, including Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Given such significant numbers and current indications of need, it is essential that decision-makers focus added attention on the education of Southeast Asian Americans.

Southeast Asian American success in higher education should be promoted by the U.S. Government, colleges, grantmakers, and others in a variety of ways simultaneously:

- A. Disaggregate and Disseminate More Data: Enhance disaggregation of data, and then disseminate to decision-makers such as policymakers, teachers, and community leaders;
- B. Promote Southeast Asian American Studies Courses and Personnel: Integrate Southeast Asian studies courses in schools with large community concentration, and train and hire more Southeast Asian American teachers and staff;
- C. Support Community Organizations: Support community-based organizations such as mutual assistance associations (MAAs), faith-based organizations, and national networking organizations, which have proven success in promoting academic success; and
- D. Create New Systems for Financial and Technical Support: Create systems of support for Southeast Asian American students, as well as the institutions reaching out to them. H.R. 333 and efforts to found an APIA college fund (or funds) are examples of initiatives now underway.

Most Southeast Asian Americans arrived in the U.S. as refugees after 1975, or are the children of refugees. Parents in these communities endured tremendous hardship for the sake of their children, and promote their sons' and daughters' success in school to the full extent of their ability. If combined with small infusions of external support, the enthusiasm and commitment of these parents and their children could produce great academic success within a short period of time.

2. Existing Data on Southeast Asian Americans and Higher Education:

A. Availability of Data:

Existing data on Southeast Asian American achievement in higher education are scarce, and will remain so at least until the release of detailed nationwide data for the groups by the U.S. Census Bureau in the fall of 2003. However, it is clear that Southeast Asian American groups are diverse, some of them demonstrating remarkable success and others remarkable difficulty. In general, it seems that ethnic groups from Cambodia and Laos tend to experience especially great difficulties.

Moslem group; Khmer Loeu, "Highland Khmer," who are divided into several distinct ethnic groups; and ethnic Vietnamese. Ethnic groups from Laos include Hmong (or Mong), Iu Mien (or Mien), Khmu, Lahu, Lao, Thaidam, and many other groups (approximately 60 in all), many of which originate in the highlands that cover most of the country. Often, people use the word "Laotian" to refer to all people from Laos (regardless of whether they are Lao, Hmong, Khmu, etc.). Vietnamese groups include Vietnamese, or members of the dominant ethnic group; Montagnards, from the French for "Highlanders," who are members of several distinct ethnic groups and have origins in the central highlands; Thaidam; and Khmer Kampuchea Krom, ethnic Khmer from territory now located in southern Vietnam. Amerasians are the children of Vietnamese mothers and fathers who served as American soldiers and visited Vietnam for other reasons during the Vietnam War.

⁴ Total U.S. population: 281,421,906. Total number of people who reported Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage: 11,898,828. Source: Census 2000 (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf>).

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On the basis of the limited information presented below, SEARAC predicts that 2000 Census results will show significant improvements in educational measures for all Southeast Asian American groups, but will also continue to show achievement gaps separating Southeast Asian Americans from other groups.

B. College Graduation Rates:

According to the 1990 Census, between 3 and 7 percent of people who reported heritage from Cambodia or Laos, and were aged twenty-five and over, held bachelor's degrees. Seventeen percent of Vietnamese in that age group reported holding bachelor's degrees. These figures contrast with those pertaining to Americans overall, and to APIAs: in 1990 17.6 percent of Americans overall in this age group were found to hold bachelor's degrees or higher, as were 36.6 percent of APIAs. In 2002, the Census Bureau reported even more striking findings: 47.2 percent of APIAs aged 25 and over held bachelor's degrees or higher, compared with 26.7 percent of Americans overall.⁵

Southeast Asian American Educational Attainment in 1990 ⁶						
	<i>Americans Overall</i>	<i>Asian Americans Overall</i>	<i>Cam- bodian Americans</i>	<i>Hmong Americans</i>	<i>Laotian Americans (non- Hmong)</i>	<i>Viet- namese Americans</i>
<i>Percentage of people aged 25 and over holding bachelor's degrees</i>	18%	37%	6%	3%	7%	17%

These findings are mirrored by data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study,⁷ which focused on immigrants and refugees in Southern California and South Florida in 1992 and 1995. This study found that in 1992 15.5 percent of fathers from Laos and Vietnam (a combined category) and 7.8 percent of fathers from Cambodia were college graduates. This contrasts with a study-wide average of 23.1 percent. Mothers were found to have less formal education: 9.4 percent of mothers from Laos/Vietnam had college degrees, as did 3.5 percent of mothers from Cambodia. The overall refugee/immigrant average for mothers was 20.9 percent.

C. College Enrollment:

More recent data reported by Khatharya Um in 2003 suggest that Southeast Asian Americans are under-represented in institutions of higher education. For example, at the University of California-Berkeley, over 41 percent of undergraduate students were APIA, but only 7 percent were Vietnamese and Um estimates that fewer than 50 students were of either Cambodian or Laotian heritage. She then notes that other universities in the University of California system demonstrate similar problems with representation, and writes "This relatively low representation of, and acute disparity among, the Southeast Asian groups is especially disconcerting in view of the fact that campuses such as Berkeley, UCLA, and UC Irvine are located in close proximity to some of the biggest Southeast Asian communities in the United States."⁸

⁵ Source: <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/ppl-169/tab01a.pdf>

⁶ Bureau of the Census. 1994. *1990 Census of Population: Education in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census. Pp. 2, 9. Accessible at <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cp3/cp-3-4.pdf>.

