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**Authors**

Wagoner, Richard L.  
Lin, Anthony S.

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Research Article

# Retention and Matriculation Obstacles and Opportunities for Southeast Asian Community College Transfer Students

Richard L. Wagoner and Anthony S. Lin

## Abstract

This qualitative case study of twenty Southeast Asian students at a flagship public research university suggests that it is illogical to view them as the “model minority” so often described in the literature. Their experience is not the same as that of students from other Asian ethnicities. They struggle with similar issues that challenge other students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the students in this study did discuss two issues that might be more unique to them: immigrant status and the importance of the ethnically based student organization as a means of support and belonging.

Southeast Asian Transfer Students at UCLA:  
Exploring Effective Support, Retention, and Graduation

## Introduction

As the work of others has made clear (Nakanishi, 1995; Teranishi, 2002b; Teranishi et al., 2004), little of concrete value is revealed in studies focused on the higher education experience of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) students without exploring individually the different ethnicities that comprise the larger category. Most importantly, it is misguided to consider AAPI students in the aggregate as members of a “model” or “super” minority group (Nakanishi, 1995; Teranishi, 2002b). When one does disaggregate by geographic or ethnic origin the experience of Southeast Asian students is remarkably different than that of Chinese

American, Korean American, and Japanese American students. In this article, the term *Southeast Asian* refers to individuals who come from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and share a political history with one another along with the United States; or whose families come from these countries, most of them arriving in this country as refugees or who are children of refugees (Um, 2003). Although past research has documented the college choice process of AAPI students, little work has been done to understand the college experience of AAPI students as a whole and the experience of Southeast Asian students in particular.

The previous work of scholars suggests that on average Southeast Asian students tend to choose lower status higher education institutions as their route to a baccalaureate degree (Teranishi et al., 2004). Of particular interest to us as researchers for this project is the experience of those Southeast Asian students who chose to attend a community college before they transferred to a more selective university. This enrollment pattern is particularly important in the state of California for two reasons: California has one of the largest Southeast Asian populations in the United States, and the state's higher education system, as mandated by the California Master Plan of 1960, relies on public community colleges to serve as the entryway to state universities for a large percentage of its students. The successful transfer of students from community colleges is a key policy concern for leaders of the state's three public higher education sectors and its legislature. In March 2009, the University of California (UC) Office of the President called for a taskforce with representatives from each of the public higher education systems in the state to study transfer issues and devise new policies and practices that could lead to higher levels of transfer and increased success of transfer students. The importance of increased baccalaureate attainment through successful transfer from community colleges for the state legislature is witnessed by a number of policy briefs and reports on the topic during the last few years, with one in particular that received national attention (Shulock and Moore, 2007).

Although there is a growing body of research focused on the experience of community college transfer students (Laanan, 2001; Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006), there is still a need to explore the experiences of smaller ethnic groups within the larger racial and ethnic categories typically employed in most studies (Yeh, 2002;

Nishimoto and Hagedorn, 2003). This study fills part of this gap for transfer students from several Southeast Asian ethnic communities.

### **Related Literature**

Research related to the successful transfer from a community college to a four-year institution or to the pathways to baccalaureate completion and how that research relates to Southeast Asian students suggests a paradox. On the one hand, studies that have focused on race and ethnicity as a variable consistently show Asian students as being at an advantage when compared to other groups (Hagedorn, Cypers, and Lester, 2008) or at least their equals (Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006). On the other hand, these same studies universally find that social class in one form or another is always a significant factor in student success, with students from lower social-class backgrounds at a disadvantage when compared to individuals from more privileged circumstances (Hurtado et al., 1997; Eggleston and Laanan, 2001; Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hagedorn, Cypers, and Lester, 2008). If both of these findings were true, then one would have to assume that if Asian students are uniformly successful, then they must all have similar socioeconomic and social-class status. The problematical nature of the “model minority” myth offers an explanation of the paradox.

For the purposes of this study we believe two pieces of scholarship offer a theoretical and conceptual explanation for the paradox. First, Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) suggest that the racialization of Asians in educational research has led to two distinct forms of stereotyping: Asians as a model minority and Asians as foreign-born outsiders, or non-Americans. The former type implies that Asian students are successful, rugged individuals who do not seek or need assistance, while the latter assumes Asian students are not an integral part of U.S. society. These two conceptions need not be mutually exclusive; they do suggest poles at either end of a continuum, one that does not allow AAPI students the same considerations as other student populations. Directly related to this concept is that of the “double unconsciousness” AAPI students face in the American education system (Chang and Kiang, 2002, 155). As the model minority they, at the very least, do not need assistance because they are so successful or, on a more disturbing level, because

they represent an “invading horde” (Ng, Lee, and Pak, 2007, 95). As perpetual outsiders, AAPI students are ignored simply because of their outsider status.

