Why Education Data Disaggregation Matters:
Challenges and Opportunities for Closing the Achievement Gap for Southeast Asian American Students

■ BACKGROUND

Data disaggregation is imperative for uncovering the social, economic, and educational disparities inherent not only in Asian Pacific Islander (API) American communities but in all ethnic populations. Understanding the breadth of diversity can lead to the development of successful programs and services that address the unique needs of populations in need. This issue paper on data disaggregation focuses on Southeast Asian Americans—a subgroup of the larger Asian Pacific Islander (API) population—but its recommendations are applicable to all ethnic, gender, and other minority communities.

Southeast Asians in America include but are not limited to the Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese populations that have endured hardships and dislocation after the end of the Vietnam War. Thousands of Southeast Asian families sought asylum in the U.S. as refugees through family reunification programs from the 1970s to 1990s. Compared to the immigration history of other peoples coming from Asia, they have a significantly shorter history in the U.S., struggling to navigate the different systems in this country with very little education and English skills.

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The importance of disaggregating data is exemplified by the needs of Southeast Asian American students. Often categorized as "Asian," their lower academic achievement rates are overshadowed by the Model Minority stereotype that all Asian students excel in academics. These students face such challenges as limited English proficiency, high rates of poverty, and cultural and linguistic barriers to navigating the educational system. For example, the 2010 American Community Survey reported that 38.4% of Laotian, 39.2% of Cambodian, 37.6% of Hmong, and 51.5% of Vietnamese Americans speak English less than "very well."

■ KEY DATA AND FINDINGS

The hearing sprang from the findings of "The Academic Challenges of Southeast Asians at Fresno State," authored by Gena Lew Gong, lecturer in anthropology; Hiromi Kubo, librarian at the Henry Madden Library; and Dr. Yoshiko Takahashi, associate professor in criminology. Sponsored in 2013 by the Fresno State Asian Faculty and Staff Association, the researchers studied the educational disparities of API and Southeast Asian students on campus. The ethnic composition of the API student population was unique in that Southeast Asians (Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese) comprised a majority (54.5%) of all API students enrolled.[1] With this backdrop, key data and findings are as follows:

- In 2013, API students at Fresno State had an 8% four-year graduation rate and a 43% six-year graduation rate.[2] They fell behind their white and

■ API CENTRAL VALLEY HEARING

On September 5, 2014 the California Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander American Affairs held a public hearing on "Why Education Data Disaggregation Matters: Challenges and Opportunities for Closing the Achievement Gap for Southeast Asian American Students." Held in the Fresno City Council Chambers, attendees included educational administrators and staff, educators, elected officials, community-based organizations, service providers, advocates, parents, students, and community members. A session of public comments and questions followed the hearing.

Topics of presentation included: factors that contribute to low academic achievement rates among Southeast Asian American students; use of data to determine recruitment and retention; how data disaggregation applies to funding for services as the state moves to local control over funding; and a case study on educational challenges facing Southeast Asian students at California State University, Fresno.

Panel topics included: demystifying the Model Minority Myth; importance of disaggregating subgroup data to promote success for Southeast Asian youth; local advocacy efforts around local control of funding; and policy advocacy opportunities at the federal and local levels.

City of Fresno District 1 Councilmember Blong Xiong hosted the hearing. Sponsorship included Central California Asian Pacific Women and the UC Berkeley Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society.

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- Southeast Asian students experienced challenges beyond the classroom, such as balancing familial obligations and lack of parental support in the home (70% of parents had a high school degree or less); they strived to overcome significant academic deficits (97% of incoming freshmen needed English remediation and 70% needed math remediation).[3]

- 97% of Hmong students were first-generation college students.[4]

- Hmong students came from larger households (6.8 on average) and 62% were from lower income households (combined incomes of less than $24,000/year).[5]

- Southeast Asian students were less likely to communicate with faculty about academics or career plans and lacked trust in faculty and other students. However, they were more willing—and more appreciative— to use on-campus resources such as the writing center, financial aid, and student success services.

- Although Fresno State is a federally-designated Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI), there are no coordinated programs or services targeted to Southeast Asian students' needs on campus.

> API students at Fresno State fell behind their white and Hispanic peers as well as their API counterparts at other CSU campuses in overall retention and graduation rates.

■ RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **State legislation regarding data disaggregation must be revisited and disaggregated data collection incentivized.** An example is AB 1098 (Eng), which requires the Department of Education to collect consistent statewide data and disaggregate the information by API subgroups across school districts, colleges, and university campuses. The bill would allow schools to draw down additional federal funds for disadvantaged students. Consistent data disaggregation can significantly impact the accountability of local control funding formulas, enabling collaboration for closing the educational achievement gaps for API student subgroups in all local school districts.

> "Better data brings better policies. Being counted means that you have a voice."
>
> **CONGRESSMAN MIKE HONDA**

2. **The All Students Count Act is an important model for federal legislation regarding disaggregated data.** Introduced by Congressman Mike Honda, it would require state education agencies to report disaggregated data at the K-12 levels, including breaking down API student populations by subgroups and cross-tabulating gender and disability in annual state report cards. All Students Count is being propelled by an active movement of API students in California and across the country—with widespread support from more than 150 organizations, including the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, and National Women's Law Center. The act will benefit all communities of color across ethnicity, gender, and disability characteristics, among others.

3. Although K-12 schools, colleges, and universities have begun to collect new data for API subgroups, **research is needed to further analyze the racial/ ethnic subgroups cross-tabulated by gender, enrollment, academic achievement, and other factors.** Coupled with stories of the experiences of students and their families, the data can elevate the information uncovering the educational disparities of all ethnic groups.

4. **New data that is collected and disaggregated by educational institutions must be made publicly available and accessible** to students, parents, academic counselors, and support service providers so that they can provide input to address educational disparities and in the design of culturally and linguistically responsive resources. This also means informationmust be translated at a level that is comprehensible to parents; in cases where written translation is not appropriate, it is vital to form partnerships with key community leaders and organizations to verbally spread the information.

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[1] Office of Institutional Effectiveness data reports, Enrollment Reporting System, Fall 2013.
[2] Ibid.
[3] *Academic Characteristics of 2009 First-time Freshmen Hmong College Students at a Western University* (p. 1), by F.M. Lee, 2013, n.p.
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Hmong* (p. 1), by N. Rudd & M.T. Fernandez, 2013, Fresno, CA: Institutional Research, Assessment and Planning at California State University, Fresno.