



A DREAM DENIED

*Educational Experiences
of Southeast Asian American Youth*

Issues and Recommendations

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**An issue paper based on findings from the first national Southeast Asian Youth Summit,
University of California-Berkeley, December 9, 2000**

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Introduction

On many of our nation's campuses, Asian Americans are leading the way in higher education. At the University of California-Berkeley, for example, Asian Americans as a whole constitute the largest component of the student population and the institution's admission standpoint reflects this. This profile of high academic success, however, is misleading. It fails to take into consideration the tremendous diversity within the Asian American communities as it is reflected along ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and generational¹ dimensions, as well as the differing circumstances and recency of migration. As a result, this profile does not account for the fact that many Asian Americans, especially Southeast Asian American² students, i.e., Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, are not attaining higher education or achieving educational success.

Disparity among Asian American groups is striking when data on academic achievement is further disaggregated to ethnic specificity. The number of Southeast Asian students in higher education is, overall, low. This number is even lower if the different ethnic groups within the "Southeast Asian" rubric are further distinguished from one another. According to the 1990 Census³, 64.3 percent of Cambodians, 59.8 percent of

1 "First generation" refers to refugees who were born outside of the U.S. and migrated to the U.S. while "second generation" refers to those who are American-born. Despite these simplified categories, there are also different age cohorts within the first generation category, with differing migration and resettlement experience. To capture these importance nuances, we are also using the terms "1.5 generation" and "1.8 generation" to refer, respectively, to those who came to the U.S. in their adolescent and pre-adolescent years.

2 Although Southeast Asia as a region covers 10 different countries, in the context of this paper it refers only to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which share a particular political history with one another and with the U.S. The term "Southeast Asian Americans," therefore, refers to individuals who are from these three countries, or whose families are from these countries. Most of them either arrived in this country as refugees or are the children of refugees.

3 These data applies, for the most part, to first generation refugees from Southeast Asia who were resettled in the U.S. in the initial cohort of some 160,000 in 1975 and in greater numbers in the early- to mid-1980s.

Laotians⁴, 71.7 percent of Hmong, and 39.4 percent of Vietnamese living in America have less than high school education. In California, where most of the Southeast Asian refugee population is concentrated, 38.8 percent of Vietnamese Americans, 67.1 percent of Cambodian Americans, 67.9 percent of Laotian Americans, and 74.1 percent of Hmong Americans have less than high school education. Conversely, as of 1990, for instance, only 6.4 percent of Cambodians and 3.2 percent Hmong in the U.S., have a bachelor's degree or above as compared to 6.6 percent Laotian Americans and 16.8 percent for Vietnamese Americans. These statistics reflect both the historical circumstances surrounding Southeast Asian migration, which involved post-war imprisonment and decimation of the educated class in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, and the recency of resettlement of these communities in the U.S. At the time the 1990 Census was taken, an overwhelming majority of Southeast Asians in the U.S. were first generation refugees who had arrived in the early to mid-1980s.

Since then, a growing number of Southeast Asian Americans, particularly those of the 1.8 and second generations, have entered the American educational system. While full data from Census 2000 have yet to be released, we can expect to see a notable increase in the rate of degree completion from both secondary and post-secondary institutions. Despite the progress made, however, there remains the concern, based on non-quantitative assessment, that improvement in educational attainment is disconcertingly slow for many of the sub-groups. For example, at the University of California-Berkeley, where Asians and Asian Americans collectively constitute over 41 percent of the undergraduate student population, Vietnamese students account for only 7 percent. Cambodian and Laotian representation remain so statistically negligible that they continue to be lumped in the category of "Other Asians." Estimates based on membership in student associations, as well as enrollment in topic-relevant classes and campus and community networks, indicate fewer than 50 students for the Cambodian and Laotian groups respectively. This disparity *between* Southeast Asian and other Asian American groups, and *within* the Southeast Asian American community at large, is also evident on the other nine campuses (not including the newly established campus in Merced which is not yet fully operational) of the University of California (UC) system. At UCLA, where Asian Americans totalled 8,237 of the undergraduate student population and 1,839 of the graduate student body in academic year 2000, Vietnamese students numbered 679 at the undergraduate level and 65 at the graduate level (UCLA Student Profile, AY2000). Cambodian and Laotian students remain critically under-represented on all the UC campuses, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. This relatively low representation of, and acute disparity among, the Southeast Asian groups is especially disconcerting in view of the fact that campuses such as Berkeley, UCLA, and UC Irvine are located in close proximity to some of the biggest Southeast Asian communities in the United States. While Southeast

4 Although the conventional understanding is that all people originating from Laos are referred to as "Laotians," the U.S. Census Bureau reports data separately for Hmong while all other ethnic groups from Laos are aggregated under the "Laotian" category. Where references are made to census information, this report will adhere to the Bureau's classification. Elsewhere, the term Laotian will refer to all ethnic groups originating from Laos.

Asian student representation in state and community colleges is markedly better than at higher ranked institutions, it still reflects the inter-group disparity and the overall, glacially slow, movement towards equitable access to higher education.

Under-representation in higher education is symptomatic, in critical aspects, of the numerous and compounding impediments that Southeast Asian youth encounter in the earlier stages of their educational experience and that deter their pursuit of higher education. Given their political histories—of war, dislocation, and dispossession—many Southeast Asian students and their families already start from a position of grave disadvantage. After resettlement in the U.S., most go on to experience additional challenges of poverty, daily encounters with delinquency and crime, family dysfunctionality, and racism both at school and in society. These obstacles, especially when they cannot be addressed through timely and effective intervention, can undermine the prospect of successful completion of secondary schooling, without which the pursuit of higher education is impossible. Faced with numerous challenges, and lacking the necessary resources, including support from teachers, administrators, parents, and community, Southeast Asian students continue to drop out or be “pushed out” of the educational system at the middle- and high-school levels—thereby accounting, in part, for the low representation in higher education.

At the national Southeast Asian Youth Summit held on December 10, 2000 at the University of California-Berkeley⁵, roundtable discussions were organized in an effort to identify barriers that Southeast Asian students face in secondary and post-secondary education, and to generate policy and program recommendations for addressing those concerns. In the session on secondary education, high school students, ranging from 14 to 18 years-of-age and representing Berkeley, Stockton, and Lodi unified school districts in California, shared their experiences. The four high schools represented at the Summit reflect differences in resources and programs, as well as in student and staff composition.⁶ Other Summit participants included undergraduate and graduate students, young professionals, advocates, practitioners, and policy makers from six different states. Summit findings were reinforced by preliminary analysis of data from 106 questionnaires that were administered to college students in California and Massachusetts. The survey was composed of 25 questions that were designed to capture the educational experiences of Southeast Asian youth, as well as their reflections on factors that may promote or deter educational progress. Issues that emerged as critical to the educational advancement of Southeast Asians ranged from lack of support systems to institutional racism. The experiences and views captured in this report are not meant to be generalizable to all

5 The Summit was jointly sponsored by the Asian American Studies Program, University of California-Berkeley, the Berkeley Southeast Asian Student Coalition, and the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, with generous support from the State Farm Insurance Companies.

6 Some of the schools are better funded and have more programs. Lincoln High, for instance, has a multilingual center with at least two bilingual staff, and a Khmer language class (the only one in both districts). Tokay High, which straddles the border of Stockton and Lodi, is comprised mostly of white students who live in the district with most of the students of color being bussed in from the outskirts of Stockton.