⁷ Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1999. *Transformations: The Post-Immigrant Generation in an Age of Diversity*. East Lansing, MI: JSRI Research Report #30, The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University. Pp. 6-7. Accessible at: <http://www.jsri.msu.edu/RandS/research/irr/rr30.html>.

⁸ Um, Khatharya. 2003. *A Dream Denied: Educational Experiences of Southeast Asian American Youth: Issues and Recommendations*. An issue paper based on findings from the first national Southeast Asian Youth Summit. Washington, DC: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC). P. ii. Accessible at http://www.searac.org/pryd-3_11_03.html.

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D. High School Graduation Rates:

Between 1992 and 1995, researchers with the University of Texas at Austin found evidence suggesting that Vietnamese and “Other Asian” Americans (the category into which Cambodians and Laotians fall in this study) are educationally distinct from many other APIA groups with respect to high school graduation. For example, they found that relatively few Vietnamese and Other Asians in Texas had graduated from high school: 28 percent of Vietnamese and 32 percent of Other Asians had “less than high school,” compared with 16.4 percent of Caucasians, 9.1 percent of Japanese, 18.3 percent of Chinese, 11 percent of Filipinos, 12.1 percent of Koreans, 10.5 percent of Asian Indians, and 18.5 percent of Pacific Islanders.⁹

E. Diversity Among Southeast Asian American Groups:

Some researchers have found significant educational differences between Southeast Asian American communities. For example, the Texas Refugee Study of 1993¹⁰ found that Houston-area Vietnamese tended to have significantly more formal education than Laotians.

Maximum Educational Achievement among Vietnamese and Laotian Texans, 1993					
	<i>0-8 Years of Education</i>	<i>9-11 Years of Education</i>	<i>High School Degree</i>	<i>Some College</i>	<i>College Degree</i>
<i>Vietnamese</i>	16%	17%	26%	19%	22%
<i>Laotians</i>	48%	18%	24%	7%	3%

A more recent study, carried out in 2000 in Santa Clara County, California, found similar results: among the sample of public assistance recipients studied, Cambodian American adults were the most likely among all groups to have between one and six years of formal education (64.3 percent), while this was found to be true of only 22.8 percent of Vietnamese Americans.¹¹

Some studies have found that Vietnamese Americans tend to perform better academically than the national norm. For example, Zhou and Bankston¹² report that in 1990 in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the high school drop-out rate among American-born Vietnamese aged 16 through 19 was lower than the rate among whites: 5 percent as compared to 8 percent. They also report that college entrance rates among the Vietnamese cohort was higher

⁹ Frisbie, W. Parker, Youngtae Cho, and Robert A. Hummer. 2001. Immigration and the Health of Asian and Pacific Islander Adults in the United States. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 153(4): 372-380.

¹⁰ Taylor, Eric H. and Lisa S. Barton. ND (a). *Southeast Asian Refugee English Proficiency and Education in Texas*. Austin, TX: Texas Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs, Texas Department of Health and Human Services.

_____. ND (b). *Vietnamese, Laotian, Ethiopian, and Former Soviet Union Refugees in Texas: Findings from the Texas Refugee Study*. Austin, TX: Texas Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs, Texas Department of Health and Human Services.

Taylor and Barton do not specify the age range of survey respondents.

¹¹ Hobbs, Richard (ed.). 2000. *Bridging Borders in Silicon Valley: Summit on Immigrant Needs and Contributions*. San Jose, CA: Office of Human Relations, Santa Clara County Citizenship and Immigrant Services Program. P. 93.

This study, which does not record data for Americans from Laos, found that 20.2 percent of all immigrant/refugee adults on public assistance had between one and six years of formal education. See Hobbs (ed.) 2000: 93.

¹² Zhou, Min and Carl L. Bankston III. 2000. *Straddling Two Social Worlds: The Experience of Vietnamese Refugee Children in the United States*. New York, NY: Urban Diversity Series No. 111, ERIC Clearinghouse for Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education. P. 33.

Also see: Cheng, Lucie and Philip Q. Yang. 2000. The “Model Minority” Deconstructed. In *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*. Edited by Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood. New York, NY: New York University Press. Pp. 459-482.

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than among whites: 50 percent as compared to 38 percent. Data such as these encourage us to take a particularly optimistic view of Vietnamese American educational advancement.¹³

Others have found that Cambodian American students face particularly grave educational challenges. For example, by analyzing 1989-1990 school-year data from the San Diego Unified School District, Rumbaut found that 12.8 percent of all Cambodian American youth in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades who were included in his sample had dropped out of high school. This was the highest dropout rate for any ethnic group described.¹⁴

3. Understanding the Achievement Gap in Higher Education:

Many factors help explain the achievement gap separating Southeast Asian Americans from Americans with other backgrounds. Four of the most important factors are limited English proficiency (LEP); systematic miscommunication between students, parents, and teachers; discrimination; and widespread feelings of alienation from mainstream schools.

