

**Understanding the Role of Higher Education in Shaping Asian
American and Pacific Islander College Students' College
Experiences and Cultural Identity**

Honors Thesis

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By

Erika K. Pen

Dr. Pamela Leong
Faculty Advisor
Department of Sociology

Commonwealth Honors Program
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Abstract

While praised for being the “model minority” due to societal perceptions of their educational and economic achievements, systematic, institutional, and individual racism towards the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community still exists. This research study examines the role of higher education in shaping AAPI college students' college experiences and cultural identity. Using interview data from 15 AAPI college students from 9 different college campuses, this study reveals that college campuses discriminate against AAPI college students. Such institutional forms of discrimination impact AAPI college students through a lack of resources in supporting the multiple diasporas that make up the AAPI community or undermining racial discrimination students report. In response to pervasive institutional discrimination at their college campus, AAPI college students may have little choice but to seek out support from on-campus AAPI organizations. Indeed, the AAPI college organizations appear to be one of the only options on campus that culturally affirm the status, experience, and identity of Asian American/Pacific Islander students. Creating resources that specifically address the needs of different demographics instead of creating resources that incorporate the one-size-fits-all approach allows for students' needs and perspectives to be heard in spaces that have oppressed them in the past.

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To all my friends I have and my partner, I am sure almost all of you have heard me complain or even cry about this thesis. Without your guidance and occasional tissues, this thesis would not be finished. Thank you for the encouraging words and for taking away my phone so I could focus on typing.

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Introduction

While praised for being the “model minority” due to societal perceptions of their educational and economic achievements, systematic, institutional, and individual racism towards the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community still exists. Using interview data from 15 AAPI college students, this study examines the role of higher education in shaping AAPI college students' college experiences and cultural identity, paying special attention to the role of the educational institution and institutional discrimination within colleges. In addition to assessing the impact institutional racism may have on the AAPI college students' cultural identity and their experience at their respective universities, this study also seeks to illuminate some of the strategies that AAPI college students use to counter racial discrimination.

Literature Review

Systematic racism is a form of racism that is embedded in the country's systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, and established beliefs and attitudes that continue the cycle of socialization and oppression toward marginalized communities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Under systematic racism, institutional racism focuses particularly on racism in a designated setting like higher education or a workplace environment (Miller, Garran, 2007). While institutions like colleges may not have the intention to oppress, there is always a group benefiting from privilege, while placing another group at a disadvantage.

Prejudice, the race-based attitude that motivates racially discriminatory behavior, also shapes Asian American college students' college experience. Racial stereotypes form the basis of prejudicial attitudes and the ensuing discriminatory treatment. Two common racial stereotypes that shape Asian Americans' experiences are the model

minority myth and the perpetual foreigner. The model minority myth praises the successful educational and economic achievements of Asian Americans in American society. Yet, Museus and Park's (2015) study reveals that many participants were affected by the stereotype in their social interactions at higher education institutions. An interviewee shared how other people assumed that they did not earn the grades they received due to the presumption that they were genetically predisposed to excel in math and science, thus devaluing the hard work that they put in. The assumption of the model minority myth became a barrier when Asian American students sought help. One other participant shared with Museus and Park how she felt that she wasn't fully addressed and supported in what she was experiencing.

The perpetual foreigners depict Asian Americans as outsiders, regardless of where they were born or how long they or their family has lived in the United States. Studies have documented the extent of racial discrimination experienced by Asian American college students. One of the discoveries that Museus and Park (2015) found was that several of their Asian-American research participants discussed situations in which they were treated as foreigners, even though they were born or grew up in the United States. Some scenarios the participants experienced involved being asked where they were truly from or questioned on their ability to speak English. Through the act of the perpetual foreigner stereotype, the participants shared the feeling of isolation and disconnect it made them feel on their college campus.

Racial stereotyping and institutional racism affect both the overall college experience of Asian-American students and their cultural identity as AAPI people. Existing scholarships have underscored how racial stereotypes of Asian Americans have

hampered Asian American college students' positive college experiences. To better understand the racism Asian American college students face daily, Museus and Park (2015) conducted face-to-face interviews with Asian American undergraduates. Their study identifies three types of racism a student may face daily in a college setting: systemic or institutional racism; cultural racism; and individual racism.

Systematic racism is the oppression of one group to favor another group through systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, and established beliefs and attitudes that continue the socialization of oppression towards a certain minority community. While institutions like colleges may not have the intention to oppress, there is always a group benefiting from privilege and another group at a disadvantage. AAPI students may also face cultural racism during their college experience.

Cultural racism encompasses the values, ideology, and practices of the dominant group (Cogburn, 2019). In America, this can be seen as individuals favoring the White Christian American culture over their different culture's customs and beliefs. Students of color may also fall victim to the toxic social environment that is promoted due to cultural racism (Tatum, 1997). In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Tatum describes cultural racism as smog that is both thickly visible and so ordinary that it becomes as if we are "breathing it in". The origins of colleges and universities reflect the cultural beliefs and values of America's beginnings and the discriminatory practices towards marginalized communities. With these origins, the culture of the university may not reflect the culture that a student is used to.

Museus and Park (2015) analyze individual racism can be seen through someone's actions towards another person due to race/ethnicity. Frequently, individual

racism comes from the people that make up the college campus. Whether it is a student, faculty, or professor, individual racism reflects the choice to discriminate against someone due to their social identity, whether it be their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or ability.

The effects of institutional discrimination on Asian American college students' racial identities are noticeable. In the interviews conducted by Museus and Park (2015), many of the interviewees discussed the importance of their cultural identity and how the lack of acceptance or ability to express their culture negatively affected their college experiences. Many of them experienced the pressure to assimilate into the culture at the university.

Another finding from Museus and Park's (2015) research reveals racial silencing in the academic setting. Participants shared how they felt their voices were silent and invisible on campus. Tammy, a participant opens up about the exclusion of Asian American authors in American Literature class and how the professor pushes that role onto the Asian Studies department, even though their university lacks one. The omission of Asian/Asian American voices in academic settings upholds the notion that students from marginalized ethnic or racial backgrounds do not have the same worth or importance as those compared to White authors and figures in history.