The preceding conceptualizations of AAPI students offer a powerful lens through which to view the paradoxical nature of the student success literature cited. As our study focuses on the state of California, it is necessary to understand the general demographics of the Southeast Asian population there. According to the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (2005, app. B, 50-51), in 2000 the Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong populations in the state of California were lower than average in regard to per capita income, median household income, and homeownership when compared to all Asians as a group or to the entire population. As well, these groups also were above the average, both the state as a whole and all Asians, in members with less than a high school diploma, living both below the federal poverty line and below 200 percent of that line, receiving public assistance, with limited English proficiency, and living in a linguistically isolated household. Based on these statistics the Southeast Asian population in California not only inhabits a lower socioeconomic stratum than the state’s population as a whole, but also its aggregate Asian population. These demographic statistics reiterate previous demographic studies of the Asian population in California (Teranishi, 2002b) and the nation as a whole (Hune, 2002).

The potential outcomes and implications for this bifurcated socioeconomic status and these educational outcomes have been well documented. Specifically in reference to different Asian student populations in California, Teranishi (2002a) demonstrated that the intersection of ethnicity, social class, and immigration between Chinese and Filipino high school students had a significant impact on school climate and educational outcomes. Research has also shown that the residential patterns, or ethnic enclaves, of Hmong and Vietnamese families can have a negative impact on the postsecondary aspirations and outcomes of students from these populations, outcomes that are tied directly to language, culture, socioeconomic measures, and immigration status (Teranishi, 2004). In a broad review of related literature, Yeh (2002) indicates that multiple factors including language, immigration status, socioeconomic status (including various measures of social and cultural capital), inadequate academic preparation and institutional

support, and the wide intragroup socioeconomic gap of Asians contribute to Southeast Asian students being at educational risk in higher education. As previously mentioned, the wider transfer and college success literature also demonstrates that measures of socioeconomic status are universally related to successful transfer (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001; Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn, Cypers, and Lester, 2008) and general academic success (Hurtado et al., 1997; Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

Although it may appear that the likelihood of academic success for Southeast Asian students is severely challenged because of the factors presented here, there are a number of programs and support services that have been demonstrated to increase success. Proper counseling and academic advice is one area that undoubtedly increases any student's chances for obtaining a degree (McDonough, 1997; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person, 2006). When counseling and academic advice are combined in a more comprehensive support program for transfer students who are transitioning to a four-year institution, the odds that those students will succeed also increase (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001). Academic honors programs at community colleges have also been shown to increase student engagement and transfer success (Kane, 2001). Although these programs and practices can benefit any student, intervention programs that are begun by students from underrepresented groups, including those from specific ethnicities and lower socioeconomic backgrounds have proven effective in supporting student agency, persistence, and success (Maldonado et al., 2005).

## Methods

Given the dearth of studies that have focused on Southeast Asian transfer students, our conception of this study encompasses two levels and, therefore, draws on two methodological traditions. From the first perspective this is an explorative qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009) that relies primarily on data obtained from semistructured interviews (Seidman, 1998) with current transfer students of Southeast Asian descent who were enrolled as undergraduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) during the spring of 2009. A case study is a valid form because this project investigates a contemporary phenomena that is highly contextualized and complex and one over which we as researchers have no control (Yin, 2009). In this sense,

then, our research site offers the boundary for our case; Southeast Asian transfer students are at many institutions, but we chose to define and delimit the boundary of this exploratory study using a single institution. Because the study is limited to one institution, results are not intended to be representative of all institutions. The unit of analysis for the study is the individual student, not the institution. The second aspect of our conceptualization of the study rises from the unit of analysis. Because individual students are the unit of analysis of the study and we are most concerned with their lived experiences, we also conceive of this project as a phenomenological study (Barritt et al., 1985; Patton, 2002). Consistent with case studies and phenomenological studies, we were interested in gaining a better understanding of (1) how and why students chose transfer as their path to a baccalaureate degree, (2) how they were able to successfully transfer from a community college, and (3) how they were able to make the transition from the community college to UCLA. As we consider this an exploratory phenomenological case study, these three broad topics served as the research questions that guided the research.

We conducted twenty student interviews that included students who are of Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotian, Mien, and Cambodian descent. The gender of the research participants is evenly divided but ethnicity is not. Three-quarters of our participants are Vietnamese. As such we have chosen to discuss the Southeast Asian student experience as opposed to the specific experience of each of these ethnic groups; also given the small numbers of non-Vietnamese students in our sample, we will not identify individual students by ethnicity to help protect anonymity. Although we do realize that in this article we call for disaggregating larger racial and ethnic groups and that we have more than one ethnic group in our sample, we feel that grouping all of our participants as Southeast Asian is a first step in better understanding the experiences of students from this geographic and political region while not jeopardizing the identity of any of our participants. All names used are pseudonyms. The ages of our research participants ranged from twenty to twenty-five years. Although it has consistently been reported that age is a significant factor related to successful transfer, with students of traditional age (18–24) more likely to successfully transfer (Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006), our study does not address that phenomena given the homogenous grouping of our sample.