A. Limited English Proficiency (LEP):

According to the 1990 Census, a high percentage of Southeast Asian Americans had severe problems with the English language. When they are released, 2000 Census figures will likely show improvements in this area, but it is clear that a high percentage of Southeast Asian Americans remain “limited English proficient” (LEP). These difficulties endure, in part, because many community members arrived in this country unable to read and write in their native languages, because many people lack the time and energy to participate in English as a Second Language classes as a result of their long work hours, and because of widespread trauma-related illnesses.

¹³ See the following for data showing strong K-12 performance for diverse Southeast Asian American groups: Rumbaut, Rubén G. 2000. Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans. In *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*. Edited by Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood. New York, NY: New York University Press. Pp. 175-206.

¹⁴ Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1995. The New Californians: Comparative Research Findings on the Educational Progress of Immigrant Children. In *California's Immigrant Children: Theory, Research, and Implications for Educational Policy*. Edited by Rubén G. Rumbaut and Wayne A. Cornelius. San Diego, CA: The Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego. Pp. 17-69. P. 38.

Rumbaut found the following overall dropout rates for Southeast Asian American youth: Cambodian: 12.8 percent; Hmong: 5.3 percent; Lao: 7.4 percent; Vietnamese: 6.6 percent. Considered together, 7.6 percent of the Southeast Asian American youth studied dropped out of school in 1989-1990. LEP (“limited English proficient”) students were particularly likely to drop out. Figures for Cambodians were 14.9 percent, for Hmong 5.2 percent, for Lao 9.9 percent, and for Vietnamese 10.7 percent. Considered together, 11.0 percent of Southeast Asian American LEP students included in the study dropped out of school.

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Southeast Asian American English-Language Abilities					
Source: 1990 Census					
	<i>Asian Amer / Pacific Is.</i>	<i>Cambodian Americans¹⁵</i>	<i>Hmong Americans¹⁶</i>	<i>Laotian Americans</i>	<i>Vietnamese Americans</i>
<i>“Do not speak English very well” ≥ 5 years old</i>	56%	73%	78%	70%	65%
<i>“Linguistically isolated” ≥ 5 yrs old</i>	35%	56%	61%	52%	44%

Even Southeast Asian children who were born in this country often have difficulty with the English language when they first arrive at school. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health¹⁷ reports that in 1998 7,706 Khmer and 5,712 Vietnamese young people were identified as “Primary Language is not English” (“PLINE”) students. Many of these children were placed into LEP or bilingual education classes.

As of 1993, 9.8 percent of all LEP students in California public schools primarily spoke the Southeast Asian languages of Hmong, Khmer, Lao, Mien, and Vietnamese in their homes.¹⁸ In addition, as the table below shows, more recent data from California support the position that large numbers of Southeast Asian American students continue to be LEP:

¹⁵ Also see: Fontanella, Mary, and Carol Williams. 1993. *The Southeast Asian Family Empowerment Project Cambodian Community Resident Survey Results*. Boston, MA: Prepared by Health and Addictions Research, Inc., for the Southeast Asian Family Empowerment Project of Metropolitan Indochinese Children and Adolescent Services of South Cove Community Health Center. This source reports that among Khmer American adults in Lynn and Revere, Massachusetts, 97 percent spoke Khmer at home “always.” In addition, they found that 8 percent of respondents felt they could speak English “a lot,” 31 percent felt they could speak English “some,” 34 percent felt they could speak English “a little,” and 27 percent felt they could speak no English. As for reading skills, 9 percent reported that they could read English “a lot,” 22 percent could read English “some,” 23 percent could read English “a little,” and 46 percent could not read English at all.

¹⁶ Also see: Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Sheboygan. 2001. *Hmong Healthcare Needs Assessment Project, Sheboygan County, Wisconsin: A Promoting Access to Health (PATH) Project Mini-Grant*. Funded by the Office of Minority Health through the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO). Sheboygan, WI: Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Sheboygan. This source reports on the basis of data collected in 2000: “When asked to identify the primary language spoken in the home, 93 percent indicated Hmong. Forty-three percent rated their ability to speak English as ‘good’ and 44 percent rated their ability to read English as ‘good.’ Twenty-two percent could neither speak nor read English at all.” (P. 9)

¹⁷ Massachusetts Department of Public Health. 1999. Southeast Asians. In *Refugees and Immigrants in Massachusetts: An Overview of Selected Communities*. Boston, MA: Office of Refugee and Immigrant Health, Bureau of Family and Community Health, Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

¹⁸ Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1995. *Op. Cit.* P. 32.

Note: These statistics were gathered by the California Department of Education. Rumbaut also notes that only 5.2 percent of the LEP students in California public schools during 1993 primarily spoke “East Asian” languages (such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) in their homes.

