

## RESEARCH IN BRIEF

# The Opportunity for Race-Conscious Policy and a More Equitable California

PRESENTED BY **The Education Trust—West**  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CAMPAIGN FOR COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY



AUGUST 2021

## A RACIAL RECKONING:

### ANTI-ASIAN RACISM AND EXCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

AUTHORS **ROSE ANN E. GUTIERREZ, ANNIE LE, AND ROBERT T. TERANISHI** AT THE  
INSTITUTE FOR IMMIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION, AND EDUCATION AT UCLA

THIS REPORT WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH A GENEROUS GRANT FROM THE ECMC FOUNDATION TO THE INSTITUTE FOR IMMIGRATION,  
GLOBALIZATION, AND EDUCATION AT UCLA

*The Atlanta massacre on March 16, 2021, spurred a series of solidarity statements with the broader Asian and Asian American<sup>1</sup> community from higher education institutions across the nation. While many colleges and universities have expressed their grief and support with the larger Asian and Asian American community, the same institutions have yet to reflect and reckon with their own history of exclusion, which has omitted Asian and Asian American students from larger conversations of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The purposes of this brief are to name the forms of anti-Asian racism that already exist in higher education institutions and to propose a series of recommendations to address the foreseeable forms of overt and covert anti-Asian violence that may occur when students return to campuses in fall 2021 and beyond. We recommend that institutions of higher education: create effectual task forces to think strategically about racism and xenophobia towards Asian and Asian American students; increase funding for ethnic studies, specifically, Asian American Studies Departments, Programs, and Centers; and collect and report disaggregated data on diverse subgroups of Asian and Asian American students.*

After the Atlanta massacre on March 16, 2021, higher education institutions publicly released solidarity statements to their campus communities. While these statements generally expressed grief and solidarity with the larger Asian and Asian American community, higher education institutions have yet to reckon with their shortcomings in supporting their own Asian and Asian American faculty, staff, and students. If higher education institutions are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, supporting Asians and Asian Americans must be a part of their conversations.

Yet, overt and covert anti-Asian racism and violence have long existed in higher education institutions, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated them. Since the beginning of the pandemic, international Asian students and Asian American students have been victims of bullying, online harassment, and verbal assault. Across the country, from the University of New Mexico to the University of Notre Dame and the University of Washington, Asian students have endured racist and xenophobic comments such as “Go the (expletive) home” or accusations of bringing diseases from China to the U.S. The racial tensions across the nation are palpable and bring to the forefront safety concerns that should be a priority as higher education leaders think about a strategic plan for reopening in fall 2021 and beyond.

The dominant narrative about Asian American students in higher education is that they are “model minorities” — a racialized minority who are academically successful (specifically in math) and high achieving with little to no challenges in their educational trajectory. For many years, academics have critically examined the question, “What’s wrong with a positive stereotype?” (Teranishi, 2010, p. 3) in efforts to debunk and deconstruct the model minority stereotype with empirical evidence demonstrating that this seemingly positive stereotype is still wrong in multivarious ways. Yet, this narrative about Asian American students is still prevalent amongst faculty, staff, and students in higher education institutions (Assalone & Fann, 2017). The dilemma of racial inequality in U.S. American higher education, therefore, remains for Asian and Asian American students. They are often de-minoritized or overlooked as recipients of resources designed for historically racialized minority students like Black, Indigenous, and Latina/o/x communities (Lee, 2006). Additionally, Asian American students have been politically used to undermine affirmative action and race-conscious admissions (Allred, 2007; Chin et al., 1996; Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Takagi, 1992). Below, we describe three ways higher education institutions still need to reckon with Asian and Asian American students’ experiences of anti-Asian racism at colleges and universities.