However, the sample of participants in this study does offer insight on the experience of a well-defined age range, one that includes students who are most likely to transfer from a community college and complete a bachelor's degree.

Being aware that there are highly organized Southeast Asian student organizations on the UCLA campus, we began our recruitment process by posting e-mails through these organizations in order to solicit participants. After initial contacts were made through these e-mail solicitations, we used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. Specifically, we asked each of the initial participants if they knew any other students who would be interested in participating in the study.

Each participant was interviewed once during the spring of 2009. These semistructured interviews (Seidman, 1998) were recorded for later transcription and ranged between thirty and sixty minutes. We created an interview protocol or outline to help guide the interview and elicit responses that would help us understand the factors that culminated in the students' successful transition to UCLA. Because these were semistructured interviews, we also frequently followed up and explored interviewee responses in order to increase the richness and depth of the interview data. Although we did review institutional documents and Web sites to triangulate findings from interviews, we did so only to verify that programs, policies, and practices that the participants mentioned did exist. As discussed earlier, we conceptualize this as an exploratory phenomenological case particularly focused on the lived experience of students; therefore, we did not conduct extensive analysis of artifacts. The lived experiences of students and what those experiences reveal about policy issues were the primary focus of the study.

Data analysis progressed through several steps after the interview transcriptions were completed and each of us had reviewed the transcripts. The first step in reducing and refining the data was for us to agree upon an initial data-coding scheme based upon our primary reading the data. This primary data scheme produced the broad thematic and conceptual categories that are used to organize the findings section and included (1) institutional policies and practices at community colleges and UCLA, (2) state-level policies, (3) federal-level policies, (4) personal characteristics, and (5) the impact of family. Our codes then stem from an inductive process and should be categorized as *etic* in nature (Patton, 2002).



That is, we as analysts created the codes given themes we initially recognized in the interview transcripts and from our interest as researchers regarding how the lived experience of Southeast Asian students could illuminate and inform policy issues at the institutional, state, and federal levels. From this initial coding scheme the interview data was subjected to four successive rounds of recoding and reduction to arrive at the final data presented here. After each round of coding and reduction we cross-checked our use of codes with each other to ensure consistency (Creswell, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## Findings

In keeping with the theme of this issue and the general focus of *AAPI Nexus*, our analysis focused as much as possible on policy-related issues, and although the final two categories may not at first seem related to policy, we believe that their connections to policy will become clear in our discussion. As is always the case with this type of qualitative analysis, some topics overlap our categories; however, we have attempted to present our findings in as logical a manner as possible.

### **Institutional Policies and Practice**

The students involved in this study discussed a number of institutional policies and practices that affected their college careers. In some instances the discussion revolved around the importance of individual employees of an institution and specific programs initiated by the institution. But our discussions also focused on extracurricular programs and organizations, the relative size of institutions, and the perceptions of other students.

Most of our participants mentioned at least one specific individual that had some influence on their education. Counselors were mentioned more often than any other employee, and for the most part our participants' opinions of them were favorable. One student who clearly had spent a great deal of time interacting with counselors at her community college offered a nuanced appraisal of counselors and the services they offer:

I sought out counselors, and when a counselor said something that I didn't like, I would find another counselor, and I did that a lot. Until I found out that one question could have multiple answers, which meant that not everyone knew the right

answer. I felt that the best counselors were those that helped disadvantaged students. I believe that this was because they dealt with students from all different backgrounds. For example, programs like the Student Success and Retention Services Center have great counselors, and not all students get to see them.

We find it encouraging that this student experienced what she felt was the most effective counseling in a program that was designed for disadvantaged students. Certainly the ideas of human variability and the complex nature of transfer and transfer issues are evident in her statement as well. Frequently there is not one “right” answer for transfer-related questions as each case can be highly contextual; therefore, it is understandable that this student received different answers to the same question.

In one notable case transfer counseling was not a matter of only a one-on-one interaction between a student and counselor but a required course at a community college. According to the student this course focused on career aspirations and their related educational requirements, transfer issues, and undergraduate housing options among other topics and created a specific and concrete plan for each student. In a case of what we assume to be understatement he concludes, “I think it was pretty helpful.” At least one student referred to an individual counselor that was of great help for transfer. “There was a counselor there that I really, really liked and I think that she really reached out to me too. . . . She helped me edit my personal statement and I went back to her a lot of times. . . . She is also the one that helped me plan my classes.” This was an admirable effort made by the counselor, but our appreciation of the effort increased with this final detail: “And the thing is, she was on maternity leave.”

Unfortunately not all student experiences with counselors were as positive as the one described. But even in cases in which there is not as strong a connection between the student and counselor, the student is able to find some value in the interaction. “Yeah, I see a counselor, but I don’t know. . . I talk to her but I don’t think she really understands. I don’t know, mostly I take classes that I plan. . . . And I usually meet with her to confirm that everything I do is correct. The guidance is what I offer myself, and she is the one that checks it.”