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Limited English Language Proficient (LEP) Students, Southeast Asian Language Groups, California Public Schools, 1993-2000 ¹⁹								
<i>Language</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>
<i>Cambodian</i>	21,040	21,467	21,028	20,645	19,981	18,255	17,637	14,720
<i>Hmong</i>	26,219	28,494	30,345	31,156	32,014	30,975	29,474	27,443
<i>Khmu</i>	332	305	359	233	261	193	251	148
<i>Lahu</i>	440	433	532	521	509	458	529	411
<i>Lao</i>	11,926	11,392	10,745	10,052	9,212	7,767	7,703	5,581
<i>Mien</i>	4,691	4,976	5,093	5,226	5,385	4,955	4,930	4,165
<i>Vietnamese</i>	48,890	49,788	48,907	47,663	45,530	42,590	41,456	39,447
<i>Total Number of Students who are Southeast Asian Language Speakers & are LEP</i>	115,524	118,842	118,997	117,485	114,882	107,184	103,972	93,908

California Department of Education data for Los Angeles County Public Schools, shown below, lead to similar conclusions about the continued prevalence of LEP students in schools serving Southeast Asian Americans. In fact, in this particular school district, the number of Southeast Asian American LEP students rose between every reporting period from 1984 to 1994.

Language of Southeast Asian American Students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Los Angeles County Public Schools, 1984-1994 ²⁰							
<i>Language</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>
<i>Hmong</i>	N/a	N/a	144	129	130	190	229
<i>Khmer</i>	3,441	6,358	6,788	7,027	7,327	7,302	7,502
<i>Lao</i>	941	696	740	798	851	719	688
<i>Vietnamese</i>	6,788	6,351	6,713	7,541	8,147	8,454	8,609
<i>Total</i>	<i>11,170</i>	<i>13,405</i>	<i>14,385</i>	<i>15,495</i>	<i>16,455</i>	<i>16,665</i>	<i>17,028</i>

As the table below shows, in 1992 and 1995 Rumbaut found similar data in Southern California and South Florida, and also found that Southeast Asian American children were unlikely to be fluent in their parents' native languages, when compared to other refugee and immigrant children.

¹⁹ These data are drawn from the R30 Census of California's Department of Education, and were accessed at <http://www.searc.org/pages/demogr.html>. SEARAC thanks Judy Lewis of the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center for help in accessing and presenting these data.

²⁰ Nadybal, Rebecca, and Marge Nichols. 1996. *Asian Pacific Factfinder: Los Angeles County*. Los Angeles, CA: United Way of Greater Los Angeles. Accessible at: www.unitedwayla.org.

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Language Proficiency Among Children of Refugees and Immigrants in Southern California and South Florida in 1992 and 1995 (Self-Evaluations) ²¹			
	<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>Laotian & Cambodian</i>	<i>Total Percentage (All R/I Groups)</i>
% Speaks English "Very Well" 1992	54.2%	42.0%	77.3%
% Speaks English "Very Well" 1995	50.6%	43.8%	77.9%
% Reads English "Very Well" 1992	50.0%	34.6%	72.4%
% Reads English "Very Well" 1995	50.6%	43.8%	77.9%
% Speaks Non-English Language "Very Well" 1992	36.9%	40.4%	33.5%
% Speaks Non-English Language "Very Well" 1995	33.2%	38.5%	34.5%
% Reads Non-English Language "Very Well" 1992	14.2%	4.6%	21.8%
% Reads Non-English Language "Very Well" 1995	13.5%	5.3%	24.4%

Efforts to decrease or eliminate assistance directed specifically towards LEP students are troubling for Southeast Asian American communities, as are "high-stakes testing" initiatives that have the potential to make otherwise well-qualified students who are English-learners ineligible for attendance in their only affordable institutions of higher learning – state colleges.

B. Systematic Miscommunication between Students, Parents, and Teachers:

Southeast Asian American parents and children often have trouble communicating with one another, and people in both groups often find it difficult to communicate with teachers and school personnel. Consequently, many students lack the parental support and guidance they need, and rely too heavily on guidance from their peers, who may share their challenges, but lack mature understanding. In addition, many parents have limited knowledge of, and impact on, their children's educational development.

Communication gaps between parents, children, and school personnel are more complex than they may first appear. Most obviously, language barriers often keep the groups separate. In addition, as noted above, relatively high percentages of Southeast Asian Americans lack extensive experience with higher education (or formal education of any sort). For this reason they are often poorly equipped to serve as educational mentors to their children and to communicate with teachers: for example, they are often unaware of opportunities for college financial aid, and sometimes they are unaware of the specific roles teachers play in our society. Furthermore, students, parents, and teachers often have conflicting communication styles, many parents are prevented from engaging intimately with others and learning new things by their trauma-related illnesses, and some parents remain more focused on life in Southeast Asia than in the United States.

²¹ Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1999. *Op. Cit.* P. 8. Accessible at: <http://www.jsri.msu.edu/RandS/research/irr/rr30.html>.

