

Asian American Students Find Academic, Cultural Support at UIC

By Alexandra Vollman



Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) — a population projected to reach nearly 40 million people by 2050, according to U.S. Census Bureau data — make up the fastest growing student population in higher education. Between 1979 and 2009, this group experienced a 553 percent increase in college enrollment and is expected to grow an additional 35 percent over the next 10 years, indicating a need for colleges and universities to develop support structures to best serve these students.

Enrolling 41.2 percent of all AAPI undergraduates nationally, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) play an important role in educating these individuals, many of whom face significant barriers to higher education. According to the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, a large percentage of AAPI students at these institutions are first-generation and low-income. In addition, they are more likely to be immigrants and non-native English speakers.

At the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), 22 percent and 0.2 percent of all undergraduates identify as Asian American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, respectively; these figures do not reflect multiracial individuals. Furthermore, in a survey of Asian American UIC students, 37 percent of respondents identified as first-generation, 28 percent indicated a household income of \$29,999 a year or less, and 48 percent said that the primary language spoken by those who raised them is not English.

“It is critical to provide services to ELL (English-language-learner), first-generation, and low-income students because they are often the most vulnerable populations on our campuses,” says Jeffrey Alton, associate director of the Asian American Resource and Cultural Center (AARCC) at UIC. “Also, for Asian and Asian American students, the added notion of the model minority myth, that all Asians are successful and smart, may be hampering the institution’s recognition of their need for support.”



Jeffrey Alton

To combat this issue, UIC, a federally designated AANAPISI since 2010 and the first institution in the Midwest to receive this designation, offers its AAPI students academic, social, and cultural support.

Beyond these efforts, the university’s AANAPISI Initiative seeks to enhance academic curricular and co-curricular opportunities as well as foster community engagement for AAPI students. Although Asian Americans comprise the majority of students in the program, the university is working with its Native American Support Program to strengthen outreach to and serve Pacific Islander students.

The program has been fully funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s AANAPISI Program via three grants totaling \$5.4 million over 10 years. These grants were acquired through a team of AARCC staff and Global Asian Studies (GLAS) faculty led by Karen Su, PhD, who has served as principal

investigator and project director for UIC’s AANAPISI Initiative since 2013.

One of the most significant aspects of the initiative is the Asian American Mentor Program (AAMP), lead by Alton, AARCC staff, and GLAS faculty. Every student who identifies as AAPI is invited to join. With both a summer and fall component, AAMP’s mission is to help these students successfully transition to college life at UIC. One goal of the current \$1.5 million grant (2015-2020) focuses specifically on recruiting AAPI students who are eligible to attend UIC’s Summer College to join AAMP.

Summer AAMP is a six-week program that takes place during the Summer College and offers tutoring in writing and math workshops while providing an opportunity for incoming students to connect to the Asian American community at UIC. In Fall AAMP, new students are paired with peer mentors in a one-credit GLAS course taught by Su. The class focuses on pop culture and media stereotypes, college life, study tips, and more, and students explore a variety of topics related to Asian American culture and identity via small and large group activities, readings, reflections, and other assignments.

Beyond GLAS, mentors serve as their mentees’ main connecting point to the overall university community as well as the Asian American community on campus, as many mentors are also Asian American. Mentors show the students around campus and the city, introduce them to on-campus resources such as the Writing and Counseling Centers, recommend strategies for

navigating the transition to college, and share personal experiences. This year, the program has 34 mentors and 42 mentees, and Alton believes the large number of Asian American mentors leads to even more positive experiences for the mentees.

“It is important to pair students with similar backgrounds because it creates a connection or bridge. I have so many students who say, ‘I love my mentor because she understands what my family is like,’” Alton says, adding

their identities, and AAMP becomes the first place where they learn about things that impact them, such as the model minority myth, the perpetual foreigner [stereotype], and microaggressions,” says Alton. “Perpetual foreigner” is the perception that Asian Americans, no matter how long their families have lived in the U.S., are not true Americans and instead are always seen as foreigners.

Alton says that students in the program also have the opportunity

other Asian American peers share their experiences and struggles with their own families’ demands. “By hearing the stories of others, students in the program gain a sense of validation and understanding of why their parents have these expectations, as well as gain insight into how others in similar circumstances navigated through them.”

While the university is still gathering quantitative evidence of AAMP’s impact, the bond students form clearly has a positive effect on their outcomes.



Left: Students navigate UIC’s campus in Chicago’s Near West Side neighborhood. (photo by Elizabeth Monge) **Right:** UIC students in the Asian American Mentoring Program listen to a speaker. (photo by Vibhu S. Rangavasan)

that just because a student is not of the same race doesn’t mean he or she is not a good mentor. “For the mentors that do not identify as Asian American, they are provided a lot of training and insight into the issues that these students face.”

According to Alton, the most prominent issues Asian American students face are financial support beyond aid, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, a high level of parental expectations, and comfort with their identity. Through AAMP, these students are encouraged to examine their cultural identities — and the issues that accompany them — via reading assignments, videos, and discussions with their mentors and professors.

“Many have never thought about

to explore the intersection of their identities, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, immigration status, and learning style. Furthermore, AAMP helps students manage parental expectations and pressure — and the stress those can cause.

“Many of our students are either first- or second-generation [college students], so their families expect them to be in majors that provide job security, a sense of accomplishment, and high incomes,” Alton says, adding that this often leads them to study fields such as medicine, business, or engineering. “About 40 percent of our students struggle to earn the GPA required to be competitive candidates to medical or professional school.”

Mentees listen as their mentors and

And although the program runs only through the end of the fall semester, Alton says that mentors and mentees remain in close contact, and many mentees later serve as mentors.

“I have many alumni come to tell me that AAMP really impacted them,” he says. “They discovered a sense of confidence, pride, and understanding that helped them get through college and has given them a strong foundation as working professionals and graduate students.” ●

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