Beyond interactions with counselors our interviewees mentioned the importance of a “mentor” in their college experience. It

is not possible to present a composite of the role mentors played except to say that in one way or another mentors mentioned by our participants offered specific help or guidance at least once during a time of need. In one case it was a connection to campus employment, in others it was the example and encouragement of a slightly older peer. In one case a mentor from a community college campus was available to listen. “[My mentor] helped me on days when I would say, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing here, this is all new to me.’” When students in this study mentioned mentors, it was in this type of isolated and specific sense and not necessarily based upon any specific mentor program initiated by an institution.

The level of academic challenge and preparation at community colleges was a topic that participants discussed. The majority of these comments revolved around the idea that courses at the community college, with the exception of honors programs, in the opinion of students had not adequately prepared them for academic expectations at UCLA. One student was very direct in her assessment, “I kind of felt like [community college faculty] were babying me, and they kept on saying, ‘You have to prepare yourself; you are lucky that I am providing this to help you.’ But at the same time, it was not helping me, because it was too easy.” Many students voiced similar concerns; they believed that they were not as prepared for courses at UCLA as they could have been. More than one-quarter of the students mentioned this, and in every case they pointed to the rigor and requirements of courses at their community colleges as not being challenging enough given what they experienced at UCLA. The only exception to this was voiced by students who had attended a community college that had an honors program that was directly articulated with enrollment at UCLA or the UC system. Although most of the students did not participate in such a program, one who did stated unequivocally, “The honors program is probably the reason why I’m at UCLA and doing well.”

Extracurricular activities, particularly student government and ethnic-related student organizations, were described as important by nearly every student that we interviewed. Although several students mentioned being involved in some form of extracurricular activity while attending a community college, one in particular was very pointed in his perspective and motivations:

When I got to [the community college], it was like the second week and I joined student government, and I said to myself, "I have to branch out if I don't want to get left behind. I want to stand out in the crowd, I want these UCs to see that I am a different person now and I want to do something different."

For this student, participating in extracurricular activities had a very specific purpose, one that appears to be motivating and, given his successful transfer, effective.

For the majority of students it was participation in ethnically focused student groups and programs at UCLA that were mentioned as making a positive difference. Nearly all of these programs centered on Southeast Asian student identity:

I feel like student activities at UCLA are really helpful. There is the Vietnamese Student Union and SEA CLEAR [Southeast Asian Campus Learning Education and Retention Project], and they are a mentoring program, student counseling, peer counseling, where you schedule appointments with peer counselors and they help you with planning your classes and making sure that you tell your peer counselors what is going on with you and your life. And that helped me out.

The sentiments of this student were shared by most. In order to make a successful transition at UCLA nearly all of our participants indicated that an organization that helped them maintain their own ethnic identity and that connected them with others that they felt comfortable discussing their questions and challenges with made a positive difference while they established themselves at UCLA.

One student was adamant in her belief in the value of programs that help transfer students with their transition to UCLA:

We feel like we are just thrown into this hectic and chaotic environment. I would ask him [Chancellor Block] to create some more programs or clubs for transfer students to adjust. It's not enough for them to just give us tips and advice, we need constant support and I feel that the transfer community is just struggling a lot right now. Just to help out with the transition.

This student refers to the difficulty that all transfer students can have in making the transition from a community college.

The first major program that focuses on the transition from the community college to the university for most students is ori-

entation. Many students also commented on the relative effectiveness of the program. The importance of orientation was reflected in one student's comments that a lack of specific information about academic policies had added to problems she experienced in her first term at UCLA. "I wish it [orientation] had given us more information on class drop deadlines, and how not to fall into academic probation [AP] and avoiding subject to dismissal [STD]. Mainly give us a heads up on how the university works academically." Although this student's experience is not representative of our study, her experience should not be ignored. As a result of not understanding these academic policies, she was put on probation, which has affected her self-confidence and experience at UCLA, including changing majors:

I changed my major from chemistry to anthropology because I feel that chemistry is a very challenging major and with the fear of being dismissed I don't want to risk taking those difficult classes. . . . I've also had to change my career goal of dentistry and I'm still deciding what I want to do with my life. I honestly feel that if I had been informed ahead of time about STD, AP, drop deadlines and the university's policies in general, that I would have tried a lot harder, and push myself to avoid doing poorly during my first quarter.

Again, this student's experience is not representative of this study, but it very clearly illustrates the difficulty any student can face if he or she is not aware of academic policies and how they can affect academic goals.