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Some of the communication difficulties are due, in part, to differences in communication style and culturally specific understandings of appropriate social relations. When compared to the communication styles favored by many Southeast Asian American parents, those of mainstream American teachers may seem rushed, aggressive, and overly direct. Um²² writes that “Cambodian parents [and children] are often reluctant to question authority” in their communications with school personnel. Um’s quote refers to differences in culturally embedded notions of hierarchy and social relations. Similarly, Phommasouvanh²³ reports that “The Lao are often characterized as quiet, peace-loving, accommodating, patient, and happy people. They dislike confrontation, value harmony, and do not like to make waves.” While such approaches to communication may lead to healthy and peaceful communities in many settings, they are also likely to contribute to the invisibility of Southeast Asian American students and parents in relation to teachers and school administrators in the United States.²⁴

Southeast Asian American students also often have communication styles that contrast with those of their parents and teachers. Many students are unable to speak in ways that their elders consider polite. Boys, in particular, who tend to be steeped in the cultures of their peers, often speak “youth street” versions of both English and Southeast Asian languages that both parents and teachers find to be coarse and inappropriate. This factor contributes to the impression among many teachers that many Southeast Asian American students are poor prospects for academic advancement. This factor also contributes to the development of a powerless attitude among some students, parents, and others.

Many Southeast Asian American parents and children also find it difficult to communicate because they realize they have very different conceptions of healthy parent/child relationships. Young people tend to have more typically American ideas that emphasize the rights of children to make decisions for themselves. These often conflict with parental convictions, brought from Southeast Asia, that parents should be strong authority figures who are free to use corporal punishment as they see fit.²⁵

In addition, Southeast Asian American parents sometimes find it difficult to communicate because of trauma-related illnesses that result from their experiences of persecution, displacement, and war in Southeast Asia. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime and people who were imprisoned in reeducation camps (such as recent arrivals from Vietnam under the ROVR or Resettlement Opportunities for Vietnamese Refugees program) are particularly likely to suffer from these illnesses, which are appropriately treated by only a small number of clinicians operating in a few areas. These illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and head injury, impair their sufferers’ abilities to relate intimately with others, take on new life challenges, and learn new skills.

As Um²⁶ (1997: 34) and others have emphasized, experiences such as those of Khmer Rouge “Killing Fields” survivors have also left many with a “legacy of fear and distrust” that may be transferred to children. Such “Cambodian youth have been found to manifest little or no confidence in themselves and an inability to project aspirations for the future.”

Many of the people who suffer from these debilitating illnesses remain virtual prisoners in their own ethnic enclaves, or even homes. Even relatively high-functioning sufferers of these illnesses often find it impossible to

²² Um, Khatharya. 1997. Resettlement Into Limbo: Implications for the Schooling and Education of Cambodian Children. In *Unfamiliar Partners: Asian Parents and U.S. Public Schools*. Edited by Bouy Te, Joan May T. Cordova, Wendy Walter-Moffat, and Joan First. Boston, MA: National Coalition of Advocates for Students. Pp. 29-35. Quote from p. 35.

²³ Phommasouvanh, Bounlieng. 1997. Social Context of Lao People in the United States. In *Unfamiliar Partners: Asian Parents and U.S. Public Schools*. Edited by Bouy Te, Joan May T. Cordova, Wendy Walker-Moffat, and Joan First. Boston: National Coalition of Advocates for Students. Pp. 24-28. Quote from p. 25.

²⁴ For similar reflections on Hmong/Mong Americans from Laos, see: Thao, Paoze. 1999. *Mong Education at the Crossroads*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. P. 91.

²⁵ Zhou, Min and Carl L. Bankston III. 2000. *Op. Cit.* Pp. 66-67.

²⁶ Um, Khatharya. 1997. *Op. Cit.* P. 34.

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learn about the educational system, reach out to their children's teachers, and speak with their children about the progress of their schoolwork. Although more research needs to be focused on the topic, many community activists who are aware of mental health concerns feel that PTSD, head trauma, and depression play major roles in perpetuating widespread family and community problems among Southeast Asian Americans.

Even when parents are not suffering from mental illnesses, they may have very different interests than their children. As Ruth Krulfeld observes,²⁷ "Lao (and other refugee) parents are often focused on Laos, Lao culture, and life prior to resettlement, while their children often do not know about such matters and are focused ... on their future here in the U.S. This difference in what is considered important exacerbates the generation gap between youth and their refugee/immigrant parents."

Community-based organizations such as mutual assistance associations (MAAs) and faith-based organizations have proven ability to provide environments in which Southeast Asian Americans flourish academically, in part by fostering healthy communication between students, parents, and teachers.

As Zhou and Bankston state "Paradoxically, intense ethnic involvement increases rather than decreases the probability that young people will gain entry into the world beyond the ethnic community."²⁸ These authors also emphasize the importance of building strong Vietnamese language skills:

The psychological identification with the ethnic group, interest in Vietnamese cultural expressions, participation in activities such as studying the Vietnamese language, involvement in Vietnamese religious organizations, and membership in Vietnamese social networks are all associated with children's high academic achievement.²⁹

Systems of ethnic social relations exercise social control over their members, reinforcing both traditional values brought from Vietnam and aspirations to upward mobility. These networks connect families and link parents to like-minded friends and neighbors, lending legitimacy to parental expectations as well as providing a microcosm within which parental values and wishes are not alien or outlandish. ... Although large-scale Southeast Asian refugee migration to the United States appears to have ended, there are still numerous governmental and nongovernmental agencies concerned with Southeast Asians in America. Our findings imply that these agencies would do well to concentrate on helping these new American residents and citizens to develop their own community organizations and on working through these community organizations.³⁰

In its report *An Invisible Crisis: Educational Needs of Asian Pacific American Youth*, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP)³¹ expresses similar views. Indeed, their first recommendation for fellow grantmakers was "Recognize and develop Asian Pacific American community, parent, and youth leadership, and support the development of community-based service organizations that focus on providing extended opportunities for youth and their families. Support efforts to partner these resources with their local schools."