Southeast Asian students, or to be taken as comprehensive of all the challenges facing Southeast Asian American youth. They do, however, capture many of the concerns of one critical segment of the Asian American student population that remains invisible and marginalized in many policy arenas, particularly in higher education. The educational realities articulated and shared by the students at the Summit and in the surveys sharply contest many prevailing assumptions about Asian Americans, and the associated “myth” of the “model minority.” They are, in that regard, essential to our understanding of public education, and critical to our thinking about educational reforms.⁷

We would like to acknowledge various individuals whose support and assistance made this project possible. We are indebted to Professor Peter Kiang of the University of Massachusetts-Boston and to Professor Minh Hoa Ta of San Francisco State University. We are especially indebted to the Southeast Asian Student Coalition at Berkeley whose leadership and commitment throughout the process made the Youth Summit and this report possible. Special recognition goes to Savet Roeuny and Viravyne Chhim for the follow-up interviews and to Long Trinh for the tabulation of the survey data. We owe special thanks to Max Niedzwiecki of SEARAC for his invaluable input, assistance, and support throughout this project.

7 We are continuing to administer the surveys and hope to share the comprehensive findings in our forthcoming publication on Southeast Asian American and Pacific Islander American educational concerns.

This publication will be produced in connection with the Summit on the Status of Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian Americans in Higher Education. Interested readers should contact SEARAC for copies of the Summit publication, which will be produced under a generous grant from the State Farm Insurance Companies.

The Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander American Summit took place in Washington, DC, in May of 2001 and was carried out principally by SEARAC and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC). Congressman Robert Underwood of Guam, the former Chair of CAPAC, and his staff have been invaluable leaders and partners in all Summit activities. Other essential partners have included the 32 Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander American scholars who participated in the May 2001 event.

Barriers to Educational Advancement

A. Little or No Access to Information

Summit participants indicated that limited access to critical information is one of the greatest impediments to education. Many felt that they and their Southeast Asian peers were not given the necessary information about higher education, about college preparatory courses or about other essential preparation for college admission (e.g., what courses they need to have, what GPA and test scores are required by colleges/universities, and so on). They are, therefore, without the necessary knowledge, information, and preparation to position themselves for academic advancement. Students felt that in most high schools, information dissemination is based on teachers' and counselors' discretion. For the most part, information critical to the pursuit of higher education is made readily accessible only to selected students, namely white students and those on the accelerated tracks; students not in those categories often must rely on their own resources and initiatives, which, as disenfranchised students of color, many do not have. Student participants cited various scholarship and admission programs in which school personnel control the dissemination of information, the nomination process, and the access to application forms, as examples of the information filtering that occurs all too frequently at the high schools. As such, while college preparatory programs, such as the Early Academic Outreach Program and Upward Bound, are available to assist underprivileged students, they are not readily accessible to all students in need. Southeast Asian students, among other marginalized student groups, are often unaware of the existence of these programs, and therefore are unable to access them.

In sum, many Southeast Asian students find themselves in a quandary where they:

- Don't know that college is an important and viable option;
- Don't know how to prepare for it, even if they recognize its importance;

- Are not given access to the necessary preparation; and
- Don't know the availability of external resources to assist them in their preparation and of other recourse outside the schools.

Without requisite information, many find themselves ill-prepared to be even minimally competitive for admission to institutions of higher education, or to make college education a viable part of their future plans.

B. Limited Access to Support

My mom keeps me going in school. She tells me to complete school because she wants to see me have a bright future and be successful in life.

Summit participants also identified support, particularly at school and in the family, as critical to educational success. Academically well-achieving student participants consistently attribute their success to the availability of support and positive reinforcement from family members and school personnel. They also recognized that, for many Southeast Asian students, such support is seriously limited or totally absent. Many Summit participants felt that, for them and their peers, support is neither present at home nor available elsewhere. This is consistent with the survey responses in which 18 percent of the students indicated that they received no support from their high school teachers or counselors. While youth and educational advocates point to the active involvement, expressed interest, and moral support of family members as being essential to the educational progress, many Southeast Asian students come from families and households with severe constraints. As census data indicate, an overwhelming number of first-generation refugee parents have little or no formal education, even in their native language. Others are challenged by their limited English proficiency (LEP), and by their limited understanding of the educational system in the U.S. As a result, many Southeast Asian parents can neither relate to the problems that their children face in school nor effectively advocate for them. Students fortunate enough to have older siblings who are supportive and who have an understanding of the American educational system can rely on this source of support and information. Others are left to struggle on their own:

When I was in high school I never had anyone reaching out to help me at school and informing me about college. I did that myself.

Another student echoed the same experience with the lack of support:

In high school, I felt that the school guidance counselors could have and should have done much more to help me choose the right classes, plans for filling out college and scholarship applications, etc. I did not feel that there were

active retention and/or recruitment efforts on their part. However, I do realize that I must take my own initiative to pursue what I want to accomplish.

Given the weakness or absence of a support system at home, educational institutions play a much more critical role for the educational advancement of Southeast Asian youth. Teachers, instructional aides, and counselors were identified as some of the most important figures that students seek out for guidance and assistance. Academically well-performing participants all mentioned the importance of the mentoring, guidance, and positive reinforcement that they received from educators. One Cambodian student noted:

While the counselors would tell me to go into vocational programs, my English teacher always told me that she believed that I could and should go to a prestigious university; and I did.

Many Summit participants, however, felt that, for them and their peers, support is neither present at home nor available elsewhere. This is consistent with the survey responses in which 18 percent of the students indicated that they received no support from their high school teachers or counselors. Without the necessary academic support, students cannot effectively access the curriculum or capitalize upon opportunities that exist. This experience ultimately leads many to feel that it is futile to continue to attend classes:

Sometimes I skip school because it is too hard. There is no point to going to school and [trying to] get good grades when the help is not there.... The biggest challenge that I have in school is not having teachers that support me...no one I can build a relationship with.

My classes were hard. It is not that I didn't want to go. It was just that there was no one there to help me. Most of my teachers didn't help me when I needed it. My biggest challenge in school is not having teachers who are willing to help me.

In many instances, Southeast Asian students are not only denied the necessary support, but are presented with additional obstacles by virtue of being students of color and/or as English-language learners. Southeast Asian students continue, at a disproportionate level, to be inappropriately placed in academic programs; in some cases, non-English speaking students have been erroneously diagnosed and referred to special education programs because of their lack of English language proficiency.⁸ Similarly, the common

⁸ See: Trueba, Henry J., Lila Jacobs, and Elizabeth Kirton. 1990. *Cultural Conflict and Adaptation: The Case of Hmong Children in American Society*. New York, NY: The Falmer Press.

failure to reclassify LEP students according to their academic progress has deterred the intellectual development of many Southeast Asian youth. A 28-year-old woman who came to the United States at the age of 9 continues to feel that her English language development was stunted during the years unnecessarily spent in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in middle school. A 25-year-old Cambodian from Revere, Massachusetts, recalls being placed in an LEP course despite the fact that English is his primary language. This is not an uncommon experience for Southeast Asian and other language minority youth in American public schools, some of whom may have full mastery of conversational English, but not of academic English. In and of itself, this challenge raised an important concern about the quality of public education. In the case of this Cambodian student from Revere, however, his placement in a LEP course was carried out despite the fact that his English speaking and writing skills were sufficiently advanced that he often led lessons alongside the teacher. Unfortunately, these setbacks, which he feels were a deterrent to his overall academic progress, were repeated in the post-secondary institution where counselors actively discouraged him from applying to transfer to a four-year institution. He has yet to finish college.