The problems most students discussed relating to orientation had to do with scheduling, the fact that much of the information discussed was either irrelevant or available from other convenient sources, particularly the UCLA Web site, and that transfer students are blocked from registering for classes until they have participated in an orientation session. One student's experience illustrates these problems:

[Orientation] was a waste of time. It was required and allowed us to sign us up to classes. And when I went to orientation, I felt like I knew everything from the Web site. All the information that was discussed I already knew so that didn't help. Also, by the time we signed up for classes, all the ones I wanted to sign up for were taken. I didn't get into any of them

at the time so I complained to all my counselors and they suggested that I e-mail the professors and in the end I got into all my classes. What's even worse is that my final was also due that day. So I had three papers due and then I had to be up the next morning at 7 a.m. for the transfer orientation.

The final issue in this section draws several earlier points together. In analyzing the data it became clear to us that in many instances there is a stigma attached to community colleges, transfer, and transfer students. Several students discussed a personal stigma that for them was palpable. Different students described this stigma in different ways, but this student's perception is representative of the whole.

[Transfer students] are kind of seen as the guys who couldn't make it the first time. And I get a lot of that feeling from the freshmen. . . . I don't feel any dumber, any intellectually inferior at all. . . . In general we are looked down on as the dumber people, who got in easier through the junior college system. But I guess this kind of fuels me, you know, to not to suck.

As evidenced in his final comment this student has used this perception of transfer students as a form of motivation, but other students only referred to the stigma as a challenge and not something that had a motivating element.

The perceptions of family members can also reveal this stigma. Several actively opposed a student's enrollment. Danny (age 21) shared how difficult and circuitous the experience of attending a community college could be for a family:

My family did not want me to go to a community college because it was kind of like shameful, and how it was not a real college. But now that I've gone through it, and now I'm at UCLA, they realized how wrong that was, and how much money they saved. So now they pushed my little brother to a community college because of what I went through. And because my sister went straight to a UC and you know the cost was humongous, but you still go to a better school. I think it's easier to go to a better school from a JC than straight out of high school. So I mean, before they were the exact opposite, except now they are now completely converted.

As Danny's experience illustrates, the families in this study struggled with one of the most ubiquitous ideas that all American fami-

lies face regarding college attendance: prestige versus cost. One form or another of this struggle was discussed by a majority of our interviewees.

### **State-Level Policy**

The two most significant policy-related issues illuminated in this study, financial aid and immigrant status, have connections to state- and federal-level policies, and we will discuss them in the following section. However, there are two other state-level issues that we will discuss here. The absence of a common academic calendar between UCLA and most community colleges in California was an issue discussed by several students. Currently in California more than 90 percent of the state's community colleges operate on a semester basis, while UCLA operates on a quarter calendar. That means that transfer students not only have to adjust to a new environment but also must adjust to having only twelve weeks to complete a course instead of eighteen. Although professors do adjust the amount of content in a course with a quarter schedule given its shorter duration, the pace at which major assignments and examinations come due must be accelerated. One student referred to this as a matter of having to develop better "time management," but at the same time he mentioned a roommate who had transferred from one of the few California community colleges that does operate on a quarter calendar who did not need to make any such adjustment. Another student expressed the sentiments of most students who commented on this difference when she said, "The quarter system seems to be a lot faster-paced when in comparison to the semester system at my community college. . . . Getting behind even one day sets you back a lot and I felt that I was constantly playing catch-up throughout the quarter." It is understandable if some people might not see much importance to this point, but it is representative of the numerous adjustments that transfer students must make, adjustments students who begin their careers at UCLA never face.

The relative size of institutions was the second issue that students frequently mentioned that state policy might be able to have some impact upon; although, given the current crippling level of budget constraint in the state, there may be no relief in sight. Regardless of the ability to materially change the size of colleges and universities in the state, the experience of students does indicate that this is another element of transition that students who begin at

UCLA do not have to contend with in the middle of their academic careers. One student gives a clear example of the scale of the difference, while noting the varied attendance patterns of community college students and course scheduling at those institutions: “At [my community college] we have around 29,000 students attend, but not all at one time, but at UCLA, we can have that many students on campus in one day.” For another student the important difference wasn’t necessarily the relative size of the campus, but the fact that the increased size of UCLA made it much more difficult to network:

[My community college] was my little baby, but I still can’t say that about UCLA, because maybe it’s only my second quarter on this campus, and it’s so big and I haven’t effectively incorporated office hours into my schedule. I just feel like another student ID here, I don’t feel humanized or at least I don’t feel like I’m recognized by UCLA as I was at the community college.

It is worth noting, however, that one student noted a potential advantage to the size of UCLA:

Yeah I have a community; I have so many friends here who do the networking and volunteering. In my wildest dreams in community college, I never thought I would have this many friends. I really appreciate this sense of belonging, which is something that I did not have at [my community college]. . . . It was shocking that I could make friends that I could truly relate to.

So, for better or worse, transfer students face challenges and opportunities related to the differing sizes of their community colleges and UCLA.