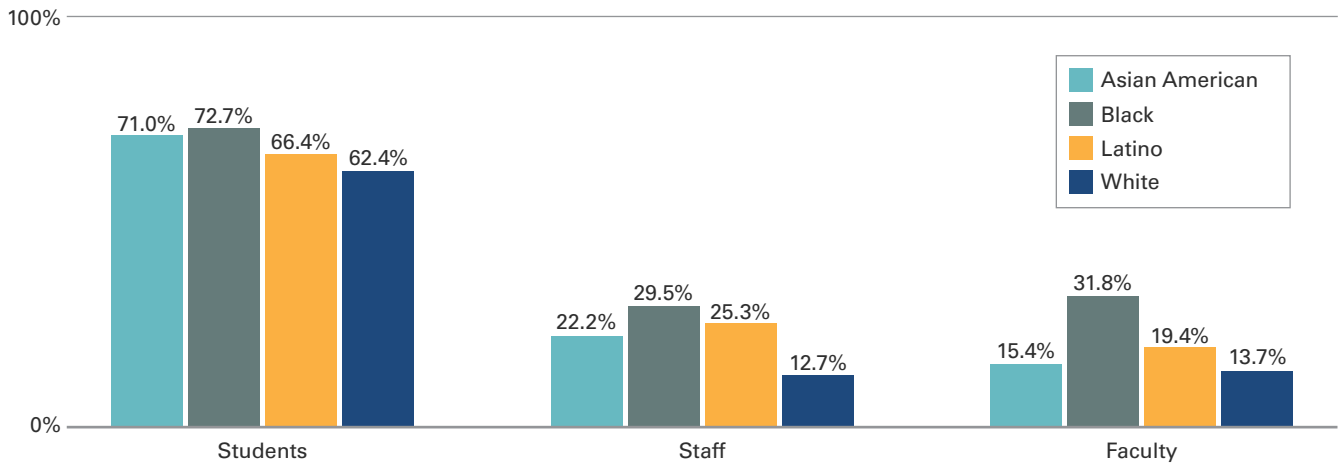
## HOSTILE CAMPUS CLIMATE AND ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a hostile environment existed on college campuses for Asian and Asian American students. Negative stereotyping about race and ethnicity has affected aspects of student life, such as racist-themed parties. For example, at Duke University in 2013, the Kappa Sigma fraternity hosted an Asian-themed party: students in attendance culturally appropriated Asian culture by wearing rice hats, putting on an inflatable sumo wrestling outfit, and dressing up in kimonos with chopsticks in their hair while mimicking stereotypical Asian accents. Although Duke University suspended the Kappa Sigma fraternity, its institutional response was the outcome of student activism and protests led by the Duke Asian Students Association. With the current increase in widespread racial violence against Asian individuals — from New York City to Oakland — ensuring a healthy campus climate also means thinking about how Asian and Asian American students may feel increasingly physically unsafe when returning to campus. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to create an inclusive campus climate that is conducive to the academic, professional, and personal well-being of all students — yet they have often failed, historically and currently, to create this environment for Asian and Asian American students.

*Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a hostile environment existed on college campuses for Asian and Asian American students. With the current increase in widespread racial violence against Asian individuals, higher education institutions are responsible for creating an inclusive campus climate conducive to all students’ well-being.*

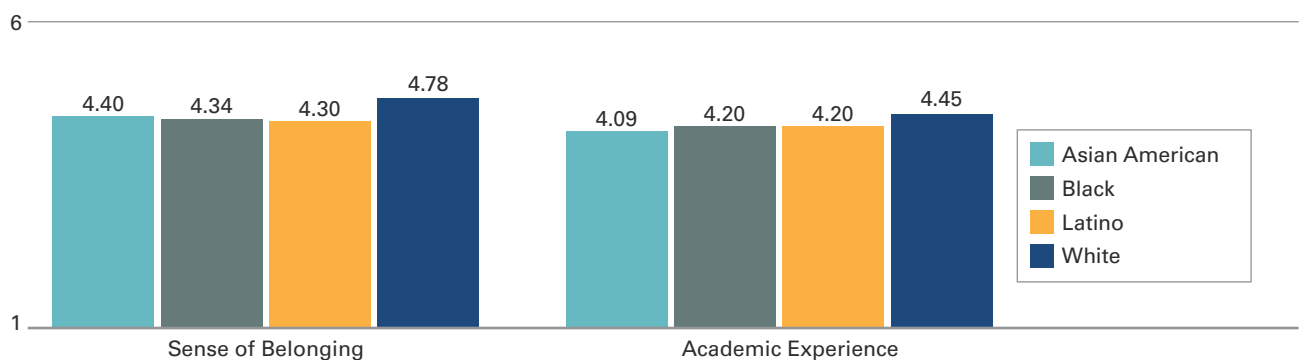
In 2016, the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE), housed under the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and its former research members published a report on the racialized experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at UCLA. The report concluded that 71 percent of the Asian American student population at UCLA (one-third of the total student body) often heard negative and/or stereotypical messaging about their race and/or ethnicity (Figure 1); they also experienced low levels of sense of belonging on campus (Figure 2), like their Black and Latina/o/x peers (Nguyen et al., 2016). Moreover, when they interacted with staff, Asian American students were significantly more likely to hear negative and/or stereotypical comments than their White peers. These findings confirm previous studies demonstrating that Asian American students “experience more harassment and fewer positive cross-racial interactions and conversations across difference when compared to other Students of Color and White students” (Johnston & Yeung, 2014, p. 151).