An individual's cultural identity draws from the values, beliefs, and norms of our culture into our identity and view of the world (Wan, Chew, 2013). Individuals often form a cultural identity reflecting their parents' background and heritage. They may also adopt the mannerisms and beliefs of their country. Cultural identity incorporates our culture's values, beliefs, and norms into our identity and view of the world. Through

exposure to values, cultural norms, and beliefs, we create a perception of the world that is based on the people who are around us.

Three components define someone's cultural identity. They are cultural knowledge which is what's widely known about the individual's culture, category label which allows the individual to perceive their identity in the context of their culture, and social connection which focuses on the person's ability to connect with people from the same heritage (Wan, Chew, 2013).

Racial identities are complex. They are shaped by various factors, including physical features, parents' countries of origin, and ethnic traditions. However, given that immigrants form the foundation of the United States, immigrants' racial identities may be complicated. Perhaps even more complex are the racial identities of children of immigrants.

Asians and Asian Americans living in the United States take on different racial identities. Some may choose to identify according to one or both parents' country of origin (for instance, "Japanese" or "Filipino"). Other Asian Americans may choose to identify as simply "Asian." Still others may choose to identify as "Asian American." And still others may identify as only "American." Conducting one of their largest research which has 66 focus groups with 264 total participants, Neil G. Ruiz, Sunny Shao, and Sono Shah (2022) of the Pew Research Center aimed to understand better and listen to how Asian Americans talk about their lived experiences in America. This study involved 18 focus groups that were organized on distinct Asian ethnic groups with a moderator of their ethnic group.

One of the common themes revealed in the focus groups was how participants discussed how the pan-ethnic “Asian” label used in the United States only represented one part of their cultural identity. Participants who had recently arrived in the United States were more inclined to identify with ethnic identity than the United States-created pan-ethnic Asian American identity. Asian participants who were born in the United States reveal how they chose to identify as Asian, but also as their ethnic origin and as Americans

Participants also discussed the complicated relationship with the pan-ethnic labels of “Asian” or “Asian American.” One of the findings revealed that the use of the pan-ethnic label was more of an imposed choice rather than an active choice. An immigrant Pakistani woman talked about how she will typically see “Asian American” on forms, but not more specific options to specify their ethnicity. Another discovery that came from using the pan-ethnic label was that participants felt the term didn’t truly capture their identity and was too ambiguous. They’ve also been encountered due to the term and the association to view Asian Americans as only from East Asian countries. A Pakistani man informs Ruiz, Shao, and Shah (2022) about how at Asian stores, he will find Chinese or Korean products, but rarely finds any Pakistani or Indian products.

Personal experiences with racial prejudices and racial discrimination in college may shape how AAPI students identify racially. The hostile treatment occurs at three levels: individual, institutional, and societal level. Individual racism occurs one-on-one or in small groups. Typically, a member of the majority group (or else a non-Asian member) engages in a harmful action against a minority member. In the case of Asian American students, examples include the alienation of the Asian American community on

campus. Students who attend higher education institutions that lack cultural diversity may feel isolated from their peers as they don't have a similar background or identity.

Kevin Gin (2019) researched the alienation AAPI college students felt on their college campuses through the act of racialized aggression on social media. To understand the racialized aggression on social media that students felt, he conducted a naturalistic, qualitative inquiry at East Oak University. His study focused on the social media app called Yik Yak, which was a mobile social media app that allowed individuals within proximity to one another to post anonymous messages. Users could identify the geographic location and school of where the message came from, leaving the identity of the user anonymous (Koenig, 2014). Messages regarding the Asian community at East Oak University appeared regularly and mocked them. Messages included mocking Asian students' accents and questioning their choice of food and behavior. Participants stated the messages on Yik Yak were an alienating experience, along with a message that Asian Americans and non-White communities were not a part of the East Oak campus.

Institutional discrimination refers to institutionalized practices (here, educational practices) that differently and negatively affect a subordinate racial group. Acts of racial profiling in education can affect the mindset of a student as seen in a meta-analysis conducted by Nguyen and Ryan (2008). Through the meta-analysis of Nguyen and Ryan (2008), they discovered that students from minority communities perform worse if the tests ask them to indicate their racial status. Many students from minority communities experienced stereotype threat once their exams asked about their racial status. Stereotype threat is when an individual believes they are at risk of conforming, to a negative stereotype about one's group (Steele, Aronson, 1995). Another study indicated that when

standardized tests are solely used to determine a student's placement in remediation, instead of high school grades, students of marginalized communities perform worse (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Finally, societal-level stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans may negatively affect Asian American college students' college experience, as well as their racial identities. Nowhere is this more evident than at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. The purported origin of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China led to widespread discrimination against not just the Chinese and Chinese Americans, but against anyone who looked Asian. In the U.S., regardless of whether they were of Chinese descent, Asian Americans have been the target of hate and violence, as they were blamed for the pandemic. Indeed, The rise in anti-Asian hate crimes skyrocketed during the pandemic. During the peak of anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021, Neil G. Ruiz, Khadijah Edwards, and Mark Hugo Lopez (2021) revealed that 81% of Asian adults believed that there was an increase in violence towards the AAPI community.

Making things worse, former President Donald Trump encouraged the racial stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners when he nicknamed the coronavirus virus "kung-flu". Referring to kung fu, a martial arts specialty, the former U.S. president stereotyped all Asians as being proficient in the martial arts. But by attaching the Chinese martial arts to the coronavirus, the former president essentially proclaimed that it was the Chinese--indeed, all Asians--who were responsible for the worldwide pandemic. Asian people everywhere, accordingly, should be reviled, if not exterminated.

Similar widespread racial stereotypes of Asians may affect Asian American college students. Cheng, Wong, Li & McDermott (2022) aimed to see the psychosocial challenges that arose in Asian American college students due to COVID-19. One of the impacts on AAPI students was heightened vigilance about one's race/ethnicity. Many students were cautious about their race/ethnicity due to the association that was created between the pandemic and the AAPI community. Through heightened vigilance, students seek to self-segregate themselves to minimize negative encounters.

Rather than focusing on academics, students of color may have to divert their energy to cope with the stress responses caused by racial microaggressions and experience racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004). William A. Smith introduces the framework of racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue is defined as the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions (Smith, 2004). Short-term effects may include anger, fear, headaches, anxiety, or sleep disturbances (Smith, 2004).