In many of America's educational institutions, particularly in the public high schools, Southeast Asian students continue to be "tracked" into remedial or vocational preparation programs. According to Summit participants, college preparatory programs and advanced placement courses, readily open to their Caucasian peers, are rarely accessible to Southeast Asian students. As one Summit participant stated, "Teachers think we are incapable of doing mainstream work. I don't understand why the majority of Southeast Asians [in my school] are in remedial courses." In a state-ranked high school in Revere, Massachusetts, with a student population that reflects the district's predominantly Italian-American constituency, students remained racially segregated on the school grounds, and in their intellectual and social interactions. Enrollment in the school's academic programs reflect a marked disparity among the racial groups; a disproportionate number of Southeast Asian students are clustered in remedial courses, which may suggest a pattern of informal tracking.

On the other extreme, teachers' racially based assumptions about their students' capabilities have resulted in high expectations that are, in some cases, unfounded, with students being urged towards certain academic routes and in grade inflation. A Berkeley student who was on the accelerated track in high school looks back:

I did fairly well in high school. Was almost a valedictorian. But when I came here, I had to take college writing. I found out that all those years of being pushed by teachers and family to take high math was pointless. My reading and writing skills suffered greatly.

Likewise, Southeast Asian students have been known to be rewarded with good grades simply for showing up to class, being passive, polite, and seemingly hardworking. This appears to be particularly true in low-performing schools where teachers' expectations of

students are correspondingly low: “We would get “A”s for just showing up to class and not making trouble. Because we are Asians, the teachers thought that we were smart and had it together, but we didn’t learn anything.” The experience of a Hmong student from Sacramento reinforces the detrimental effect of this schooling environment:

I started off focused and studious. The school system was so bad that I soon realized that I could still maintain good grades without trying as hard because even if you only tried a little you were already overexceeding everyone’s expectations. As a result, I became less motivated and more discouraged and lazy.

Weak educational foundations, developed early on at the elementary and secondary levels, continue to jeopardize students’ chances of educational success. Insufficient academic preparation is one of the key reasons for the comparatively higher enrollment of Southeast Asian students in junior colleges. While in recent years there has been an increase in the number of successful transfers from junior colleges into four-year institutions, a disconcertingly high number of Southeast Asian students remain unable to make that successful transition; anecdotal evidence suggests that this is particularly true of Cambodian and Laotian students. For the successful transfers, retention and degree completion remain additional challenges, especially when they have to compete from a relatively weak educational base. Of the 106 college students surveyed, 32 percent indicated that high school did not prepare them well for a college career. Of the respondents, 31 percent of those currently attending four-year institutions, and 36 percent from the junior colleges, felt that they were ill-prepared for college. A Berkeley student admitted that:

The greatest impediment/challenge to my educational pursuit is not having a strong foundation. My high school education did not prepare me for college.... Academically, I failed a class because I lacked the special skills that should have been taught to me in high school.

Through formal and informal tracking systems, many Southeast Asian students are denied access to high-achieving programs, and are, as a result, unable to acquire the necessary preparation for post-secondary education. Moreover, many are discouraged, rather early on, from seeking a college career. Summit participants noted that, in their high schools, counselors make college information accessible mostly to their Caucasian peers and rarely to students of color. In some cases, deterrence comes through subtler messages. Even well-meaning statements from teachers and guidance counselors, such as “college is very expensive” or “college is very difficult to get into,” can convey *unintended* messages that are disempowering of students who are already marginalized in their educational experiences.

Students of color also internalize negative perceptions of teachers and counselors, that reinforce their sense of disempowerment. Students who encounter unresponsiveness or

outright hostility when soliciting help from school personnel are left with the feeling that their needs do not matter; that they are regarded as “second-class citizens” by individuals and institutions that are supposed to promote their intellectual development. Summit participants expressed frustration at being in a perpetual quandary, trapped within an educational system that is unresponsive to their needs and circumstances, and having to contend with unrealistic expectations; hence, disappointment and disapproval of family and community for their educational failure.

Counselors are another important resource for students in their preparation for high school graduation and pursuit of post-secondary education. While academic guidance is critical to students, however, many schools, particularly in California, are faced with a serious shortage of counselors and are unable to meet the needs of their student population. Particularly in under-funded schools, counselors, overwhelmed with their student load and assigned duties, are unable to interact in any effective way with all their students:

The counselors need to check with students...they should monitor the student's performance...should be responsible and be more involved with students. My senior year, the counselor called me in only once...he needed to call [me in] more often to see how I was doing.

This student nearly failed to graduate from high school because he was unaware that he was lacking the necessary credits.

For the reasons listed above, Southeast Asian students, often left without sufficient preparation, access to critical information, and emotional support, are unable to move beyond the condition of educational marginality. While schools may claim that it is the responsibility of parents to monitor their children's academic progress, it is important to recognize that 60 percent of Southeast Asian parents have less than three years of formal education⁹. Disaggregated further into ethnic and regional groupings, as high as 77.6 percent of Cambodians and 52.1 percent of Vietnamese living in Washington State and 74.1 percent of Hmong in California have less than a high school education. In California, the mean number of years in school is 9.58 years for Vietnamese, 6.15 years for Cambodians, 5.59 years for Laotians, and 4.67 years for Hmong. In many families, the students currently in school may be the first to pursue a high school education or to have any formal education at all.

Additionally, most Southeast Asian students come from households with LEP parents. According to the 1990 Census, over 60 percent of Southeast Asian families are linguisti-

9 See: Lewis, James, and Ngoan Le. 1995. *A Profile of the Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese People in the United States*. Chicago, IL: National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans (NAFEA). Also see: President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. 2001. *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: A People Looking Forward: Interim Report to the President and the Nation*. Washington, DC: Office of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

cally isolated, with the percentage being even higher for certain ethnic sub-groups and in certain geographical areas. By extension, only about 25 percent to 33 percent of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans considered themselves able to speak English “well or very well.” This percentage is inversely proportional to the amount of written communication from the schools in the English language. As a result, the ability of most Southeast Asian parents to effectively monitor their children’s academic progress, understand school requirements, or know their rights as parents and as advocates for their children, is seriously constrained. Effective monitoring and timely intervention on the part of educators and counselors are, therefore, particularly critical for this student population who often cannot rely on other support systems. Yet, in many schools this monitoring and intervention do not take place. Strengthening home-school relations should be a priority for schools committed to the academic success of all students.

Despite the many challenges facing Southeast Asian students and their families, it is equally important to recognize that given the opportunity, students can overcome many of the obstacles. Speaking of the challenges of pursuing higher education, a student now attending UCLA reveals the resiliency that is found in many Southeast Asian students:

The greatest impediment would probably be that my parents didn’t have any experiences in higher education. But that in itself also had positive aspects because I become more independent and self sufficient in working towards my higher education.