**FIGURE 1: Proportion of UCLA Students Reporting Hearing Students, Staff, or Faculty Expressing Negative/Stereotypical Views about Racial/Ethnic Groups (2016)**



Source: *The Racialized Experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander Students: An Examination of Campus Racial Climate at the University of California, Los Angeles*, by B. M. D. Nguyen, M. H. Nguyen, J. Chan, and R. T. Teranishi, 2016.

**FIGURE 2: Proportion of UCLA Students Reporting a Sense of Belonging and Satisfaction with Academic Experience (2016)**



Source: *The Racialized Experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander Students: An Examination of Campus Racial Climate at the University of California, Los Angeles*, by B. M. D. Nguyen, M. H. Nguyen, J. Chan, and R. T. Teranishi, 2016.

Note: Scale is from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree.

## **EXCLUSION OF ASIAN AMERICANS FROM DIVERSITY INITIATIVES**

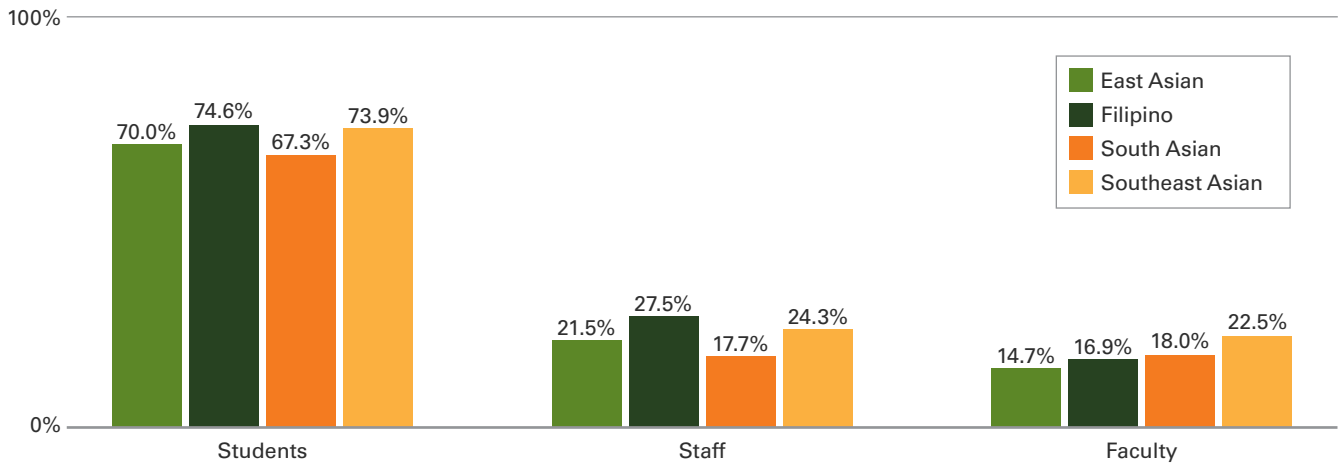
Higher education institutions frequently exclude Asian and Asian American students from what they count as their racialized and marginalized population on campus, despite including Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, and Pacific Islander students (Osajima, 1995). Although diversity initiatives signal an institutional commitment to recognizing the contributions of historically racialized minorities to the diversity of campus life (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), Asian American students tend to be excluded as a relevant group (Sumida & Nomura, 1992). Their omission reinforces the idea that Asian and Asian American students are “model minorities.” That stereotype is perpetuated as numerical representation of Asian and Asian American students increases at highly selective institutions. Institutions tout the success of those increases and do not see them as marginalized enough to deserve of institutional support (Lee, 2006, 2008). Furthermore, this omission has led to the historical exclusion of Asian American students from minority services and programs in higher education (Lee, 2006). For example, during the mid-1970s through the 1980s, administrators from the University of California, Berkeley amended the institution’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) policies to no longer consider Asian American students (except Filipinos) eligible for outreach and support programs targeted at historically racialized and socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants (Lee, 2008; Takagi, 1992). This modification of EOP policy resulted in a decline in Asian American admissions rates at Berkeley despite a continued increase in the Asian American applicant pool.

## **BIASES THAT ASIANS ARE ALL THE SAME**

Higher education institutions must acknowledge that Asians and Asian Americans are a highly diverse group who range in ethnic background, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, immigration generation and status, and cultural practices (Teranishi & Kim, 2017). Further disaggregating the previously mentioned data CARE collected into four subgroups based on ethnicity and region – East Asian, Filipino, South Asian, and Southeast Asian – highlights a richer and more complex portrait of how Asian American students experience campus climate (Figure 3 and 4). For example, Southeast Asian students’ perceptions of campus climate were significantly less favorable in comparison to their peers, feeling the lowest sense of belonging on campus (Figure 4). A Vietnamese student attributed possible reasons for these sentiments as “misrepresentation, low understanding of model minority myth, [and] low understanding of differences between Asian American ethnic groups” (Nguyen et al., 2016, p. 14). This statement signals the need to recognize the varied experiences of the Asian American community.