Smith's framework revolves around the concept that universities are operated from a historically dominant White perspective (Smith, 2004). In historically dominant White environments, this culture creates an environment where racial microaggression will arise and affect the students of color. One study that explores racial battle fatigue in college students and its effects on their physical health was conducted by Hills, Kobayashi, and Hughes (2007). Hill, Kobayashi, and Hughes (2007) researched the connection between perceived racism and the increase in stress-induced blood pressure of African-American students. 40 African-American students were asked to complete an ambulatory blood pressure assessment from which daytime and nighttime averages were

computed. To measure the perceived frequency of experiences with racism and racial discrimination, they measured using the Perceived Racism Scale. Their research revealed that in academic settings, perceived racism results in an increase in blood pressure in the students. Smith's (2004) research reveals that for students of color who have experienced racial microaggressions most of their lives, the stress becomes overwhelming given the additional stress of navigating predominantly White settings where racial microaggressions may occur.

To complicate things, the Asian and Asian-American communities struggle to discuss topics around mental health. Data from the National Latino and Asian American Study reported that only 8.6% of Asian Americans sought mental health services compared to 18% of the general U.S. population. Kramer, Kwong, Lee, & Chung (2002) analyze some of the cultural factors that influence mental health. They found that cultural factors, such as language, age, gender, and others, can influence the mental health of Asian immigrants. They also note the social stigma and shame in seeking mental health services. Julian Chow, a professor at UC Berkeley's School of Social Welfare reveals that some Asian cultures believe that mental health problems are the result of wrongdoings in a past life. This cultural belief continues to let people accept that mental illness is a hardship that needs to be endured.

Given the reticence of the AAPI community to discuss mental health issues, AAPI college students may need to rely on alternative coping strategies. One approach is through racial uplifting (Ong 2022), wherein AAPI individuals and groups embrace and celebrate their heritage and cultural practices openly. There is evidence to suggest that positive ethnic identity buffers against negative psychological effects. Mossakowski

(2003), for instance, found a positive correlation between Filipino Americans' involvement with their cultural practices and ethnic identity and better mental health. Conducted by Iwamoto and Liu (2010), discussed that Asian American college students who have strong ethnic pride and attachment to their ethnic group endorse positive traits of well-being, such as acceptance and positive relationships with others. Iwamoto and Liu (2010) note that college students who had a stronger sense of ethnic affirmation and belonging had a positive relationship with their psychological well-being.

Because some of the existing literature suggests that involvement in one's culture and a positive embracing of one's racial and ethnic identity provide some protection against the harmful effects of racial discrimination, AAPI college students will likely need to rely on non-clinical means to cope with the stresses associated with being a marginalized population. This current study hopes to uncover some of the strategies that AAPI college students use to counter racial discrimination.

Methods

Methodology

This study employed a semi-structured interview design. For this research study, a semi-structured interview allowed the researcher and the participant to discuss the questions the researcher prepared beforehand and more of the participants' thoughts and experiences that were brought up from the set questions.

Sampling

The target population of this study was Asian American Pacific Islander undergraduate college students. Participants were of Asian American Pacific Islander descent, between the age of 18-24, and currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at

their university/college. This research study did not require a specific gender identity and socioeconomic class.

Sampling Design

Participants were chosen through self-selection sampling which is a type of non-probability sampling technique. To gain participants in the research study, the researcher engaged in different ways to promote the research study. They shared the flyer on the social media platform, Instagram. Due to the researcher being a student leader for an AAPI student organization, they were able to also email other AAPI student organizations like the Umass Lowell Cambodian American Student Association, Simmons University Asian Student Association, and the University of Virginia Asian Student Union and ask them to share the flyer on their social media accounts. The researcher had friends and student leaders share the Instagram post on their Instagram Story and promote it by word of mouth.

Justification of Sampling Design

Using the self-selection sampling method, the researcher was able to gather participants who were interested in the study. Participants were intrinsically motivated to discuss their experiences as AAPI college students and increase the resources to better assist AAPI college students and provide them with a more inclusive college experience.

Limitations of Sampling Design:

One of the limitations of the sampling strategy was that it didn't include a full representation of the Asian American Pacific Islander racial group. No participants identified as Central West Asian or Pacific Islander. Participants who were interested in the research fell under the categories of East, Southeast, or South Asian. With a lack of

participants who identified as Central or West Asian or Pacific Islander, it doesn't encompass all of the AAPI diaspora. It also provides a gap in the research of the college experiences of college students of those geographic regions experience college and how they interact with their higher education experience.

Ethical Issues:

Participants were given a consent form that underlined the potential risks of the study. The consent form informed them that any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Their real name would not be used in any write-up. Instead, their identity and data collected will be kept confidential; a pseudonym (false name) will be used in place of your real name in any written, disseminated works. They had the freedom to edit any material about their interview. Participants had the choice of whether their interviews were to be tape-recorded. If they consented to their interview being recorded, their audiotape was solely used for the interview. All of the recording is kept in a private file, that can accessed only by the investigator. The data will be stored in the private domains of the principal investigator indefinitely, and no one other than the research investigator will have access to the data at any time.

Instruments, Materials, and Measurement Issues

To conduct research, the principal investigator created a list of interview questions. The interview questions had two sections. The first section was questions that focused on the interviewee's background. These questions asked about their gender, what university they attended, their academic major, racial and ethnic background, and what socioeconomic class they thought they belonged to. The second section of the interview

questions was closely related to what the principal investigator was investigating regarding the intersection of AAPI college student and their college experiences and how it affects their cultural identity. Questions focused on their higher education institution like the racial and ethnic makeup of the university, whether they felt like there was representation in the staff members, and if they had course materials that showcase AAPI identity and/or history. Participants had the chance to also share any experiences regarding racism or microaggression they may have experienced or witnessed in their social group. They had the chance to share their involvement with student organizations that focused on their cultural identity and whether the organization has benefitted them.