Ultimately, as one student from Sacramento pointedly observes:

I’m confident that any student can make it in a college environment, because people have a way of rising up to the challenges they are faced with. The hard part is getting them there in the first place.

C. Stereotyping, Low Expectations from Educators, and Academic Failure

The teachers think that I am a gangster...when we [my friends and I] wear chains or sag our pants or wear a letter belt buckle, they [teachers] think that we are in gangs.... I feel that teachers will not help me because they already have that [mis] conception and label me as a gangster. Why help gangsters when they don’t have [any] potential?

Student participants felt that the disregard of their academic needs and potential can be partially attributed to assumptions, negative stereotypes, and low expectations that

educators have about Southeast Asian students, particularly Cambodian and Laotian students. Many felt that they are labeled as “gangsters,” “at risk,” or simply as possessing limited capability because of the clothes that they wear, the music that they enjoy, and their manner of speech. Once viewed as such, students feel that educators do not deem it worthwhile to invest any time or resources in cultivating their potential. Such stereotyping, in turn, causes some students to “act out” and to manifest behaviors that affirm these preconceptions. Placed in an environment where they are viewed as having no potential to succeed, these students eventually come to believe that they cannot succeed. Chronic truancy and dropping out (or perhaps more appropriately termed, “being pushed out”) are the frequent outcomes of systemic neglect.

Student participants felt that barred access to quality guidance is similarly rooted in institutional discrimination and low expectations among the counseling staff. Having labeled certain students as underachieving or lacking in potential, counselors, like teachers, are unwilling to invest time and resources in their educational promotion. Based on their presumed lack of capability, many language minority students are not given the necessary information about prestigious four-year colleges, and are instead urged towards the lower ranking institutions or vocational programs. In one instance, a high school student with a GPA of over 3.5 was denied a free college application form to the University of California system because the counselor only had a limited number to dispense, and the student was considered less deserving than others of such an opportunity. Not knowing any other recourse, the student ended up attending a local state college that was not his preferred choice. Moreover, students deemed to be low achieving also do not receive information about scholarship programs, even those that are need-based. This is a serious impediment given that many Southeast Asian students come from economically vulnerable backgrounds. In these cases the decision to go to college entails sacrifice not only for the individual, but also for the entire family.

Among the academically well-performing Southeast Asian students, many also feel that their educational experience has been affected by assumptions that teachers and counselors have of Asian Americans. Many feel that they are encouraged towards math and science programs, irrespective of their interests or inclination, simply because of the prevailing notion that they, as Asians, have technical aptitude. In either extreme, as one Vietnamese student, now at Berkeley, succinctly puts it, “Subtle racism (exists) everywhere. Pushed into classes because of my ethnicity and kept out of classes because of my ethnicity.”

The tendency of school personnel and educational institutions to filter and “track information” only to high-achieving students is a serious impediment to the educational advancement of underprivileged students. It continues to be one of the key challenges for university-based outreach efforts. Berkeley student recruiters have encountered teachers’ and counselors’ reluctance to allow them access to LEP students, and to students not in accelerated programs. In some cases, this resistance persists even after school personnel have been informed that the objective of the program is to reach out to underprivileged students.

D. Critical Roles of Paraprofessionals and Teaching Support Staff

Where support from teachers and counselors is not forthcoming, tutors and instructional aides can and do, in many cases, provide the much-needed intervention. For many Southeast Asian students, bilingual teachers, paraprofessionals, and community liaisons are the only resources that they have. Access to such resources, however, is not always available or possible for all students in need. According to one recent study, the ratio of bilingual teachers to students in California's public schools remains alarmingly unfavorable: 1:662 for Vietnamese speakers; 1:1,113 for Hmong speakers, and 1:21,000+ for Khmer speakers¹⁰. The availability of bilingual paraprofessionals and tutors, like other academic support, depends upon the availability of resources within the district and the school and, more importantly, upon the political will to utilize resources equitably to meet the needs of all vulnerable students. Where paraprofessionals and other support staff are available to assist the students, they are often constrained by their limited expertise and access to information, and by their subordinate position within the school system. It is not uncommon for paraprofessionals in certain school communities to experience the same degree of discrimination and sense of powerlessness as the students they are working to assist. As such, they cannot effectively substitute or compensate for teachers' and counselors' neglect.

E. Limited Access to Community Resources

Regarded as the "model minority," Asian American families and communities are commonly assumed to be economically well-positioned to provide the essential support for their youth. Arguments have been made that Asian Americans encounter few, if any, academic challenges because support is available to them through family-financed private tutoring or community-financed after-school programs.¹¹ This assumption, like many others associated with the model minority myth, fails to take into account the tremendous class disparity among Asian Americans. Unlike the more economically stable segments of the Asian American population, Southeast Asian American families and communities are largely economically vulnerable. According to the 1990 Census, the percentage of Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese living below the poverty line was 63.2 percent, 35.2 percent, 41.9 percent, and 26.9 percent respectively. Moreover, in California, single females headed 9.1 percent of Vietnamese American households, 17.13 percent of Cambodian, 11 percent of Laotian, and 7.25 percent of Hmong households. For the Cambodian community in Oregon and Washington State, the percentages increased to 20.87 percent and 25.21 percent respectively.

10 See: Olsen, Laurie. 1997. *An Invisible Crisis: The Educational Needs of Asian Pacific American Youth*. San Francisco, CA: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AA/PIP).

11 See: National Task Force on Minority High Achievement. 1999. *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*. New York, NY: The College Board. Accessible at: www.collegeboard.org.

Overall, these disconcerting statistics reveal an economically vulnerable population that seriously lacks the necessary resources, both at home and in the community, to provide sufficient support for its youth. The number of community-based organizations that exist to serve this highly diverse population varies according to the sub-groups. There are proportionately few local or national organizations, for instance, that address the particular concerns of Cambodian Americans and the highly pluralistic Laotian American communities, and even fewer still with quality educational programs. As a result, relatively few Southeast Asian students and their families have ready access to community-based support.

Where support programs are available, be it in the schools or in the community, many Southeast Asian students are prevented by economic and cultural constraints from accessing them. Students may be unable to participate in after-school tutoring, or to capitalize upon educational opportunities because of the lack of transportation, and because of family responsibilities:

We have a homework club at my school that offers tutoring after school, but I can't stay for it. I have to take the bus home. If I stay for tutoring, I have no ride home because my mom does not have a car to pick me up.

Economic constraints are also reinforced by cultural and experiential norms. Coming from a context where education is defined strictly in terms of conventional curriculum, many Southeast Asian parents do not recognize the importance of extracurricular activities. Many regard participation in field trips or similar activities as distractions from the "real academic focus," or as opportunity costs that economically marginalized families can ill afford. Moreover, for many college students, academic responsibilities must be balanced by family obligations. A Laotian student pointed to the multiple responsibilities that he has to undertake while attending college:

Living on my own, and away from my hometown, I had to travel back and forth to help my parents and family (such as take them to the hospitals, fill out paperwork, act as a translator, attend religious ceremonies, attend relatives' feasts or celebrations, attend wedding celebrations...).

Young Southeast Asian women are further subjected to cultural restrictions, which curtail their educational experiences:

Because I am a girl, I always have to come home right after school.... My brothers could do more things....

I can't go to tutoring after school because my parents don't trust me. They want me home right after school.