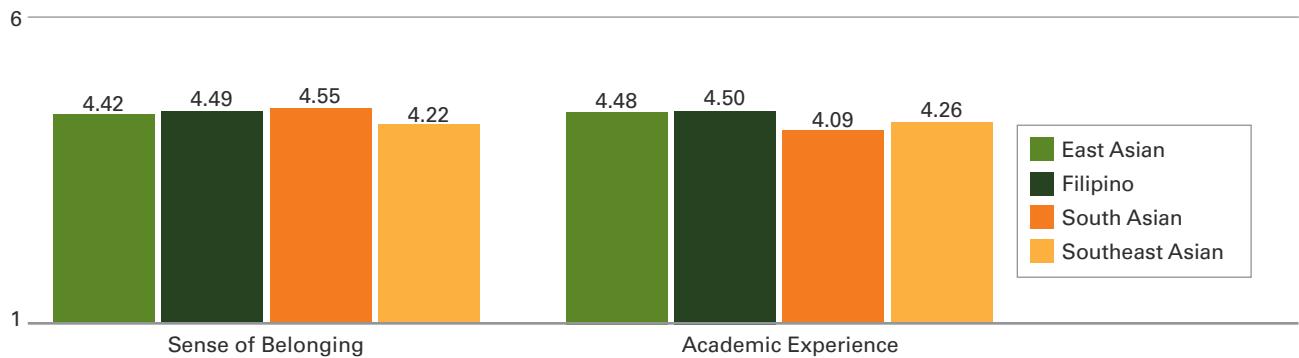
*“I would say administration and other entities say they serve the Hmong community... but, in reality, whether or not they actually do is another story. [They are] not necessarily providing the support that they say they are,” (Nguyen et al., 2016, p.14). – Hmong American Student*

**FIGURE 3: Proportion of UCLA Students Reporting Hearing Students, Staff, or Faculty Expressing Negative/Stereotypical Views about Racial/Ethnic Groups, by Subethnic Groups (2016)**



Source: *The Racialized Experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander Students: An Examination of Campus Racial Climate at the University of California, Los Angeles*, by B. M. D. Nguyen, M. H. Nguyen, J. Chan, and R. T. Teranishi, 2016.

**FIGURE 4: Sense of Belonging and Race/Ethnicity Being Respected on Campus, by Subethnic Groups**



Source: *The Racialized Experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander Students: An Examination of Campus Racial Climate at the University of California, Los Angeles*, by B. M. D. Nguyen, M. H. Nguyen, J. Chan, and R. T. Teranishi, 2016.

Note: Scale is from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree.

Institutional data often aggregate international Asian students and Asian American students within a single, larger Asian category. Aggregated data masks the reality of low-income, refugee, and undocumented Asian and Asian American students. For example, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans live well below the U.S. average poverty line (37.8 percent, 29.3 percent, and 18.5 percent, respectively; CARE, 2008). Additionally, about 25 percent of undocumented students enrolled in U.S. higher education identify as Asian American and Pacific Islander (Feldblum et al., 2021). Yet, we rarely hear their stories within the contemporary undocumented narrative. Within these broader categories, it remains unclear what the needs of specific subethnic communities are and how to appropriately support populations of these groups on campus.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface long-held racist and xenophobic beliefs toward Asian and Asian American communities. Holding up a mirror to confront the historical legacies of anti-Asian racism and exclusion that continue to pervade higher education institutions is an initial step to addressing the problem. With discussions surrounding the physical reopening of colleges and universities, disregarding Asian and Asian American students as a part of diversity, equity, and inclusion discussions is at best negligent and at worst oppressive. Below, we propose three recommendations for higher education institutions in California to actively combat anti-Asian racism.