C. *Discrimination:*

²⁷ Personal communication, 2002. Also see: Krulfeld, Ruth M. 2001. *The Politics of Education For, By, and About Immigrants: A Lao Example*. In Mary Carol Hopkins and Nancy Wellmeier (eds.), *Selected Papers on Refugees and Immigrants*. Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association.

²⁸ Zhou, Min and Carl L. Bankston III. 1998. *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. P. 107.

²⁹ Zhou, Min and Carl L. Bankston III. 2000. *Op. Cit.* P. 73.

³⁰ Zhou, Min and Carl L. Bankston III. 1998. *Op. Cit.* Pp. 222, 237.

³¹ Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP, www.aapip.org) is a national "affinity group" for grantmakers who are particularly concerned with the welfare of Asian and Pacific Islander American communities.

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Policymakers on the state and national levels tend to overlook the specific educational needs and assets of Southeast Asian Americans, and to remain under the influence of the model minority myth. Some local-level educators and school administrators take a different view that is equally damaging and unrealistic.

Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese American students often feel that their teachers consider them incapable of first-rate academic achievement. Accounts of teachers telling their students they should not consider going to college are commonplace. So are stories of teachers failing to encourage their Southeast Asian students to enter advanced courses, or pursue scholarship opportunities. Indeed, in 2000 a study carried out by Santa Clara County, California³² found that 11.5 percent of Vietnamese Americans in the sample (the only Southeast Asian Americans studied) felt that teachers discriminated against them. This was the highest for any refugee or immigrant group studied, and contrasted with the pan-ethnic group average of 5.0 percent.

In a 1992 and 1995 study in Southern California and South Florida, Rumbaut³³ found further confirmation that Southeast Asian American students in the sites were more likely than most other refugees and immigrants to experience discrimination, and to expect to be discriminated against in the future.

Self-Reports of Discrimination and Expected Discrimination Among Refugees and Immigrants in Southern California and South Florida from Vietnam and Cambodia/Laos, Self Reports, 1992 and 1995			
	<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>Cambodia/Laos</i>	<i>Total (All R/I Groups)</i>
<i>% Experienced discrimination, 1992</i>	66.3%	65.0%	54.3%
<i>% Experienced discrimination, 1995</i>	72.6%	73.3%	62.0%
<i>% Expects discrimination, 1992</i>	35.3%	42.6%	31.6%
<i>% Expects discrimination, 1995</i>	38.4%	43.1%	35.0%

Participants in the Southeast Asian American Youth Summit at the University of California-Berkeley in December, as well as respondents to a survey carried out in conjunction with the Summit, also reported high rates of discrimination in colleges and other schools. In the words of one participant, "It is difficult to ... see some college professors make racist remarks, either purposely or unintentionally. Much of this is perhaps due to misinformation or miscommunication."³⁴

Southeast Asian American students are placed in a difficult position. On the one hand, senior policy makers neglect to acknowledge their demonstrable academic characteristics, and to give them access to the educational resources and institutional support they need. On the other hand, many of the people who structure their daily academic environment – teachers, peers, and others – treat them as if they are incapable of succeeding, and in various ways convince them that they should give up on school. Findings such as those of Trueba, Jacobs, and Kirton over a decade ago and focused on Hmong Americans in California may still hold true for large numbers of Southeast Asian American students. In their words, "The most disturbing finding of our research was that some [Southeast Asian] children have stopped trying to learn and have accepted and internalized their [learning] 'disabilities' as their own personal attribute, not as a consequence of historical circumstances and dysfunctional instructional arrangements."³⁵

D. Widespread Feelings of Alienation from Mainstream Schools:

³² Hobbs, Richard (ed.). 2000. *Op. Cit.* P. 100.

³³ Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1999. *Op. Cit.* P. 10.

³⁴ Um, Khatharya. 2003. *Op. Cit.* P. 13.

³⁵ Trueba, Henry J., Lila Jacobs, and Elizabeth Kirton. 1990. *Cultural Conflict and Adaptation: The Case of Hmong Children in American Society*. New York, NY: The Falmer Press. P. 104.

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Southeast Asian American students often feel alienated from their schools: they don't feel as if they really "belong" in them. In part, this is because not enough of their schools tailor curricula specifically for them, and in part it is because there are not enough Southeast Asian American teachers and staff in educational institutions. Some schools have begun to address these shortcomings by, for example, giving their students the option of taking Southeast Asian language classes to fulfill foreign language requirements, by teaching about Southeast Asian history and culture, and by recruiting more Southeast Asian American teachers and staff.