For intervention programs to be effectively implemented, these factors must be taken into consideration. In many instances, the ability to recruit Southeast Asian student participants into education-related programs depends on the trust and confidence that families and communities have in the sponsoring institutions. Effective recruitment, therefore, must begin with effective outreach, and the building of relationship between schools, families, and communities that is sustained and founded on the principles of inclusiveness and mutual respect.

F. Racism

I used to want to be a doctor but the experiences with racism motivate me to go into law or politics as well as education in order to stand up for what I believe....

—Laotian college student

If anyone has a problem with you, “Nip” is the first thing they say.

—Vietnamese student, De Anza College

Whether rooted in the individual, the educational institution, or in society, Summit participants identified racism as central to any discussion about the schooling and education of Southeast Asian American youth. Southeast Asian Americans are often regarded in binary extremes. On one hand, they are frequently lumped together with other Asian American groups and viewed as the “model minority,” with no serious educational challenges or experiences of discrimination. On the other extreme, they are depicted as an irreparably traumatized community of welfare dependents, high school dropouts, and delinquents.

Representation of Southeast Asians in the media reinforces these prevailing myths and misperceptions. Southeast Asians, reduced to a community of LEP and dispossessed individuals turned valedictorians, successful entrepreneurs, and professionals, are held up as the embodiment of the “American Dream.” In juxtaposition, as one high school student from the Bronx pointed out, Southeast Asian youth are often portrayed as “gangsters, criminals, or ‘dog-eaters’,” i.e. as cultural perils, the living reminders of a failed foreign policy, and a failing society. The prevailing reality of Southeast Asian America, however, defies these bifurcated categories, and is rarely captured in print or on the television screen. For the most part, Southeast Asian American students and families, like other Americans, are simply striving to achieve a meaningful life. The binary views of Southeast Asian Americans, nevertheless, have led to the denial of critical support based, on one extreme, on the assumptions that they have no real needs and, on the other, on the notion that they don’t deserve it.

As previously discussed, the stereotyping and homogenization of Asian Americans have masked the serious challenges that a critical segment of this population encounters. Given that race relations in America are largely viewed in terms of black-white issues, there has been comparatively little attention paid, in general, to racism and discrimination against

Asian Americans. Documentation of anti-Asian violence reveals some important implications for Southeast Asian Americans: 1) because of the inability or unwillingness of the public to distinguish among the various Asian communities, discrimination and racially motivated violence tend to be indiscriminate and directed to all persons of Asian ancestry; and 2) because Asian Americans continue to be viewed as “perpetual foreigners,” Asian Americans are not distinguished from foreign nationals from Asia. They are vulnerable to discrimination and racially motivated violence, and their loyalty to the United States is questioned, particularly in times of political tension in U.S. bilateral relations with Asian countries.

In addition, Southeast Asian Americans, in particular, are vulnerable to the hate and resentment that are linked to America's role in Southeast Asia. As refugees from the Vietnam War, Southeast Asians are living reminders of an ignominious chapter of U.S. foreign policy, a highly divisive era at home, and protracted postwar scars. Problematic rendering of the war by Hollywood and depiction of Southeast Asians in popular media reinforce the sense of nativism. On July 14, 2001, in New Hampshire, Richard Labbe brutally murdered Tung Phetakoune, an elderly Laotian man, as a “payback” for losing relatives in Vietnam, while proclaiming to the police that “...those Asians killed Americans and you won't do anything about it so I will.”¹² In 1989, in Stockton, California, Patrick Purdy opened fire on Cleveland Elementary, a school with significant Southeast Asian student population, killing six Southeast Asian children. The crime was deemed racially motivated.

Negative association with a lost and brutal war is further accentuated by the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in visible clusters, largely in neighborhoods that are already adversely impacted. As newly resettled communities emerging out of traumatic political upheavals, Southeast Asians have had to rebuild their lives often in economically impoverished neighborhoods already plagued with high unemployment, endemic poverty, and crime. As such, they have had to compete with other marginalized groups over scarce resources such as affordable housing, underfunded subsidized school programs, and low-wage jobs. Forced into these enclaves, they are viewed from the inside as competitors for shrinking services and resources, and from the outside as resisting integration and being “un-American.” In both cases, they are vulnerable to resentment and hostility.

Summit participants articulated that racism in the educational system is an extension of the racism that is embedded in American society. One youth from the Bronx reported that store-owners would often follow him around as he shopped, or would ask him and his male friends to leave the premise on the presumption that they intended to shoplift. Such racial profiling also results in many Southeast Asian youth being arbitrarily stopped and interrogated by law enforcement officials. For example, one Summit participant, a college-aged male from Des Moines, Iowa, with no criminal record, reported having been stopped on three separate occasions, physically yanked from the driver's seat, and having his person and his vehicle

12 See: Liu, Michael. N.D. “New Hampshire Balks at Hate Crime Murder of Asian American.” *Asian American Revolutionary Movement Ezine*. Accessible at: <http://www.aamovement.net/hatecrime/phetakoune1.html>. Also see http://www.napalc.org/programs/antiviolence/alerts/new_hampshire_death_update_7-30-01.htm, which describes a related advocacy effort focused on the New Hampshire Attorney General.

illegally searched, over the course of two weeks. Participants also recounted that following an assault of a Cambodian-American student by a group of Italian-American student athletes in Revere, Massachusetts, a group of Cambodian youth, driving through an Italian-American neighborhood were pulled over by police officers fearing gang retaliation, though they were not involved in the altercation. With guns pointed at them, they were frisked and interrogated about the school incident in which they were not involved. "We were made a mockery of and put on public display in the white neighborhood. We were humiliated."

As an extension of the community and of the larger society, schools are not immune to the permeation of racism. Of the 106 students surveyed, 45 percent reported having encountered one form of racism or another. Of this pool, 44 percent of the male and 32 percent of the female respondents specifically cite racism of teachers and counselors. A Hmong student at University of California, Davis, remarked:

It is difficult to believe, but not surprising, to see some college professors make racist remarks, either purposely or unintentionally. Much of this is perhaps due to misinformation and/or miscommunication. However, what is most difficult to accept is that some administrators, professors, and college students make racist remarks out of ignorance and carelessness.

Reinforcing the survey findings, Summit participants also reported numerous encounters with discrimination and racism both from school personnel and from other students:

White kids said that Cambodians eat dogs! I get angry and it makes me want to beat them up. I'm angry ' cause they make fun of my people...the white kids need to back off...how would they feel if someone picked on them...it doesn't make me want to learn.

In many instances, racialized and ethnicized hierarchy extends into the way students of color regard one another. The desires to belong and to feel superior to other groups compel some students to deny their own racial affiliation and to embrace the model minority status. In school, given the diversity of Southeast Asian Americans, Southeast Asian students may encounter discrimination not only from non-Southeast Asian students but also from other Southeast Asian students as well:

Other kids harass me because I'm Laotian. They say that Laotians eat dog and cats...the Vietnamese and white students would say this to me. It makes me mad and I want to fight with them. I can't do my work when this happens.

As captured in the quote above, such an environment has an adverse effect on learning and retention. Racial and ethnic tensions, which in some locales are escalating, have led

to the eruption of violent conflicts on school campuses and in communities. Following the altercation cited above, a racially charged fight took place in the high school. Despite indications that school officials, including security personnel and teachers, knew of the simmering tension and potential escalation, no efforts were made to intervene to forestall the violence, or to assist in conflict mediation.