- 1. Go beyond listening spaces—act. Create a task force to think strategically about responding to racism and xenophobia towards Asian and Asian American students:** Involve staff and students on this task force — not just faculty. Pay students with a stipend to recognize the emotional and intellectual labor of students, including the trauma experienced as a result of current events of racial violence. Add accountability measures to evaluate the strategic responses of the task force.
- 2. Increase the funding for Asian American Studies Departments, Programs, and Centers, alongside other ethnic studies areas, in addition to providing funding for faculty and doctoral students who are conducting interdisciplinary research that works toward dismantling anti-Asian racism:** As of the release of this brief, 25 states have introduced bills to restrict or limit how educators can discuss racism and sexism in the classroom. It is essential for California leaders to counteract this trend by actively supporting ethnic studies programs, which have been designed to critically examine intersecting and layered forms of racism, sexism, and classism across all historically racialized groups. California has a rich history of ethnic studies departments and programs born out of student activism, such as the Third World Liberation Front of the 1960s — a coalition between Asian American, Black, Indigenous, and Latina/o/x students — who protested to create ethnic studies departments and programs on colleges and universities in California. Higher education institutions should uplift scholarship about Asian American history to the wider campus community by financially investing in and disseminating this research to learn about Asians and Asian Americans’ significant contributions to shaping U.S. American history.
- 3. Collect and report disaggregated data on the diverse subgroups of Asian and Asian American students:** Disaggregate international Asian students by country of origin and Asian American students by subethnic groups to understand and address appropriately each community’s specific needs. The disaggregation of data should be supplemented by opportunities to learn about explaining data disaggregation as a civil rights issue and its significance in critical policy decisions about the growing Asian and Asian American community in the state of California.



## REFERENCES

- Allred, N. (2007). Asian Americans and affirmative action: From yellow peril to model minority and back again. *Asian American Law Journal*, 14(1), 57-84.
- Assalone, A. E., & Fann, A. (2017). Understanding the influence of model minority stereotypes on Asian American community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(7), 422-435.
- Chin, G. J., Cho, S., Kang, J., & Wu, F. (1996). Beyond self-interest: Asian Pacific Americans toward a community of justice: A policy analysis of affirmative action. *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal*, 4, 129-162.
- Feldblum, M., Hubbard, S., Lim, A., Penichet-Paul, C., & Siegel, H. (2021). *Undocumented students in higher education: How many students are in U.S. colleges and universities, and who are they?*The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/report-undocumented-students-in-higher-education-how-many-students-are-in-u-s-colleges-and-universities-and-who-are-they/>
- Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2007). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. *New directions for student services*, 2007(120), 7-24.
- Johnston, M. P., & Yeung, F. F. (2014). Asian American and campus climate: Investigating group differences around a racial incident. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 51(2), 143-156.
- Lee, S. S. (2006). Over-represented and de-minoritized: The racialization of Asian Americans in higher education. *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 2(2), 1-16.
- Lee, S. S. (2008). The de-minoritization of Asian Americans: A historical examination of the representations of Asian Americans in affirmative action admissions policies at the University of California. *Asian American Law Journal*, 15(129), 129-152.
- National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE). (2008). *Facts, not fiction: Setting the record straight*. The College Board. <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/professionals/asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-facts-not-fiction.pdf>
- Nguyen, B. M. D., Nguyen, M. H., Chan, J., & Teranishi, R. T. (2016). *The racialized experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander students: An examination of campus racial climate at the University of California, Los Angeles*. National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573725.pdf>
- Osajima, K. (1995). Racial politics and the invisibility of Asian Americans in higher education. *Educational Foundations*, 9(1), 35-53.
- Poon, O. A., & Segoshi, M. S. (2018). The racial mascot speakers: A critical race discourse analysis of Asian Americans and Fisher vs. University of Texas. *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(1), 235-267.
- Sumida, S. H., & Nomura, G. M. (1992). University of Michigan. In G. Y. Okihiro, & L. C. Lee (Eds.), *East of California: New perspectives on Asian American studies* (pp. 113-126). Asian American Studies Program, Cornell University.
- Takagi, D. Y. (1992). *The retreat from race: Asian-American admissions and racial politics*. Rutgers University Press. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED361459>
- Teranishi, R. T. (2010). *Asians in the ivory towers: Dilemmas in racial inequality in American higher education*. Teachers College Press. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/teth.12148>
- Teranishi, R. T., & Kim, V. (2017). The changing demographic landscape of the nation: Perspectives on college opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. *The Educational Forum*, 81(2), 204-216.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 We use the term Asians and Asian Americans in this brief to historically situate the distinct racialized experiences of individuals with origins from Asia in the context of discussions surrounding race and racism. We separate the two terms “Asians” and “Asian Americans” to make a distinction that not all Asian individuals identify with the political panethnic identity of “Asian American.” We do not use Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Asian Pacific Islander (API), and Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) to avoid erasing the experiences of Pacific Islanders within a panethnic identity and reproducing a narrative of them as a homogeneous group in the conversation of race and racism. We do use the term Asian American and Pacific Islander if previous data sources we cite have used the term.