Historical Overview of the Model Minority Concept

Are Asian Americans Considered Racial Minorities in Higher Education?

While the stereotype of Asian Americans as “model minorities”—naturally gifted, hard-working, and socially passive—is often perceived by Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans alike as a “positive stereotype,” many scholars have revealed that Asian American students face double barriers based on the model minority stereotype. They are touted as superachievers, not requiring special programs for recruitment and retention efforts, but at the same time, they face limitations in opportunities based on the assumptions of their overrepresentation, especially in relation to the more underrepresented Asian American ethnic groups (Hune, 2002, 2011; Teranishi, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2009). Touting overachievement yet remaining fearful of overrepresentation points to the precarious position Asian Americans have occupied in society as a whole, and not merely higher education. Thus, the model minority is constantly in dialogue with another established Asian American stereotype—the “yellow peril.” Between these two stereotypes, Asian Americans are hypersuccessful academically or they constitute a threat to the normative structure of thinking about race relations. Throughout history, these ideas have undergirded the prevailing notion that Asian Americans exist outside the framework of normalcy. In what legal scholar Angelo Ancheta has termed “outsider racialization” (Ancheta, 1997), the ways in which Asian Americans have been
constructed in our social and political history have rested on ensuring their “forever foreigner” status (Tuan, 1999). Despite the concept of race itself as a social construct, the racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994) of minorities in the United States has resulted in reified structural laws and practices that produced very real and legitimate stratification of life chances and limited access to upward mobility for all people of color, including Asian Americans.

The current minority status of Asian Americans in higher education has certainly come to challenge prevalent understandings of American racial relations since the 1960s and 1970s, when Asian Americans were fully integrated and included in the civil rights and affirmative action discourse. On many college campuses, particularly those elite private and public institutions, the status of Asian American students as minorities (or not) depends on certain organizational interests. On the one hand, Asian Americans may be included in promoting diversity in terms of college enrollment and praised as contributing toward an inclusive environment. On the other hand, however, services typically reserved for minority students, such as affirmative action in admissions, financial aid for underrepresented/underprivileged students, and diversity-related programming efforts in academic and student services, become severely limited or even foreclosed from Asian Americans. For example, the National Science Foundation (NSF) does not consider AAPIs as an “underrepresented” group, thereby excluding them from grants and other financial support (Teranishi, Maramba, & Ta, 2012). A number of higher education institutions, such as the University of Illinois, follow NSF’s definition and further lay exclusionary practices for campus-wide fellowships aimed at underrepresented minorities. Some Asian American groups, such as the 80–20 Educational Foundation, and those in the mainstream have held firmly to the belief of Asian American students’ overachievement, claiming that affirmative action efforts inhibit the process of meritocracy to come to fruition (further fueling the debate of African American, American Indian, and Latina/o underachievement).

Conversely, proponents for race-conscious measures to include Asian Americans contend that despite significant gains by some, most Asian Americans still remain heavily underrepresented in multiple aspects of the university, including but not limited to non-STEM academic programs, staff, faculty,
and civil service workers (e.g., Hune, 2006; Maramba, 2011a; Maramba & Nadal, 2013). Therefore, the question of whether or not Asian Americans are a racial minority within higher education inevitably raises the question of where the boundaries of higher education are drawn, and which characterizations of “majorities” and “minorities” are given primacy over others.

The Various Shades of the Yellow Peril

The idea of Asians constituting an overrepresented minority, and as a potential threat, became popularized with the phrase “yellow peril.” During the Gold Rush era of the 19th century, the United States saw a vast migration wave to the West Coast from far and wide, and Chinese immigration was a significant aspect of this population boom. Like many other (predominantly male) sojourners from the United States and abroad, the prospect of finding wealth became the pull factor bringing them to burgeoning cities that were created on their way to the Yukon territories (Chan, 1991).

The popularization of the phrase “yellow peril” is attributed to writer and journalist Jack London in his writings for the Hearst newspapers of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904 (Métraux, 2010). The term itself is believed to have come from German Kaiser Wilhelm II following Japan’s defeat of China in 1895 in the first Sino-Japanese War, signaling Japan’s rise to military and industrial powers at the time. “Soon, however, it took on a broader more sinister meaning embracing all of Asia. The ‘Yellow Peril’ highlighted diverse fears including the supposed threat of military invasion from Asia, competition to the white labor force from Asian American workers, the moral degeneracy of Asian people, and the specter of genetic mixing of Anglo-Saxons with Asians” (Métraux, 2010, para. 3). Other historians provide further evidence of how the transnational migration of Asians across the America in the mid-19th century created and reshaped the idea of the yellow peril as a more imminent threat on a global scale (E. Lee, 2007), expanding beyond the boundaries of the United States.