An inhospitable school climate not only leads to eruption of conflict, but also contributes to learning deterrence in other ways. Research indicates that the drop-out rate among Southeast Asian youth¹³ is not always accompanied by a corresponding suspension rate. When placed in a seemingly unreceptive environment, many Southeast Asian students simply stop attending schools, in many cases without prior involvement in fights or campus incidents. This seems to support the argument that, in many cases, they are in fact “pushed out” of the educational system for reasons that, perhaps, could have been prevented.

Without effective recourse, students who are vulnerable are also turning to peer association for support and protection. Group membership becomes a viable substitute for the support and nurturing that school and families fail to provide. In many instances, instead of yielding positive reinforcement, these associations encourage problematic behavior and result in delinquency.

It is essential that schools provide an environment conducive to learning for all students. Because of their political histories and experiences, many Southeast Asian students have particular needs and concerns that must be effectively addressed if social and academic advancement is to be achieved. Schools, therefore, must have the necessary and appropriate mechanisms and programs in place to accurately assess the specific needs of our diverse student population. Moreover, appropriate and timely intervention must take place once these needs have been identified. Along this premise, students must be placed in learning environments that are intellectually challenging and that promote their total development. English learners must have the necessary linguistic, academic, and social support to allow them to advance in their overall educational development without being unnecessarily deterred by their language constraints. Given the need for a holistic approach to education, any initiative that seeks to undercut support to language minority and poor students and their families will have an adverse impact on Southeast Asian communities.

Nurturing must also come in the form of teacher and counselor expectations that are consistently high for all students. To undercut personal and institutional racism, school personnel, law enforcement officials, legislators, and all entities that impact the social and educational lives of our youth must be informed and educated about the histories, expe-

13 See: Rumbaut, R.G. and K. Ima. 1988. *The Adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth: A Comparative Study*. Final Report to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. San Diego: San Diego State University, Department of Sociology.

riences and cultures of the diverse population in their schools and communities. Schools and other vested agencies must also ensure that the knowledge and sensitivity gained by the professional development of their staff are reinforced and nurtured within their own institutional arenas so as to promote a culture of validation of our nation's diversity.

G. Absence of Language/History Courses, Active Role Models, and Southeast Asian Teachers

Summit participants pointed to two additional impediments to Southeast Asian educational empowerment. Students raised the concern over the lack of Southeast Asian language and history courses in the public schools. In particular, they emphasized the need for more Southeast Asian language courses at the secondary level; at present, in Stockton and Lodi unified school districts combined, only one high school, Lincoln High School, offers a Southeast Asian (Khmer) language course. Students also argued for a policy change that would make it consistently possible for Southeast Asian languages to be used to fulfill high school and college admission requirements. Summit participants felt that Southeast Asian students should have the choice to acquire or enhance their native language competency and not be forced to choose another foreign language to fulfill the language requirement. At present, however, only a limited number of high schools make that option possible for their students.

In the same vein, Summit participants pointed to the void in the existing curricula of the public schools and colleges, which offer virtually no opportunity for them to learn about their own history as Southeast Asian Americans, and about the histories of their ancestral countries. Thus, in addition to language courses, they would like to see Southeast Asian history being offered at the high school level as an integrated component of the state's core curriculum rather than an add-on component of certain commemorative events such as Asia Pacific Heritage Month. Topics such as the Vietnam War, for instance, should be taught as an integral aspect of U.S. history, but are often overlooked or underemphasized.

Consistent with their need to have an instructional curriculum that is meaningful to them and which they can relate to their own experiences, Southeast Asian students also point to the lack of active role models in general, and of Southeast Asian teachers in particular. Though Southeast Asian students continue to feel alienated and marginalized on many college campuses, the need for this mentorship is particularly critical at the elementary and secondary levels.

Other Barriers to Educational Achievement

A. Cultural Constraints

*My parents don't understand why I'm going to school.
Similarly, I don't understand why they don't understand.*

—Laotian college student

Summit participants pointed to intergenerational gap as an added challenge to the cohesiveness of the Southeast Asian family institution, which has already been gravely undermined by war and displacement. Altered family structure and an uneven pace of adaptation to American society and culture have resulted in a fundamental reversal of gender and generational roles. The high rate of un- and underemployment of Southeast Asian males and high percentage of female-headed households have placed unprecedented importance on women as principal income generators, and on employment outside the home. Likewise, the comparatively faster rate of acculturation of Southeast Asian youth has seen the corresponding acquisition of power and responsibility, often unmatched by the level of social maturity. In limited English proficient households, Southeast Asian youth, who have become decision makers and indispensable culture and information brokers, are forced, in general, to assume adult roles and responsibilities. These changes necessitate a fundamental renegotiation of power relations across gender and generational lines, which, if unsuccessful, may result in further destabilization of the family institution. Thus, while refugee youth may experience a greater sense of empowerment, this is often accompanied by the *disempowerment* of the adults in the family, the relinquishment of parental responsibilities and seeming loss of control of Southeast Asian parents. Domestic violence and substance abuse are some of the more observable signs of family destabilization.

While Southeast Asian families are subjected to multiple and compounding challenges, many are without the internal resources to manage them. Acculturation has resulted in linguistic and cultural disruption and the breakdown of intrafamilial communication. In the acquisition of English proficiency, Southeast Asian American youth often lose their ancestral language. Given that many Southeast Asian parents and elders have limited command of English, this language loss seriously impedes intergenerational communication. Thus, although Vietnamese or Khmer (Cambodian) may be listed as the home language on school documents, actual communication within the family is often a mixture of imperfectly spoken languages, which limits intrafamilial exchange both in substance and quantity.

The loss of their primary language also results in cultural disconnection, leading to conflict in values and expectations. Summit participants pointed to fundamental differences between Western and Southeast Asian societies, particularly as they involve practices and philosophies about child-rearing, parent-child relations, and gender roles. Parents who grew up in Southeast Asia have different values, perspectives, and expectations from their children who grew up, or were born, in the U.S. In Southeast Asia, obedience, filial piety, and deference to the larger collective of family and clan are moral virtues taught in school and reinforced in the home and community. From very early on in their youth, many Southeast Asian parents were given responsibilities because of the need or the obligation to assist their families. As a result, they expect similar levels of early maturity, responsibility, and self-sacrifice from their children. Given their own socialization, Southeast Asian parents often view release from these responsibilities as the ultimate form of support that they, as parents, can extend to their children, and cannot understand why it is not sufficient.

The younger generation of Southeast Asians, however, having received most if not all of their socialization in America, grew up with a different, and at times conflictual, set of values. Nonetheless, they expect their parents to be “Americanized” as they are, and to behave “as American parents do,” which often translates to being openly expressive with their affection, endorsing their children’s individuality and individualism, and granting them the freedom and latitude of personal choice. Thus, while Southeast Asian parents may regard restraint from open praise as a cultural norm, designed to strengthen character and instill humility and the drive towards excellence, or simply “as being who we are,” their children look upon it as absence of communication and lack of parental affection. While Southeast Asian parents consider “support” to mean providing basic necessities and material comfort, their children measure it in terms of their demonstrated interest in their academic and social life. Like many non-Southeast Asian educators, Southeast Asian youth may interpret the lack of assertiveness and involvement of parents and elders in their educational process as ignorance, “culturally backward” fear of authority, or outright disregard for their academic well-being and for education. They often fail to consider the economic and other constraints that may impede such involvement.

