ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER (AAPI) STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students make up an incredibly diverse segment of the U.S. college population, but AAPI students are often left out of conversations about students of color and are seldom recognized in academic research. When AAPI students are included, they are often referred to as the “model minority,” a reference point against which other groups of students are compared. In reality, the AAPI umbrella represents over 50 different ethnic groups that vary greatly in terms of languages, English proficiency, colonial history, immigration patterns, and socioeconomic and first-generation college-going status. Given this diversity, it is not surprising that many AAPI ethnic subgroups are identified as underserved. However, without disaggregated data, it may be difficult to understand how these nuances can account for differentiated outcomes.

There is great variability in the Asian American population, which continues to grow every year. The rapidly increasing population has experienced a growth of 30.6% since the 2010 Census and a growth of 10% from 2010 to 2013. According to the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), of the approximately 22.6 million Asian Americans, the largest ethnic groups were Chinese (5.2 million), Asian Indian (4.5 million) and Filipino (4.1 million). Together they comprised approximately 61% of the Asian American population. Other East Asian groups like Korean and Japanese comprised another 15% of the population. The newer wave of Asian immigrants and refugees, the Southeast Asians, which include Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian, comprised another 13% of the population. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander groups made up less than 1% of the U.S. population.

ENROLLMENT/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- Though AAPI college enrollment has increased by 29% since the 2000 Census, the number of Pacific Islanders enrolled in college decreased by 1,000 between the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 academic school year. What’s more, these students remain in the minority across all sectors of postsecondary education.
  - The largest representation of AAPI students is at public four-year institutions, where they make up 8% of the student population.
  - Nearly half of AAPI students are enrolled in community colleges, yet they compose only 6% of the two-year public college population.
- According to the 2015 ACS, AAPI ethnic sub-groups have varying rates of college enrollment and persistence.
  - 56% of Vietnamese, 54% of Hmong, 60% of Laotian and 60% of Cambodian adults living in the U.S. have either not enrolled in or not completed their postsecondary education (the survey excludes students who have attended some college or completed an associate’s degree).
  - In fact, 29% of Laotian, 33% of Cambodian and 31% of Hmong adults in the U.S. lack a high school diploma or the equivalent.
  - 49% of Native Hawaiian, 57% of Samoan, 58% of Tongan, and 53% of Guamanian adults 25 and older in the U.S. have not completed a two-year or four-year degree.
By contrast, over 52% of Chinese Americans, 50% of Japanese Americans and nearly 52% of Filipino Americans have earned bachelor’s degrees.

Aggregating all subgroups, 57% of AAPI males and 53% of AAPI females had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2018.

SOURCES


“American Community Survey.” United States Census Bureau.


“AAPI Community Infographics and Data.” Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, 2016.


Updated May 2020