Acknowledging the importance of curricula that address the particular linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics of student populations, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy recommended that fellow grantmakers "Promote research, development, and staff training in the use of multicultural curricula that portray the history and culture of Asian Pacific Americans, and of anti-racism curricula that support direct and honest dialogue among students."³⁶

Courses acknowledging the value of Southeast Asian cultures and languages can help motivate students to succeed. What Saetern writes about her own ethnic group could also be applied to Southeast Asian Americans in general: "If you have Iu Mien students in your class, share your knowledge about the people to your students. This gives them motivation and pride because you acknowledge and value their culture, which rarely ... happens in the school system."³⁷

Courses in Southeast Asian studies can also counteract the negative stereotypes teachers often have of their Southeast Asian students. As Trueba, Jacobs, and Kirton write, "[I]nsensitivity to the obvious cultural and linguistic gap between minority home cultures and mainstream cultures paves the way for school personnel to stereotype and underestimate minority children's learning potential."³⁸ Teachers are more likely to be genuinely growth-encouraging when they hold positive views about them, and when they understand the challenges Southeast Asian Americans face in historical and cultural context. In addition, non-Southeast Asian American students benefit from courses that enable them to become global citizens who appreciate the historical legacies, cultural contributions, spiritual commitments, and political lessons of Southeast Asia.³⁹

Finally, courses in Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American studies can help young people better understand their own lives and the lives of their parents, and thereby assist with intergenerational reconciliation. Because of their trauma-related illnesses, many parents do not teach their children about the challenges they faced in order to survive in their homelands, arrive in this country, and build better lives for their families. As a result, many children lack gratitude for their parents. They also often lack understanding not only of the depression and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) many of their parents face from the past, but also of the struggles with discrimination and hardship that families continue to confront in the U.S. Learning about the histories and cultures of Southeast Asians in the United States and overseas can help children to feel compassion and love for their parents and other elders, while developing values and visions of healing and social justice for their communities.

³⁶ Olsen, Laurie. 1997. *An Invisible Crisis: The Educational Needs of Asian Pacific American Youth*. San Francisco, CA: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP). P. 35.

³⁷ Saetern, Moug Khoun. 1998. *Iu Mien in America: Who We Are*. Oakland, CA: Graphic House Press. P. 92.

³⁸ Trueba, Henry J., Lila Jacobs, and Elizabeth Kirton. 1990. *Op. Cit.* P. 106.

³⁹ See, for example:

Kiang, Peter N. 1997. Pedagogies of Life and Death: Transforming Immigrant/Refugee Students and Asian American Studies. *Positions* 5(2): 529-555.

_____. 1998. Writing from the Past, Writing for the Future: Healing Effects of Asian American Studies in the Curriculum. *Transformations: A Resource for Curriculum Transformation and Scholarship*, 9(2): 132-149.

_____. 2000. Long-Term Effects of Diversity in the Curriculum: Analyzing the Impact of Asian American Studies in the Lives of Alumni from an Urban Commuter University. In *Diversity on Campus: Reports from the Field*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Pp. 23-25.

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A group of Cambodian Americans in Philadelphia expressed views to a SEARAC staff member in 2000 that might also apply to other communities:

Our people need to come together to build a stronger community and we still need to work on that. Education on cultural awareness is needed to help families stay together in peace. It's good when family members know two cultures, but when two cultures are practiced in the same household but the members don't understand each other, there can be conflict.

Asian studies are too limited in the American educational system. Hardly anything is taught about Cambodian culture and history. Some teachers don't even know where Cambodia is and who we are. We feel ignored and left out. Some Cambodians are not proud of their own race because of what they have been through and what they have experienced in life as Cambodian, and don't want to be identified or tell others that they are Cambodian.

Just as many Southeast Asian American students feel alienated from their schools because curricula do not reflect their heritage, many also feel alienated because few schools have sufficient Southeast Asian American representation on staff.

Even in California, the state with the largest number of Southeast Asian Americans, policymakers neglect to ensure that Southeast Asian Americans have access to the educational resources they need. For example, Chu⁴⁰ reports that as of May 1997 California had only 72 certified bilingual Vietnamese teachers for 47,663 Vietnamese-speaking students (ratio: 1:662), 28 certified bilingual Hmong teachers for 31,156 Hmong-speaking students (ratio: 1:1,113), and 5 certified bilingual Khmer teachers for 20,645 Khmer-speaking students (ratio: 1:4,129).⁴¹ In Chu's view, "The fundamental problem is a blatant lack of sensitivity and understanding on the part of schools and teachers concerning the needs of Southeast Asian students." Others might add that teachers of all ethnic groups are in short supply, and that programs for training Southeast Asian American bilingual teachers are too rare. In all likelihood, all of these factors (and others) contribute to the longstanding shortage.⁴²

It is important that Southeast Asian American students have access to teachers and other staff of their own ethnicity for several reasons. They can understand and negotiate the family, cultural, and personal dynamics of their students in ways that are rare among other teachers. They can also share knowledge of Southeast Asian cultures with their peers, and thereby create school-wide changes. Furthermore, they can provide inspirational examples of academic achievement for their students, many of whom would not otherwise personally know people of their own ethnicity who have graduated from college. As Johnson, Boyden, and Pittz⁴³ state:

⁴⁰ Chu, Nawn V. 1997. "Re-examining the Model Minority Myth: A Look at Southeast Asian Youth." In *McNair Journal*. Accessible at: <http://www-mcnair.berkeley.edu/97Journal/Chu.html>.