Imbued with the notions of individualism and egalitarianism of American society, younger generation Southeast Asians have difficulty reconciling with age and gender hierarchies,

and with the “top-down” mode of communication within the family and community. Many Southeast Asian youth point to the cultural insistence on respect for, and unquestioning obedience of, elders as undercutting the much-needed dialogues across gender and generational lines. Female Summit participants, in particular, point to added constraints faced by Southeast Asian American women, which gravely impact their educational access. Many recounted not being allowed to pursue extracurricular activities because they are expected to be home when not in class, for fear of community scrutiny, or because of the responsibilities bestowed on them by virtue of being female members of the household. Some reflected on the burden of having the family reputation being made to rest on their personal virtue as daughters and sisters which has contributed, in many instances, to the pressure towards early marriage. A young Hmong college student from Richmond, California, reflected:

I think that being who we are, Hmong, there are set gender roles...and our parents and grandparents still uphold the gender boundaries. I also believe that...this strict bias, particularly against single females [moving] towards higher education, causes them to refrain from taking the opportunity to study at great institutions that are most likely far and away from home....

Another young woman from California State University, San Luis Obispo, speaks to the gendered view on higher education:

If a male goes away to college, he gets high praise and only greatness is to be expected of him. If a female goes away to college, she gets talked about; people question her intentions and doubt her abilities.

It is important to note that, although many participants look upon these cultural norms and practices as stunting their personal and intellectual growth, some found in these challenges the determination to succeed. As this young Hmong woman puts it:

In the Hmong culture, women are usually oppressed. But that made me work harder. A lot of parents want their daughters to stay near home. But I wanted to go beyond and try to show that it's okay for women to be independent and educated.

Others echoed the same sense of determination:

Although my parents know my potential, they doubted my intentions. That doubt has pushed me to this point in my life and I continue to pursue higher education because of that.

As school got harder, the thing that kept me going were the female stereotypes, especially the Hmong ones where the girl usually gets pregnant in high school, has to get married, and drop out of school. I was afraid to be one of those girls. Also, I knew how hard my parents had worked to give me an easy life. I felt that the least I could do was get an education and someday support them in their old age.

Many female participants acknowledged that cultural constraints that undercut their social lives essentially force them to focus on their studies, if for no other reasons than that “there is nothing else to do.”

Intergenerational conflict also emerges in the area of personal attire and comportment. Southeast Asian youth feel that they are often stereotyped by the way they dress and the music they enjoy. Because of the emphasis that Southeast Asian cultures place on form and perception, many parents fear that others may judge their children by their outward appearances; thus, even though they themselves may understand that these manifestations are harmless, they are mindful of the community opinion. As parents, some are concerned that their children may be mistakenly implicated in gang association by virtue of their appearances. Others simply have little understanding of their children’s lifestyles, and as one student conceded, “Parents are afraid of what they don’t know....” The uneven pace of acculturation, linguistic barriers, and a limited understanding of American society and the educational system, all combine to keep many parents disconnected from the reality of their children’s lives, and isolated in their own fears and anxieties.

Issues regarding educational trajectory and career choice can also be the source of intergenerational conflict. Because of their own experiences with uncertainty, many Southeast Asian parents want their children to pursue occupational paths that are stable and economically rewarding. Others want their children to enter professions that fill existing needs in the community. Still others are unaware of the multitude of choices and opportunities present in the U.S., and tend to encourage their children towards conventional career options. Many Southeast Asian youth, on the other hand, would like to explore the myriad of alternatives that are available to them. The inability to resolve the internal conflict between commitment to one’s own intellectual quest and the obligation to the family is a common source of psychological burden for Southeast Asian youth. Fear of failure, at times, becomes paralyzing as students feel the weight of responsibility not only for their personal success, but also for their family’s reputation. In some cases, despite their achievement, students, nonetheless, feel that they have “failed” the family:

They [parents] want me to go to college but have a problem that I’m an Ethnic Studies major. They always want me to be a doctor; sometimes I feel that they are disappointed that I threw away my opportunity to become something.

Thus, while they emphasized the importance of family support, Southeast Asian youth point to the distinction between “demanding success” and “offering encouragement to succeed.”

Because the cultural and linguistic divide often impedes communication within the family, many of these contentious issues are often not openly addressed, and both elders and youth are left feeling that their perspectives are not given due consideration. Feeling misunderstood and invalidated, many Southeast Asian youth turn to each other or, in some cases, to problematic associations for companionship and moral support. In all, these challenges point to the weak or absent support systems that exist in Southeast Asian homes and communities—contesting the widely-held myth about the Asian family which assumes internal cohesiveness and collective support, access to an established resource base both at home and in the community, and a capacity to prepare and position youth for academic excellence.

B. Economic Constraints

For Southeast Asian Americans, the challenge is both to gain admission into and complete college. In addition to the barriers to college admission, there are equally significant barriers to successful completion. For the few who do make it to college, fewer still actually graduate. The problem of retention and the challenges of college completion that Southeast Asian students encounter are rooted in many factors. Given the high rate of poverty, particularly in the Cambodian and Laotian American communities, economic hardship remains one of the key impediments to higher education. Of the Southeast Asian students surveyed, 36 percent listed financial constraints as the biggest obstacle to their educational pursuit, while 26 percent listed the lack of time to study, presumably due to competing demands, as a key challenge. While student responses consistently identify the family as a central force in educational achievement, it is also true that, in many instances, family obligations present added challenges to the attainment of higher education. Many Southeast Asian males, in particular, feel the pressure to contribute financially to the family, which often results in early employment and postponement of further education or in pressure to take on multiple jobs while in college.

While some institutions of higher education have begun to recognize the necessity of recruitment outreach to under-represented communities, most remain insufficiently attentive to the challenges of retention. For under-represented student populations, such as Southeast Asian Americans, a significant part of the problem lies in the smallness of their numbers. Considered statistically negligible, these smaller populations are commonly lumped into the miscellaneous category of “Other Asians,” which further masks their particular issues and concerns. In institutions and programs that do not regard Asian Americans as under-represented or as populations with recognizable needs, Southeast Asian students, as a result of this aggregation, are denied access to critical resources and support. With regards to student enrollment, the California State Universities have a

better system of accounting for their diverse student populations. The UC system lags behind in this process: Vietnamese Americans have only been recently given a separate, designated category on the application form, while Cambodian and Laotian Americans continue to be lumped in the “Other Asians” category. Without group-specific data and information, these smaller constituencies virtually do not exist from the institutional perspective, and their interests and concerns are not considered in policy and programmatic decisions. Hence, they are essentially caught in the vicious cycle of invisibility, marginality, and persistent under-representation.

Recommendations

Key recommendations emerging from the Summit discussion are in the following areas:

- Promoting parent, youth, and community advocacy to address educational concerns of Southeast Asian youth;
- Rethinking the existing educational curriculum to reflect more accurately the complexity of American history and society;
- Fostering collaboration among stakeholders to enhance the educational achievement of Southeast Asians in secondary and post-secondary institutions;
- Creating a scholarship program and coordinating institution; and
- Organizing activities, such as parent-student conferences, to strengthen inter-generational communication.