Results/Findings

Demographic Response

15 participants were a part of the interviews for this research study. Of the 15 participants in the interview, 5, or 33% were East Asian, 8, or 53.3 % were Southeast Asian, and, 2, or 13.3 % were South Asian. 4 of the 15 participants identified as male, while the other 11 participants identified as woman. Two participants were international students studying in America, while the rest were domestic students studying at their college/university. Three of the participants were born outside of the United States, while the rest were born in the United States. When asked about their class standing, 4 stated they were sophomores, 4 stated they were juniors, and 7 stated that they were seniors. 7 of the participants had majors that fell under the STEM categories, while 8 had majors that fell under the Humanities. Finally, 3 stated that they fell in the upper-middle-class bracket, 8 in the middle-class bracket, 2 in the working-class bracket, and 2 in the low-class bracket.

Regional Makeup of Participants

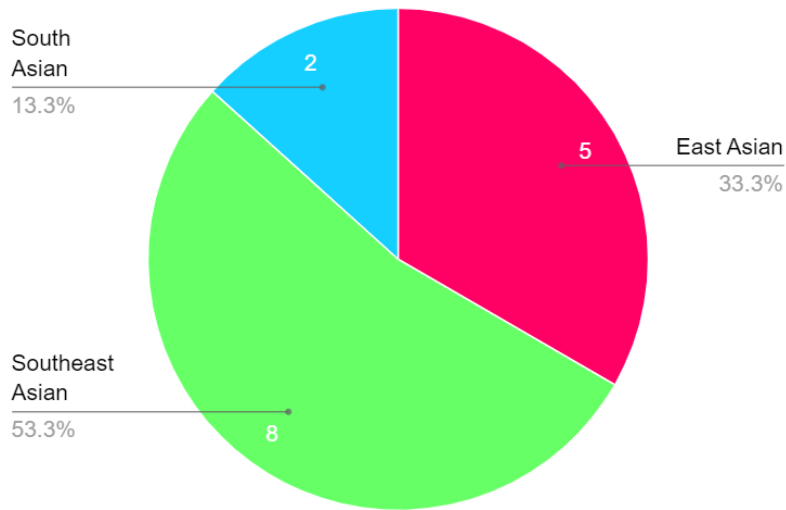


Figure One: 13.33 % (2 participants) identified as South Asian, 33.3% (5 participants) identified as East Asian, and 53.3% (8 participants) identified as Southeast Asian.

Domestic or International Student

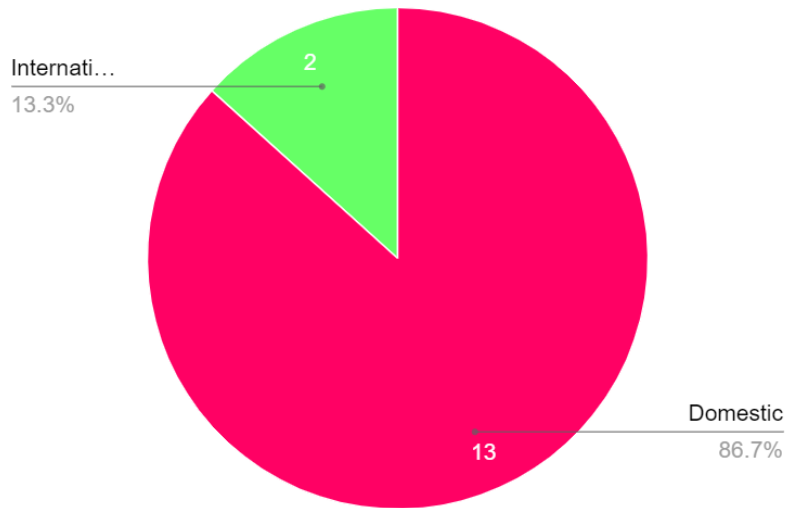


Figure Two: 86.7 % (13 participants) are domestic students while 13.3% (2 participants) are international students.

Birth Country of Student

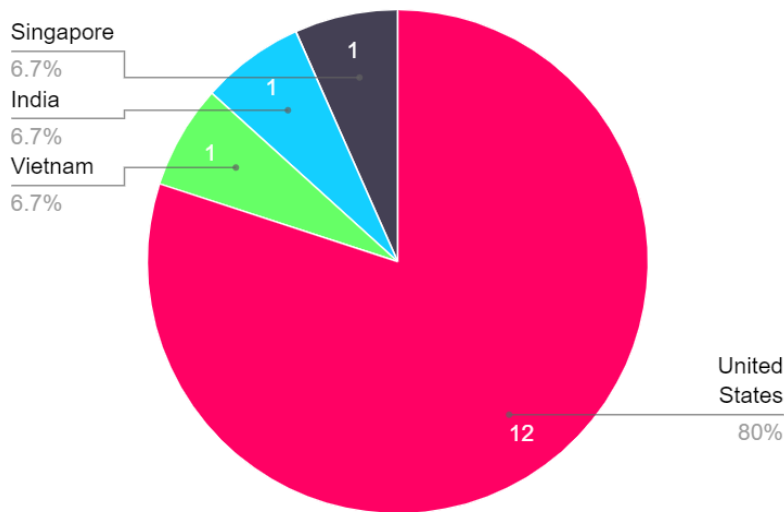


Figure Three: 80% (12 participants) were born in the United States, 6.7% (1 participant) were born in Vietnam, 6.7% (1 participant) were born in India, and 6.7% (1 participant) were born in Singapore.

Class Standing

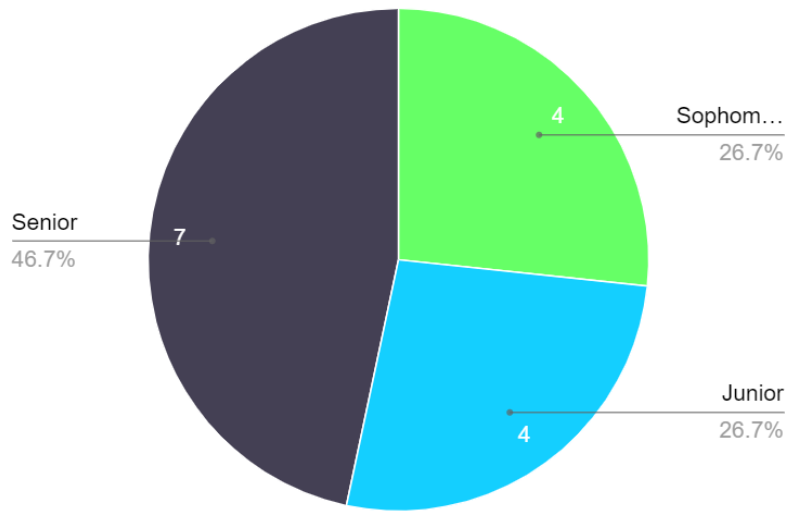


Figure Four: There were no participants with the class standing of freshmen. 26.7 % (4 participants) are sophomores, 26.7% (4 participants) are juniors, and 46.7% (7 participants) are seniors.