⁴¹ Also see Rumbaut 1995: 33-34 for figures on bilingual educators in California in 1993. He reports that 96 percent of California bilingual teachers spoke only Spanish in addition to English, that 83 individuals spoke Vietnamese, 2 spoke Cambodian, 1 spoke Hmong, and 1 spoke Lao. According to Ruiz de Velasco and Fix (2000: 5), "Nationwide, only 2.5 percent of teachers with English language learners in their classes have any special preparation to work with them." This percentage is drawn from 1993-1994 data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. Sources: Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1995. *Op. Cit.*

Ruiz de Velasco, Jorge and Michael Fix. 2000. *Overlooked and Underserved: Immigrant Students in U.S. Secondary Schools*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

⁴² Dr. Seree Weroha (personal communication 2002) notes that "one reason for the shortage of Southeast Asian American teachers is that not enough Southeast Asian American professionals take the initiative to lead and recruit Southeast Asian Americans who may want to become teachers."

⁴³ Johnson, Tammy, Jennifer Emiko Boyden, and William J. Pittz. 2001. *Racial Profiling and Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: How Zero Tolerance Policies and High Stakes Testing Subvert Academic Excellence and Racial Equality*. Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center. P. 21. Accessible at: <http://www.arc.org/erase/index.html>.

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Teachers of color ... provide students of color with invaluable examples of successful, respected adults. More particularly, teachers of color provide models of success in the academic arena, where students of color are often expected to fail. Of course, students of color are not the only ones to benefit from a diverse teaching corps. White students also derive important lessons when their role models include teachers of color.

For all of the reasons expressed in this section, it would be wise to heed the following recommendation made by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy: "Fund recruitment and training of more Asian Pacific American teachers, administrators, and counselors, with particular emphasis on those with bilingual skills and knowledge of new and unrepresented Asian Pacific American populations."⁴⁴

4. Recommendations:

Most Southeast Asian Americans have deep respect for academic pursuits, and seek educational advancement with all of the resources available to them. By supporting their commitment and enthusiasm in relatively modest ways, governmental institutions, grantmakers, colleges, and resource organizations could significantly impact the educational trajectories of these sizeable and growing communities. SEARAC recommends that the U.S. Government, colleges, grantmakers, and others support the advancement of Southeast Asian American success in higher education through the following methods carried out simultaneously:

- A. Disaggregate and Disseminate More Data: Enhance disaggregation of data, and then disseminate to decision-makers such as policymakers, teachers, and community leaders;
- B. Promote Southeast Asian American Studies Courses and Personnel: Integrate Southeast Asian studies courses in schools with large community concentration, and train and hire more Southeast Asian American teachers and staff;
- C. Support Community Organizations: Support community-based organizations such as mutual assistance associations (MAAs), faith-based organizations, and national networking organizations, which have proven success in promoting academic success; and
- D. Create New Systems for Financial and Technical Support: Create systems of support for Southeast Asian American students, as well as the institutions reaching out to them. H.R. 333 and efforts to found an APIA college fund (or funds) are examples of initiatives now underway.

A. Disaggregate and Disseminate More Data:

Policymakers, teachers, and other decision-makers need better information on Southeast Asian Americans in higher education, in order to make better-informed decisions. Research institutions and agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau should disaggregate data for particular Southeast Asian American groups, and then release their data in a timely and widely accessible fashion.

B. Promote Southeast Asian American Studies Courses and Personnel:

Colleges and other educational institutions with significant community representation should integrate Southeast Asian language, history, and culture components with their mainstream curricula, and train and hire more Southeast Asian American teachers and personnel. By taking these steps, schools can motivate students to succeed, foster better communication with communities and parents, and diminish dangers of discrimination by providing non-Southeast Asians with accurate information about their neighbors.

C. Support Community Organizations:

Community-based organizations such as MAAs and faith-based organizations such as temples and churches promote academic success by facilitating healthy communication and information-exchange (for example, about

⁴⁴ Olsen, Laurie. 1997. *Op. Cit.* P. 37.

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scholarship opportunities) between groups separated by language and culture. They also provide students with environments that enhance academic achievement. National network organizations such as the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) support MAAs and faith-based organizations by providing them with technical assistance, funding opportunities, and access to best practice models. All of these types of community organizations should be supported in their promotion academic success.

D. Create New Systems for Financial and Technical Support:

The "model minority myth" that is still so often applied to Asian and Pacific Islander Americans of all backgrounds, regardless of their distinguishing characteristics, must be overcome. Some of the work directed towards finally destroying the model minority myth should focus on changing the ways our educational systems work – for example, through enacting legislation and creating new support institutions such as college funds.

Southeast Asian American students and the institutions of higher learning reaching out to them require additional financial and technical support. Legislative efforts such as H.R. 333 – an effort "to amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to authorize grants for institutions of higher education serving Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders"⁴⁵ – should be pursued in order to make the American educational system more equitable for people of diverse backgrounds. Efforts now underway to found an Asian and Pacific Islander American college fund, or group of funds, similar to those of African, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Americans also have the potential to significantly aid in Southeast Asian American quests for educational success.

⁴⁵ H.R. 333 is accessible at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query>.