### **Federal Policy**

Our overriding impression of study participants is that a majority of them had a rather sophisticated understanding of the financial-aid system, including the importance of full-time attendance to receiving maximum benefits, and used this knowledge to their advantage. Our analysis also leaves little doubt that those students who depended on aid also went out of their way to budget and stretch that money as far as possible, which may have a connection to immigrant status for some of them. At the state level two points are particularly important. First, several interviewees stated that they did not have to pay tuition while attending com-



munity college because of the CalGrants program that waives all fees for students with sufficient financial need. This benefit alone influenced some students to attend community college. From a policy perspective this finding provides evidence that state grant-aid programs are having a positive impact on this student population. The second point is related to the first and indicates that California's low tuition and low financial aid policy, at least for the participants in this study, also produces benefits. That is, students who qualified for aid also discussed having additional grant money available to help with other living expenses after paying tuition and fees, which is an indication to us that despite the low fees at California community colleges, those students who maintain a full-time schedule and apply for federal aid are able to receive it and use it for expenses beyond the direct costs of their education.

At the risk of stating the obvious, this study provides evidence that federal financial-aid programs are supplying relief that makes it possible for Southeast Asian students to attend higher education institutions. Beyond the importance of Pell grants, students also indicated that they do take out student loans to supplement other forms of aid. Although it was clear that those students who did take out loans did so more as a last resort, they were willing to take those loans particularly if doing so meant they could stay enrolled and maintain a full-time course load. Finally, those students who were able to obtain work-study positions not only benefited financially from these positions, but they also felt more connected to life on campus and learned about campus resources available to them while working. The one form of federal aid that no interviewee mentioned was federal income-tax relief available to students and their families. We assume no one mentioned these benefits because they are only available to individuals and families that have enough federal tax liability to use the credits. That is, such tax benefits are not refundable, so families without federal tax liabilities are not able to realize the benefits.

The personal narrative of nearly every student we interviewed was tied to the immigrant status of them and their families. There were parents who had fought on the American side of the Vietnam War, and there were others whose families were displaced in one way or another because of the war. Regardless of the circumstances many study participants were the children of refugees, and the difficulties associated with that status were ever present.

One student's father experienced the reduced social status that can come with immigration, "My dad was pretty well educated because he was part of the military. . . . He was a nurse for the military and the village doctor. He was the village teacher." This was a position the father was not able to maintain after he came to the United States. Most of our participants, however, were also aware of the opportunities available to them. One student reflected:

I have an opportunity to get an American education. What if I was in [Southeast Asia], would I have the same opportunity? I recently visited and my parents also told me stories about how poor it is and how there isn't much opportunity there. So when I was not able to walk in my high school graduation, my parents gently reminded me about the daily reality of those people [there] and how they do not have this opportunity that I have. . . . I am the youngest and I need to take this opportunity, I would be stupid not to.

These experiences of students and their families demonstrate that lawmakers at the state and federal levels need to constantly be aware of immigrants and the challenges they face and craft policies that address these challenges. Although America does offer increased opportunities for immigrants, those opportunities come at a price that often can include abandoning careers and social status that cannot be immediately replaced after arriving in the United States.

### **Personal Characteristics and Behaviors**

For this category we chose to emphasize the behaviors that were mentioned by our participants most often and those that appeared to have direct impact on their academic experiences. Our analysis found that there were four noteworthy characteristics that one way or another were under the control of students: study habits, course load and attendance, personal networking, and employment.

A number of our participants discussed how their study habits had changed or the significance of study habits to their success. In one case a participant made the point quite succinctly: "I actually studied. . . . I mean that I would study for hours. . . . My work ethic is completely different." During the course of all the interviews a majority of our participants did mention the importance of having to study. As a group they were aware that study-

ing was linked to success. In some cases students were also aware that studying did come with personal costs, and that at times it was necessary to sacrifice time with friends. Valerie reflected, "I kind of distanced myself from my friends a little bit, because I knew that if I went out with them, I would get sidetracked and not focus in my studies." Not every participant saw friends as a detriment to studies. In some cases students were able to use personal friendships developed before college to their advantage. "I went to [my community college] with a few of my good friends from high school. . . . We kept each other on track and now they are at places like UC San Diego and Berkeley. We took the same classes together, and that helped. We hung out together, studied together."

Beyond the personal effort to study and regardless of the potentially positive or negative role friends could play in studies, many of our research participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a full-time course load. In at least one case this strategy included attending every intersession at a community college in order transfer as quickly as possible. "I was able to plan and do all my courses in one year. So rather than transferring in two [years], I did it in one. So I saved a lot more money that way." The fact that our participants were all motivated to transfer/complete a baccalaureate in as little time as possible is reflected in this quotation and in other comments. A number of students clearly demonstrated an understanding that less than full-time-equivalent course loads can decrease one's chances of successfully completing a baccalaureate degree. No student that we interviewed indicated planning on taking more than two years to transfer from community college, and most intended to complete their baccalaureates as quickly as possible. Trinh voiced an idea that was often repeated, if in different words and time frames, "Sadly, at [my community college] there was what was known as the 'five year plan.' A lot of people were somewhat lazy and took their time, but I was determined to get in and get out in two years." Parents and other siblings also contributed to this emphasis on transferring from the community college in two years (maintaining a full-time course load) and continuing at the same pace once at UCLA. Overall, students and their families understood full-time attendance as critical.