Such fears would work to enforce race-based restrictions against Asian immigration in the United States through the Page Act (1875), Chinese
Exclusion Act (1882), Gentlemen’s Agreement (1907), and the Asiatic barred-zone Immigration Act (1917), virtually curtailing any immigration from Asia. Each of these laws was implemented to contest any sort of Asian presence in the social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes of America. Domestically they were also complemented by various laws, which prevented Asian Americans from naturalizing as citizens, owning property, and marrying interracially, among many other *de facto* restrictions. In 1952, the McCarran–Walter Act overturned aspects of the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 and also provided more limited entry of Asians to immigrate to the United States. More than a decade later, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 overturned all restrictive aspects of the 1924 Immigration Act and allowed for more open immigration to the United States from all over the world, giving preference to family reunification and trained professionals in American industries short on labor. The significance of the act’s passage accounts for the majority of Asian American population growth in the country today.

Figure 2 provides the historical growth of Asian American populations in the United States, with projected growth, which reveals the significance of immigration policies post-1960s.

The Asian American and Pacific Islander population is an ever-growing and diverse group, where new ethnic groups continue to arrive under various circumstances. More recent waves of Asian Americans who are immigrating to the United States through family reunification immigration policies may differ from earlier waves of post-1965 immigrants who directly benefited from job placement through company sponsorship of their visas. Without these same benefits, newer Asian immigrants are therefore often subject to underemployment and nontraditional familial living arrangements where extended families (grandparents, adult siblings, nieces, nephews, cousins, etc.) beyond the prototypical nuclear family arrangement cohabit. Furthermore, the arrival of Southeast Asian groups from war-torn countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from the 1970s through the 1990s, has troubled the popular conception of the overachieving, affluent model minority, which was largely based on stereotypes of East Asian immigrants. Rather than migrating under ideal circumstances, these waves of refugees arrived in the United
States without the same resources as other Asian American immigrants who had higher education degrees, training for professional careers, and a greater degree of freedom to choose their place of settlement. Thus, it is significant to note that because Southeast Asians did not easily fit within the frames of public reference of being the successful Asian, some have come to be “ideologically blackened” (Ong, 2003). This term signifies those Asians, southeast in particular, who become categorized as criminals and cultural delinquents who defy the common conception of the model minority. Thus, Southeast Asians are racialized in a manner that upholds status quo in two ways: (a) as immigrant refugees from Asia, they are considered part of the yellow peril that is supposedly overpopulating the country and (b) taking opportunities away from deserving Americans. Furthermore, their ideological blackening separates them from the predominantly East Asian model minority, labeling them as outliers who are simply not treated as part of the discourse of Asian America, but rather a marginalized “Other” that does not fit into any preconceived notion of racial mores.
The Modern “Model Minority” Emerges

The passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, which facilitated an influx of Asian immigration, and the simultaneous time period of sweeping civil rights legislation converged to create an interesting historical moment. While one event did not directly influence the other, the processes of change that occurred during that time gave way for the modern model minority stereotype to emerge. With African Americans at the forefront in fomenting structural changes for equality and equity under the law, the clamor that it raised, in the minds of many, necessitated a counter response. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the United States had seemingly ended all forms of institutionalized discrimination. In search of a means to purport the political successes of these new legislations on both a domestic and an international level, Asian Americans were chosen as the poster children of a new equitable American ideal, which was presumably attained via a meritocratic and equal-footed quest.