Type of Major

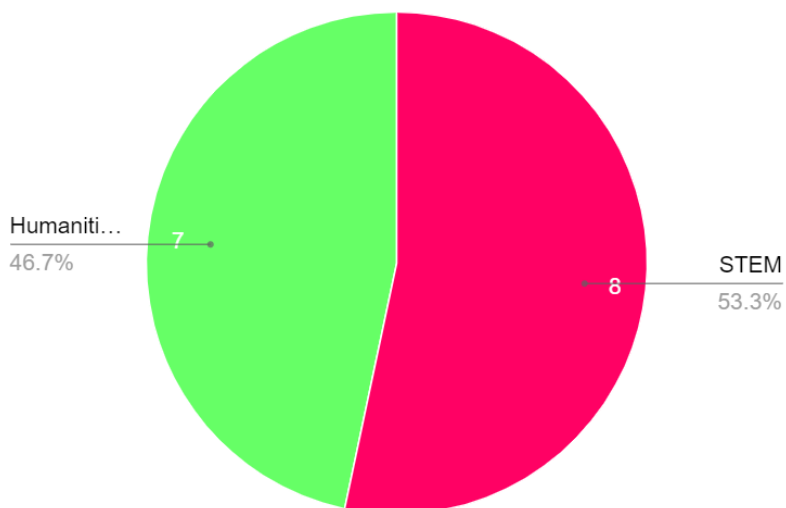


Figure Five: 53.3% (8 participants) are studying fields that fall under STEM while 46.7% (7 participants) are studying fields that fall under the Humanities.

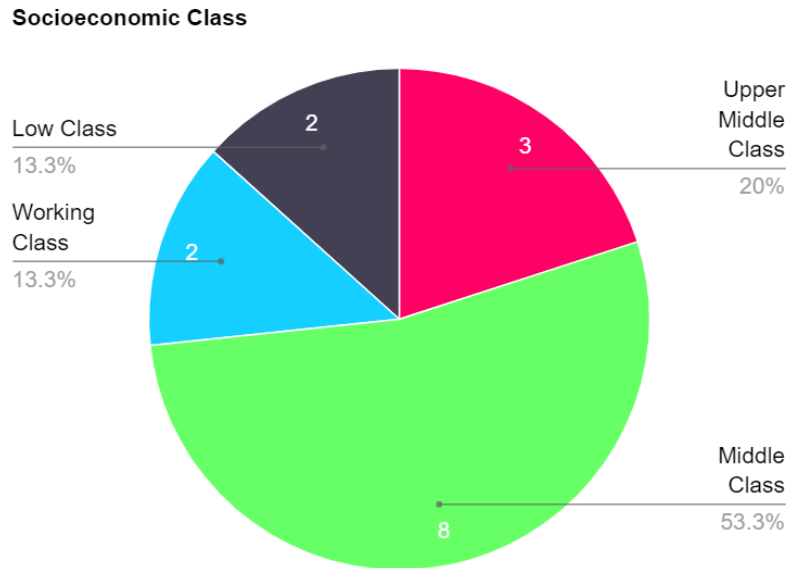


Figure Six: 20% (3 participants) identified their socioeconomic class as upper-middle-class, 53.3% (8 participants) identified their socioeconomic class as middle-class, 13.3% (2 participants) identified their socioeconomic class as working-class, and 13.3% (2 participants) identified their socioeconomic class as low-class.

Lack of Representation in Academics and Academic Settings

When asked to discuss any representation in their academics along with professors and faculty members, all participants revealed that there's a gap in representation, especially if it was outside an Asian-oriented program. N.E, a senior at the University of Virginia believes the course he's taking for his major influences the lack of representation: "I think that might also like a large part of that might just be the courses that I'm taking. At least in my core curriculum in terms of chemical engineering,...so just depends on the class,... but it's not something that's like brought up". L.T., who is a

sophomore at the University of Massachusetts Boston reflects on the disproportion between university leaders and students: “ I would say no just because I know they (UMB) are struggling to find Asian American professors for the Asian American program of studies alone. Yes, we do have a ton of Asian Americans and Asians on campus, but the leaders and the professors are not representative of that community”.

Effects of having an AAPI Professor or Faculty Member

While participants expressed the gap in representation of AAPI professors and/or faculty members, when able to take a class with an Asian/Asian American professor, there is a higher rate of connection and overall, satisfaction of enrolling in a class taught by an AAPI professor. J.M.C, a Filipino-American senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst positivity discusses her experience of having a Filipino professor: “It's always nice to be in a class and have a professor who like understands and I can relate a little more too. My professor, when he talked about some of his experiences like growing up in the Philippines or whatever, I was like, oh yeah, like I can relate to some of those things”. J.G., a Filipino-American junior at Northeastern University reveals having an AAPI professor allowed them to be seen in that type of career: “Whether or not I was attending the class all the time or doing the work, I always felt like being in that class, it was nice to like see that there was someone of my ethnic group be teaching and being. That position isn’t commonly held by a lot of Asian people”.

Self-Segregation

Many of the participants brought up that their lack of experiences regarding microaggressions and racial incidents is influenced by the people they choose to hang out and surround themselves with. E.K., a junior who attends the University of San

Francisco, talks about how social circles play a role in protecting them: “I feel like for my campus, most people stick within their demographics or like similar ethnicity. I feel like I haven't had interactions like a microaggression or anything. I surround myself with my Asian friends on campus. I do have white friends, but they're kind of like an offshoot”. While it may not appear as a way to protect one's self, the act of surrounding yourself with people of the same race and/or ethnicity limits the negative experiences that may arise due to someone's cultural identity.