The students involved in our study also had a keen awareness that networking, with other students and with potential support-program offices, was important. Although it was not always

clear where this understanding came from, students frequently discussed networking as a success strategy. “I definitely networked a lot of people when I first got [to the community college]. I was not shy. . . . [I] would be like, ‘what classes have you taken and who’s a good professor?’” This particular student also talked about the importance of physically visiting program offices to better access resources: “I walked into every building possible to find all the resources that you could take advantage of.” This form of networking by walking was not something reserved for community college campuses. Eddie (age 20) used the same strategy after arriving at UCLA—a strategy he attributes to a student-initiated support program on campus:

I went on a tour of the entire campus and I wanted to memorize the campus like the back of my hand. And then I went to all the resources, the financial-aid office, the counselors’ office, the gym. I just really wanted to know where everything was so I could touch base with people if I needed to. That is something I picked up from being in HOPE [Higher Opportunity Program for Education], that we actually need to know our surroundings and use it to our advantage.

Money was an issue for nearly all of our participants, and in many cases individuals needed to work. In the most extreme case one student talked about having three part-time jobs simultaneously and the negative pressure that put on her and her studies. Of most interest, one of those jobs was a work-study position at her community college, and as she said, “I took up the work-study job so I could be on campus a little more.” Most other students that mentioned work as a factor that impacted their studies tended to emphasize the negative effect it could have because of the time work took away from studying. As one student noted, “I couldn’t study as much, because I couldn’t tell my boss I had a test to study for.”

### **Impact and Influence of Family**

All of the students we interviewed discussed the importance of their families in their higher education careers. There was a range of effects. In many cases the relationships between cultural and social capital and college success were very apparent. “I was the first in my family to [attend college]. I had some friends who had older siblings who went off to college and were able to help

their younger siblings when they were looking at colleges. But I had to do everything by myself, it was a challenge but it really helped me mature.” Although many of our participants had similar situations regarding their parents’ lack of higher education experience, several had members of their extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins—who had attended and completed a degree. In one case the support of an extended family member was direct. “My aunt was also a counselor [at the community college] so she helped me with my goals of transferring as soon as possible.”

Community college attendance played a role in family interactions for several students. The cost savings of attending a college was important for many families. For others the gentle transition that attending a local community college offered was important:

I think [my attending the local community college] helped transition my mom to feel like, “okay, I’m letting her go to the community college.” And, I had the mind-set that they were going to see me go away so why not make it slower for them. And I wasn’t ready to leave home yet. I wasn’t ready to leave my friends or my family.

Usually students that referred to this type of idea were female (as this student was), but regardless of gender, community college attendance did allow for a less jarring transition from high school to higher education for students and their families.

### Implications for Policy

Although we have highlighted a number of policy issues in the analysis section, we will take this opportunity to reiterate some of those policies with a particular focus on how the federal designation of Asian American and Pacific Islander serving institution (AAPISI) can serve to undergird such policies. The provision for AAPISIs in the reauthorization of the higher education act from our perspective becomes a key overarching policy and, therefore, deserves a brief discussion of its own. In August 2007, as a part of the College Cost Reductions and Access Act, Congress targeted ten million dollars over two years for institutions designated as AAPI serving. A year later the program was extended through 2013 with up to thirty million dollars each year as a part of Higher Education Opportunity Act. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss issues regarding AAPISIs, it is important to note that feder-

al funding can be used in several ways that could benefit Southeast Asian transfer students. Funds can be used to support tutoring and counseling programs and other student support services, establish community outreach programs that will develop and encourage interest in postsecondary education in K-12 students, conduct research and data collection for AAPI populations and subpopulations, and establish partnerships with community-based organizations serving AAPI populations (Park and Chang, 2008).

### **State-Level Policy**

There are several potential policies and programs that could be targeted for AAPI student funding through the Higher Education Opportunity Act. Participants in this study were unanimous in their belief that AAPI student groups provide support that helps them persist and succeed. It is important to provide funding for these groups at community colleges and four-year universities. Such programs that are targeted at recruiting, retaining, and graduating AAPI students can be supported by AAPISI funds. Support programs could also move beyond single campuses through partnerships. Specific to this study, it would be useful to create and expand mentorship programs that bridge California community colleges with UC campuses. Mentor programs would allow UC students, faculty, staff, and alumni to connect with prospective transfer students, creating a support community early in a transfer student's career that would clearly signal that transfer is attainable and that students are not on their own when it comes to navigating the process.