A. Need for Mobilization and Advocacy

For Southeast Asian students to have more equitable access to education, Southeast Asian families and communities need to actively advocate for the educational rights of their youth. Though it is the responsibility of schools to ensure that all students are treated equitably, anecdotal evidence, supported by statistics on low academic performance and school failure, strongly suggests that Southeast Asian students are among the most disenfranchised of the student populations. Families and community groups need to devise effective ways to mobilize around these critical concerns.

B. Need for Parent Education

For mobilization and advocacy to be possible, Southeast Asian parents must be empowered through increased knowledge of the American educational system, of their rights as parents, and of the rights of their children in the schools. Effective parent education will promote parent involvement, allowing them to become more active and proactive in their children's education.

C. Strengthening Community-Based Organizations and Building Family-Community School Collaboration

To promote capacity for advocacy, community-based organizations, dedicated to working with parents, must be supported in their endeavors. These organizations, in turn, can assist in the development and implementation of outreach and educational support programs by working collaboratively with college students, student groups, and national organizations to promote information access and the overall educational advancement of Southeast Asian students. College students, in particular, can be mobilized to conduct workshops at various middle schools and high schools on topics such as college admission, retention, and financial aid programs to assist underprivileged students. To foster more effective networking, Summit participants highlighted the importance of creating Southeast Asian student organizations in local high schools, and of promoting collaboration among various student networks in high schools and colleges. Additionally, collaboration among different Southeast Asian clubs in the local high schools is regarded as an important aspect of this networking process.

D. Development of a Scholarship Program and Coordinating Institution

In addition to promoting access to critical information, student participants also saw the need to create a national Southeast Asian scholarship program to undercut the economic impediment to higher education. Such a program, and its corollary outreach component, must be designed and structured to be easily accessible to the Southeast Asian student population, and with due consideration given to the particular needs and characteristics of that community.

E. Strengthening the Support Structure in Families and Schools

Student participants also proposed a regular convening of a parent-student conference where Southeast Asian youth and their elders can share their experiences, expectations, and concerns. Such a forum would help bridge the intergenerational gap, reinforce the importance of family support in the educational process, and ultimately promote

greater family involvement. Students also suggested that families and communities work with schools to encourage educators' participation in training workshops and conferences dealing with Southeast Asian American issues. This proposal is aimed at increasing educators' and administrators' awareness of issues and challenges facing their Southeast Asian student constituencies.

F. Addressing the Lack or Absence of Language and History Courses, and of Active Role Models

High school student representatives at the Summit were particularly inspired by the effective mobilization of the Cambodian community in Lowell, Massachusetts, to push for the offering of a Khmer language course in the high schools. Summit participants felt that the Lowell advocacy and community mobilization model could, and needs to, be replicated in other school districts and communities.

Appendix I

A. State and Condition of Southeast Asian Communities in California: Census 1990

	Vietnamese	Cambodian	Laotian	Hmong
Total Population in U.S.	615,547	147,411	149,014	90,082
Total Population in California	276,759	71,178	60,627	49,343
% Females in Population	47%	52%	49%	48%
Mean Age of Population ^a	26.78	22.55	22.27	17.91
% Population <25 years old	48%	60.5%	60.6%	72.1%
% Population >65 years old	3.1%	2.7%	3.1%	2.6%
Mean Children/Household	1.41	2.41	2.5	4.12
% Households with >1 Family	14.2%	11.4%	15.3%	17.1%
% Single Parent Female-Headed Households	9.13%	17.13% ^b	11%	7.25%
Mean Years of Formal Schooling	9.58	6.15	5.59	4.67
% Population with College Degrees	16.6%	5.5%	6.7%	3%
% Population with No High School	38.8%	67.1%	67.9%	74.1%
% Population in Professional Sector	16.9%	11.1%	7%	11.4%
% Population in Semi-skilled Sector	19.1%	23.6%	29.5%	23.8%
% Population Unemployed	9.68%	12.27%	13.62%	20.72%
Median Household Income (U.S.\$) ^c	\$32,000	\$31,404	\$17,092	\$18,850
Per Capita Income (U.S.\$) ^d	\$10,724	\$5,382	\$4,566	\$3,309
% Population Below Poverty Line	24.2%	43.8%	49.9%	55.1%
% Population on Public Assistance	22.5%	54.8%	57.6%	61.7%
% Population Who Are Non-Citizens	49.38%	67.55%	68.07%	58.6%
% Population Who Are Linguistically Isolated ^e	44.6%	60.4% ^f	65.8%	66.8%

a The overall percentage of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians <25 years old was 45%.

b In Oregon=20.87%, and Washington State=25.21%.

c For the state of California, the median income was \$34,798.

d For the state of California, the per capita income was \$20,676.

e Only about 25%–33% of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans considered themselves able to speak English well or very well.

f In Washington State=65.7%.

B. Population on Public Assistance (%): Census 1990

	Vietnamese	Cambodian	Laotian	Hmong
California	22.5%	54.8%	57.6%	61.7%
Oregon	8.06%	17.1%	7.89%	13.13%
Washington State	16.84%	45.54%	26.83%	19.15%

C. Migration and Residency Cohorts of Populations (%): Census 1990

	US Born	1975-1979	1980-1981	1982-1984	1987-1990
Vietnamese American	16.8%	26.8%	20.2%	—	—
Cambodian American	22.1%	8.6%	22.1%	21%	—
Hmong American	34.6%	13.6%	20.8%	—	20.1%

Appendix II

A. Cambodian Householders Living Alone (%): Census 1990

	Male	Female
California	2.7%	2.4%
Washington State	3.8%	4.1%

B. Average Family Size in California and Washington State: Census 1990

	Vietnamese	Cambodian	Laotian	Hmong
California	4.19	4.94	5.10	6.42
Washington State	3.87	4.39	4.31	6.35

Appendix III

A. Demographics by Race Alone or in Any Combination with One or More Other Categories of Same Race: Census 2000

	Cambodian	Hmong	Laotian	Vietnamese	Total SEAn Population
Total Population in U.S.^a	206,052	186,310	198,203	1,223,736	1,814,301
Total Population in Top 5 States					
California	84,559	71,741	65,058	484,023	705,381
Texas	8,225	422	11,626	143,352	163,625
Minnesota	6,533	45,443	11,516	20,570	84,062
Washington State	16,630	1,485	9,382	50,697	78,194
Massachusetts	22,886	1,303	4,449	36,685	65,323

^a Note that historically the U.S. Census Bureau has consistently undercounted minority populations.

Appendix IV

A. Data Based on Surveys Administered to Southeast Asian Students in Post-Secondary Institutions in California and Massachusetts

Percentage of students who:

- Had experienced racism from teachers and counselors, broken down by gender

44% (<i>Male</i>)
32% (<i>Female</i>)
- Had encountered racism in any form 45%
- Considered financial constraint as key impediment to educational advancement 36%
- Considered lack of study time as key impediment to educational advancement 26%
- Felt that high school did not prepare them well for college 32%
- Felt that high school did not prepare them well for college, broken down to institutional categories

31% (<i>4-year institutions</i>)
36% (<i>2-year institutions</i>)
- Felt that they have no support in their educational pursuit 19%
- Felt that they have no support in their educational pursuit (in 2-year institutions) 56%

Notes

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