Experiences of Microaggression and Racial Discrimination Towards Themselves

While self-segregating with one's ethnic group may reduce the experience of microaggression and/or racial discrimination it doesn't eliminate the threats of experiencing both microaggressions and racial discrimination. N.E., a senior at the University of Virginia, shares a microaggression he experienced due to his background as an Indian-American. He shares “During a meeting for the cultural organization I was part of for a while, I was compared to a monkey and I know it wasn't something that they brought up intentionally, but it was also it was very shocking because it was kind of out of nowhere”.

E.L., another sophomore at the University of Virginia reveals the microaggression she's received as an international student from Vietnam. “My past roommates were White Christian girls, and while they were pleasant, yet whenever, we hung out together and we talked, they never looked at me. They never make eye contact with me and I think it's something that they do unconsciously which sucked. When I was the one talking, they would just sort of like do their own thing. But whenever my white roommate talked, they would fully look at her. I stopped hanging over them because I can't do that.” Even while

talking about her past experiences with her old roommate, she still feels a sense of anger for not having the same respect as her white roommate.

A.O.C, a junior at Simmons University discusses their experience attending a PWI and all women's college and how this shapes some of the microaggressions she's experienced on campus. A.O.C shares that in the classes she's been in, she's had professors mix her up with the other Asian students, in some cases, she would be mixed up with the only Asian classmate. "Last year, I had a professor, and she called me (other student's name) and I was looking around like where's (other student's name) let me say hi, but then realized she was referring to me. She made it even worse and she said oh you guys just have similar hair. I had red hair. She had black hair."

Witnessing Microaggression and Racial Discrimination on College Campuses

While not every participant shared that they experienced a microaggression directed towards them, every single participant shared that they had at least observed a form of racial discrimination and/or microaggression towards their peers on and off their college campuses. Students who attend schools that have a strong historical presence in the United States and/or are ranked as Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) emphasize a greater sense of disconnection from the college community due to their racial and ethnic identity. I.D. a senior at Simmons University also discussed their experience attending a PWI and all-women's college. I.D. talks about how when many of her white classmates are exposed to items outside of the cultural norm, they react in a negative light. "One experience I remember and know that many Asian kids with immigrant parents have experienced is people questioning their lunch. There was one class where I'm not sure if it's my profession, but my classmate was eating her ethnic food and these

girls were just making faces. They were making little side-eyes and questioning why she brought that meal.”

Even for students who attend institutions that have the designation of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI), there are still occurrences of racial stereotyping. H.A.C., a senior at UMass Boston, recalls an incident that happened in their student involvement suite. He explains “A couple of White students were going into the belongings of the Vietnamese Student Association and found their bamboo hats. They were putting them on and they were kind of going around the club space doing kinda like stereotypical imitations of what they perceived to be Asian”. H.A.C later explains that the students were imitating the caricatures that existed to diminish Asian/Asian Americans like speaking with a mocked and heavy accent and pretending to work in careers that were “deemed” for them like rice field farmers.

Interviewing R.X, a senior at John Hopkins University, he explains his thoughts regarding the academic setting and how the student body reflects the limited racial discrimination he’s seen on campus. R.X. says “ John Hopkins is a predominantly STEM school, which plays into why there's a strong Asian American population. It would make no sense if you found a racist here, I don't know how you would do that because they would just hate the whole school”. Compared to other interviewees, he believes that attending a school with an Asian American population has reduced microaggression/racial discrimination on campuses. Whereas, interviewees who attend institutions with a noticeable AAPI population still believe and witness racial discrimination.

Community and Cultural Identity Growth from Cultural Organization Involvement

Out of the 15 participants, 13 stated that they were involved with a student organization that focused on their racial and/or ethnic identity. All 13 participants have also held or currently hold an executive board position for their respective student organization. When given the chance to share about their respective student organization, they were enthusiastic to share about the student organization and their experiences being a part of it.

A common theme that was discovered was the sense of community that came with being a part of their student organization. H.C.A, a senior at UMass Boston, and one of the co-presidents of the Filipino cultural organization, Hoy Pinoy, describes his experiences with the community he's found at college. He said "I became the co-president of this club because I think that they're so special to me in the sense that it's the one place where I feel like I can truly be myself and I can truly relate with the people around me. Because like I said before back in high school, yes, I had a group of friends who were primarily Asian but I still felt like I was there was something missing with me because I wasn't the Asian that they were, which isn't anything wrong, but it just felt like there was something missing. So to find a club where I could like kind of explore that identity, I think it's really great."

N.O.B, a sophomore at Brandeis University and one of the cultural show coordinators for the Southeast Asian Club, also describes the connections she has been able to find with her Filipino heritage and the other countries that make up Southeast Asia: "It did like really shape my social life, especially last year because like I joined before I even got on campus. So like I was texting these people all summer. And when I

got on campus, it did feel like a strong community at first and it still does. I do come from like a town that is majority white and we didn't have any like culture clubs like that. So that's why it was kind of like my goal to join one in college. I think it has strengthened ties with my culture. I feel really comfortable exploring my culture with these people, especially because like a lot of us are half or like, you know we were born here and not like in our respective Southeast Asian countries. So we like to have fun creating these events and learning together”.

The ability to participate in the cultural organization has created a sense of community that many of them lacked in their hometown. Many of the participants shared the ability not just to form connections with members, but also with members of different Asian ethnic groups. Through their respective student organizations, they've been able to host collaborations with other ethnic groups on campus, and even, other groups from nearby universities.

Another common theme discovered was the ability to learn more and build solidarity between the different regions of Asia. G.S, a senior at the University of Virginia who has held the role of president and is currently one of the student advisors for UVA's Asian Student Union, expresses the growth towards his identity as Chinese American and understanding the perspectives of other regions of Asia: “Essentially the biggest lessons I've taken away from all this leadership I've done over the years is enlarging my perspective. The data shows there are a lot of ways in which our marginalization is different. I may be more prone than a South Asian person to be emasculated because of stereotypes about the emasculation of East Asian men. But at the same time, I am more likely to be economically well off than, say, Southeast Asians or

Pacific Islander people because the circumstances that resulted in being in this country are very different from the circumstances that I'd even differ from say Chinese Americans on the West Coast whose family have been in here since the transcontinental railroad days. So it's like, it's very important to try to understand different perspectives and see how different people struggle with different things.”