Transfer orientation programs should also be supported. Our findings also suggest that these programs could be improved if they are expanded to include relevant discussions and presentations for student success, including academic policies and support services available to them. Without this relevant knowledge, Southeast Asian students who transfer will continue to have to rely on their own resources and motivation to transition from community colleges to four-year universities.

Current and accurate information regarding the transfer process should be available to students and support program staff. Students and counselors must be able to quickly and efficiently search out answers to questions about transferring without running into dead ends or dated information that no longer applies.

Because this information can change frequently we suggest a Web site be created for the transfer process that can be accessed by all individuals and programs involved.

A significant portion of the students interviewed for this project indicated that the transition from semester to quarter academic terms was a source of stress, including in one case, academic probation. We acknowledge that having all higher education in California transition to identical academic calendars is not feasible particularly given the current fiscal crisis in the state, but we do believe that there should be programs and policies in place that are available to support students as they transition from one schedule to the other, addressing a stressor that can negatively influence a smooth transition between institutions.

Federal funds dedicated to AAPISIs could be used for support in each of the policies and programs presented. We believe that the state of California could also implement a matching-funds approach for these programs. That is, the legislature could pledge to match all federal funds received and dedicated to AAPISI programs and partnerships. Such funds would not be available unless and until institutions applied for and were awarded federal support. Beyond the immediate support these funds would give for students we believe such a program would have two lasting impacts. First, the additional funds would help ensure more stable and longer-lived funding for support programs aimed at improving Southeast Asian student success, while signaling state belief in and material support for a policy that could have far-reaching positive outcomes in the twenty-first century.

### **Federal Policy**

The legislation that has created AAPISIs and that provides for short-term financial support for these institutions is critical. How these funds might be used has already been discussed, as well as a state-level matching-funds policy that could increase the impact of the federal policy. It is important to pursue these programs in the next three years to demonstrate to Congress that the need for AAPISI funding is critical to the success of Asian students in need of support. Assuming evidence of the success of these programs is demonstrated, continuing and increased funding beyond 2013 is imperative. Beyond the continued support of AAPISIs, two federal policy issues are highlighted by the study.



All forms of federal financial aid are used by the Southeast Asian students in this study. By that indication alone it is clear that federal financial-aid policies at a minimum should remain as they are. However, this study would also indicate that changes to two of the policies would have the potential to benefit Southeast Asian students. First, the family backgrounds of the students in this study, including socioeconomic status as well as their experiences as recent immigrants, suggests that continuing to increase the amount of Pell grants available is critical because the students in this study and their families live with little or no financial safety net, so any increase in grant aid would be critical in times of financial stress. Second, the availability of federal work-study funds is also essential. Our interviews demonstrate the positive impact of an on-campus position: it not only connects students to the campus community, but it can make them aware of support that is available. On the policy side, therefore, continued support and funding for work study positions should remain a priority. Finally in terms of collecting and reporting data it is imperative that, whenever possible, individual institutions, state agencies, and federal agencies must make every effort to disaggregate the AAPI population by as many ethnicities as possible. For example, in 2007, the UC system decided to increase AAPI categories from eight to twenty-three. UC students from the different campuses mobilized to change the current process in order to ensure that minority groups under the *Asian American* umbrella term would be visible through their own category. It is important to continue this trend in order to visibly identify how communities are succeeding and where they face obstacles so that impactful policies and measures can be taken to ensure that these students succeed in higher education.

## Conclusion

If I was like the model Asian, I would have easily gone to the Ivy League straight out of high school, and gotten a perfect score on my SATs, but you know what, my family didn't have money for me to go to SAT prep classes, and they are struggling right now to pay rent. And so, my parents are refugees from the Vietnam War and my mom does not speak any English at all, and my dad has to work. . . a mediocre part-time, minimum wage job to support me, my mom, my younger brother. And so, I just felt like that had a lot to do with the



whole Model Minority Myth thing, because we were not the Model Minority obviously.

Perhaps this quotation from a study participant sums up the study as well as anything. Our data present a fairly clear picture: Southeast Asian transfer students are not the “model minority” so often described in the literature. Their experience is not the same as that of students from other Asian ethnicities. They struggle with similar issues that challenge other students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and in that sense our findings and particularly our policy recommendations apply not only to Southeast Asian students but also to all students who struggle with these same challenges. The Southeast Asian students in our study did discuss two issues that might be more unique to them: immigrant status and the importance of ethnically based student organizations as a means of support and belonging. In the end, perhaps even these two issues have a similar importance to other student groups, just with a different specific context—a context that is always essential to developing understanding.

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RICK WAGONER is an Assistant Professor in the Higher Education and Organizational Change Division of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research is concerned primarily with community colleges and the role they play in U.S. higher education.

ANTHONY LIN holds a Master of Arts from the Higher Education and Organizational Change Division of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests include community colleges and issues regarding access to higher education.