N.S, a junior and international student at Simmons University who is the president of their Asian Student Association and outreach chair for the South Asian Student Association, shares the dual perspectives she’s gained due to her involvement in both student organizations: “I feel like it's very unique to me because I think I'm the only one who's been a part of both of these groups simultaneously. I better understand the lack of representation and too much representation of one thing and why people feel the need to have these concentrated groups. Even though we don't have a real South Asian population there was a time when ASA was heavily focused on just doing things that are more Asian American, specifically East Asian American...I just took that opportunity to kill that narrative about it when people talk about there's not enough international student representation.”

While participating in a cultural organization has increased their awareness of their ethnicity, participation has also increased awareness and solidarity between different ethnicities of the Asian continent. It’s easy for individuals to solely be focused on their culture, but once given the chance to explore outside their identity, participants share the powerful connections that are formed. The student leaders in the interview shared how thorough their position they were able to advocate and recognize current events that target and harm the AAPI community. Five interviewees shared how their student

organizations were participating in or hosting events that supported Palestine Liberation. They all echoed the importance of supporting all of the AAPI diaspora which includes people who are Middle Eastern and from the region of Palestine.

Lack of Support From their Institution

Regardless of the type of institution participants attended, all participants expressed that they felt a lack of institutional support for the AAPI student body on campus. K.G., a junior at Boston University, discussed that there weren't enough resources for AAPI students: "The university can be better in taking the initiative to kind of promote like and at least take the initiative to do these cultural planning instead of relying on these cultural organizations to promote. I feel like the administration relies heavily on the students". J.G., a junior at Northeastern, also expressed the same theme of the university not doing for their students: "One thing I would say is during specific months like for example AAPI month that could be highlighted a little bit more when the time comes around. I mean like in general I think being able to highlight the different cultural history months would be great too for any." Interviewing interviewees who went to schools that have more than just one AAPI organization and have organizations that are dedicated to their country or religion, they shared the imbalance that came from having many clubs that focus on a specific ethnicity. J.M.C., a senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst talks about her participation in the UMA Filipino Club. "Our club was very small compared to the Asian American Student Association. Often, they will be at the forefront of AAPI cultural events compared to our club." While participants mainly shared about the differences between the funding of the various AAPI clubs, a majority of the participants did not share about the funding of other non-AAPI

organizations on campuses. Only one participant shared about the gap in funding between student organizations, especially if that student organization is directly tied to the background of the university. For N.O.B., who attends Brandeis University, the history of the university and the demographics shed light on the level of support they provide for their student organizations. Founded in 1948 by members of the Jewish community, Brandeis University is known for its ties to the Jewish community and for founding the first academic setting dedicated to Jewish life in the United States. Due to their religious and historical ties, N.O.B. reveals that Hillel, the student organization dedicated to Jewish life and culture, receives about \$90,000 for their club budget and not including additional funding for big and major events. While Brandeis' student body is about 15% of AAPI descent and their AAPI cultural organizations receive good funding like how Brandeis' Asian American Student Association received \$30,000 for their culture show, N.O.B still believes that there is a gap between which clubs receive more funding and support from the university. She reflects that if Brandeis were founded differently, then most likely, it would also change which club received the most funding.

Another issue that was brought up was the lack of support for international students. Just like any marginalized group, international students face a unique set of barriers while attending an institution in the United States. R.X, a senior at John Hopkins University shares about the language barrier international students face: "I've specifically noticed in Chinese internationals... when you're in a lecture and there's like slides talking about an equation or whatever and they have to go to Baidu and translate what's on the slide". E.L, who is a sophomore international student at the University of Virginia, talks about her disconnect to certain spaces as she doesn't fit into the label of Asian American

“We just recently got the Asian American Student Center. I was talking to the (current Asian Student Union) president about this, but a lot of older students who have now graduated, wanted it to be called Asian-American Student Center, but we sort of questioned why it was Asian American Center and not just like Asian Student Center. Students like me who are not American will probably never see themselves as American. Where is our place in that? I still go to the center because I have a lot of my friends, but I have Chinese international friends that don't ever go to that center because they're like, well, I'm not Asian American”.

Discussion

The goal of this research study was to conduct interviews with current undergraduate Asian American Pacific Islander college students and gain insight into what their lived experiences were and how higher education may have played a role in shaping those experiences along with their cultural identity. One of the components of an individual's cultural identity is the social connections between members of their cultural identity (Wan and Chew, 2013). Serpe and Stryker (2011) describe that social connections allow the person to find and seek connections in a greater community, in this case, the setting of their college. All participants shared that the ability to form connections with members of their racial and/or ethnic group has brought them a more fulfilling college experience, especially for participants who are currently seniors. Some participants have shared that without their cultural organizations on their campus, they would remain less connected with their cultural background.

Participants of this research study were also able to express how involvement in a student organization has made them better advocates for the current social and world

events that affect every one of the AAPI diaspora. One of the most prominent events happening now is the genocide in Gaza and the need for Palestine Liberation. Through E.L.'s participation with the Asian Student Union, they've been able to serve on the committee that focuses on social justice including leading events to educate the student body on what's happening in the region.

While there was a limited amount of data regarding participants who directly experienced a form of microaggression or racial discrimination, many literatures highlighted how visible racial discrimination towards the AAPI community is on college campuses. While colleges and universities may not target Asians and Asian Americans specifically, action (or else inaction) by university decision-makers, as well as by professors and fellow students, reflect the history and usage of stereotypes towards the AAPI community. Common stereotypes like the belief that Asians look like are still alive in classrooms. Participants like G.S. and A.O.C. listed their encounters of being mixed up with the other Asian students in the classroom. Interviewing students from universities and colleges of different historical backgrounds, student demographic makeup, and locations provided a deeper insight into how social settings, locations, and student populations influence the probability of experiencing or witnessing racial discrimination.

One of the common themes when discussing the lack of institutional support had to do with the level of support the university provided to the AAPI students. While N.O.B of Brandeis University shares that the AAPI student organizations receive significant funding for their culture show, there's still a stark difference between funding of clubs that align with the history of the University versus clubs that don't align with the original demographic of the University. Due to Brandeis' history as the first academic setting

dedicated to Jewish life in the United States, there is a higher emphasis on funding student organizations that specifically align with their Jewish background like Hillel which is the largest and most inclusive Jewish campus organization in the world, serving more than 160,000 Jewish students each year. With a base club budget of \$90,000, these numbers are 100x the budget of other student organizations at different universities like Simmons University. N.S. of Simmons University explains that through her role as President, she works hand in hand with their Treasurer in receiving their monthly funding for their events. She reveals that instead of having a starting budget for the academic year, her Treasurer has to propose each month for funding with the chance they may be denied the funding for the events they have planned.

H.A.C. and L.T. who both attend the University of Massachusetts Boston, share that attending one of the two universities in Massachusetts to have the designation of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) has benefits that other institutions may not have. Universities with the designation of AANAPISI meet the requirements of having an undergraduate student population consisting of at least 10% Asian American or Native American Pacific Islander students and at least 50 percent of the student body eligible for federal need-based financial assistance such as Pell Grants or Federal Work-Study. Both emphasized that while there are areas that the university can improve on, the university's status as an AANAPISI provides them with resources that contribute to their success in college. L.T. shares about the resources that UMB provides including the Asian American Resource Office, Asian American Studies Program, and Asian American Resource Library. With resources ranging from career workshops to one-on-one mentoring, AAPI college students can

excel in their academics and social communities. While both have expressed the positive benefits of attending an AANAPISI, both still commented that there are still areas that need to be improved to fully uplift the AAPI community, especially those from underrepresented regions of Asia like Central or West Asia.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this current study is the small sample size ($N = 15$), rendering the findings non-generalizable. A second limitation of the study was that there were no participants who identified as Central Asian, West Asian, or Pacific Islander. While Pacific Islander-based student organizations were connected, none of them contacted the researcher to participate in the study. With participants from these subregions of Asia and the Pacific, it creates a skewed presentation of what cultural identity may look like in these subregions of Asia and how they interact in social environments like higher education. The lack of data from these sub-regions also contributes to the limited research and understanding of students from these regions of Asia and the Pacific. They can share their experiences, hence, not share what could be better done to support students of these underrepresented regions of Asia and the Pacific. Furthermore, 14 out of the 15 participants were students who attended a university on the East Coast. With no students from the Midwest or Southwest or more students from the West Coast, it provides a gap in whether the geographic location of the institution also contributes to the experiences an AAPI student may have.

Finally, due to the researcher's background as a Cambodian-American and Southeast Asian-American, the researcher had more connections to those who identified as Southeast Asian and received participants with Southeast Asian backgrounds. While

much data surrounding AAPI college students focuses on East Asians, the background of the research created a slight bias when promoting and searching for participants.

Despite the above limitations, however, this study nonetheless gleaned important insight into the realities that AAPI college students face. Specifically, AAPI often encounters instances of microaggressions on campus, but these events go unaddressed. As a result of feeling unsupported by their institution, AAPI may have no choice but to seek support through on-campus cultural organizations that affirm their experiences and identities as AAPI people.

Implications

The findings have shown how higher education institutions play a significant role in shaping both the college experiences an AAPI student may have, but also the intersection of cultural identity and institutional racism and how an individual deals with situations they may encounter. One of the central themes discovered in the interviews was the importance of community between members of a shared racial group or ethnicity. While students may still encounter individual acts of microaggressions or racist incidents, knowing that they have a safe space on campus provides them with the strategies to overcome the incident or remark. Also revealed in the interviews was the growing need for universities to increase their support to all students of marginalized communities and not solely rely on the identity and multicultural organizations on campus. Creating resources that specifically address the needs of different demographics instead of creating resources that incorporate the one-size-fits-all approach allows for students' needs and perspectives to be heard in spaces that have oppressed them in the past.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Demographic/Background Questions

1. Your age?
2. With what gender do you identify?
3. What college do you currently attend?
4. What is your current class standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior)?
5. What is your academic major?
6. How do you identify racially? Is that how other people see you?
7. What is your ethnicity? What is your mother's country of origin? Your father's country of origin?
8. In what country were you born?
 - a. If you were not born in the United States, at what age did you come to the United States?
 - b. Were both your parents born in the United States? If not, where were they born?
9. What social class (or economic class) do you think you fall under and why?

Main Questions

10. What is your racial-ethnic self-identity? Why do you identify using this terminology and not another?
11. How racially diverse is your campus?
12. What percentage of the undergraduate student body would you say is a member of your racial and/or ethnic group?
13. Among the Asian/Asian American students on campus, which Asian ethnic group is the largest?
14. Do you feel that your racial and ethnic groups are well-represented among university leaders? The professors? Non-academic staff? Students? Explain.
15. How many Asian/Asian-American professors have you personally had for a course instructor? What subject areas do they teach?
16. Does having an Asian/Asian-American professor affect your academic interactions or academic success as an Asian/Asian-American student? Explain.
17. How well do the course materials (lectures, readings, etc.) reflect the contributions or else the experiences of Asians/Asian Americans? Explain.
18. Have you **personally experienced** any microaggressions or racist incidents on campus that targeted you specifically? Explain. What happened? Who was the perpetrator and what was the perpetrator's racial background? How did you react? How were those situations handled?
19. Have you **observed** any microaggressions or racist behavior against Asian Americans in which you were not the direct target? Explain. What happened? Who was the perpetrator and what was the perpetrator's racial background? How was the situation handled?

20. What special challenges do Asian/Asian-American college students typically face on campus? Have you personally faced these challenges? If so, how did you handle these challenges?
21. At your college, are you a member of any student organizations that focus on your cultural identity? Which ones?
- What is your role in the organization?
 - Why did you decide to join this organization?
 - How did you find out about this organization?
 - What is the purpose and goals of the organization?
 - Has participating in this organization shaped your racial-ethnic identity in any way? Explain.
22. Does your college have resources to support its AANHPI students? What resources and what supports? Have you used these resources?
23. What would you want to see your school do better in order to support you and the AANHPI community better?

Appendix: Mental Health Resources for AAPI Students

- Asian Mental Health Collective: <https://www.asianmhc.org/>
- National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association: <https://www.naapimha.org/aanhpi-service-providers>
- South Asian Mental Health Initiative & Network: <https://samhin.org/>

- National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance: <https://www.nqapia.org/>
- 988: Mental Health Hotline
- Counseling and Health Services at your college or university.