It should be noted, however, that how Asians have been politically and racially positioned was nothing new. Scholars have noted how popular culture’s lauding of Chinese immigrants’ predilection for hard work and obedience was used in comparison to freed slaves during Reconstruction and Irish immigrants in the North (Wu, 2003). Ironically, however, while the Chinese were noted for their work ethic, they (Asians writ large) were still seen as unfit for citizenship in the debates that led up to the ratification of the 14th Amendment supposedly extending citizenship rights to African Americans and securing equal protection under the law (Anderson, 2007). The now deliberate reemergence of Asian Americans as the model minority in the 1960s became popularized through two early publications. One of the most often-cited references comes from University of California, Berkeley, sociologist, William Petersen’s (1966) *New York Times Magazine* article, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.” The article begins by asking which minority group in the United States faced some of its worst atrocities, thus drawing comparisons between the types of injustices which have occurred and inevitably assigning ordinal effects which favored some forms of discrimination and prejudice over others:
Asked which of the country’s ethnic minorities has been subjected to the most discrimination and the worse injustices, very few persons would even think of answering: “The Japanese Americans.” Yet, if the question refers to persons alive today, that may well be the correct reply. Like the Negroes, the Japanese have been the object of color prejudice. Like the Jews, they have been feared and hated as hyperefficient competitors. And, more than any other group, they have been seen as agents of an overseas enemy. . . Generally this kind of treatment as we all know these days, creates what might be termed “problem minorities.” (Petersen, 1966, pp. 20–21)

Petersen further notes that to reshape the structural flaws that enacted discrimination would be a futile attempt, as it could not be overturned, even with the newly enacted civil rights laws. The jab against African Americans in their continuous quest for civic freedom was seen as a mockery. Instead, Petersen sought to portray how Japanese Americans found a way to overcome the immediate past discrimination and to even flourish in American culture. He lists a bevy of oppressive government measures under which Japanese Americans suffered in the 20th century (antimiscegenation laws, anticitizenship and anti-immigration laws, and wartime internment) to argue against civil rights expansion for African Americans. The significant features of this article pointed to the Japanese Americans’ cultural resistance toward seeking governmental support (i.e., welfare) and instead relying on one’s individual efforts (an extension of the Protestant work ethic) toward social mobility. The tone of Petersen’s article also suggests that African Americans were clamoring all for naught, as the vestiges of slavery were too entrenched to overturn discrimination against them. It also signified the popularity of mainstream sentiment that gained increased attention from a 1965 report authored by then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, entitled The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. Otherwise known as the Moynihan Report, it laid claims to the features of the culture of poverty stemming from the lack of a nuclear family structure (the traditional family structure for which Asian Americans were lauded). The rise of single-mother households and an absent father figure were the cultural byproducts of the system of
enslavement that continued to plague the Black family, as Moynihan would assert. The ways in which the report portrayed how Black culture reinforced its own cycle of poverty through ignorance and complacency could not be overturned through governmental legislation.

This depiction of Asian Americans worked in contradistinction to the struggle for equal rights that had been spearheaded by African Americans for more than a century, demanding full recognition and rights under the law, as promised in the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Pointing to individual or cultural explanations for social (im)mobility, rather than to systems of entrenched structural discrimination, the influence and legacy of the Moynihan Report still exists to explain one group’s achievement (i.e., Asian Americans) and another group’s failure (African Americans and Latinos, in aggregate).

Adding increased support to the modern model minority stereotype came through another article by the *U.S. News & World Report* (1966), “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” The authors, claiming to have scoured Chinatowns across the country, remarked at the high levels of discipline, hard work, and promotion of traditional family values. Indeed, criminal activities were low and all the youth were actively engaged in their studies, obeying their fathers and mothers to maintain traditional Chinese culture while promoting American values of hard work and thrift. As the opening of the article makes clear:

*At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities—One such minority, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work. In any Chinatown from San Francisco to New York, you discover youngsters at grips with their studies. Crime and delinquency are found to be rather minor in scope. Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts—not a welfare check—in order to reach American’s “promised land.”* (U.S. News & World Report, 1966, p. 6).
The indirect reference to African Americans in this article no longer placed Asian Americans in the same struggle with all racial minorities, but rather, as a new type of “model” minority to which all other minorities should aspire, arguably even with which to compete. The obvious question became, “They made it without government support, why can’t you?” However, no considerations were given to the relative disparities in resource allocation, reparations, immigration status, and other social, cultural, economic, and political rights which were selectively distributed among people of color and continued to perpetuate stratified life chances and curtail social mobility for a majority of people of color long after institutionalized discrimination was written out of public policy.

This form of racial triangulation of Asian Americans (Kim, 1999) would set the stage for continuous false comparisons between and among minorities and the mainstream, especially in the post–Civil Rights era. In delineating the concept of racial triangulation, political scientist Claire Jean Kim (1999) demonstrates that the end result is to place Whites at the top of the hierarchy of the racial order by positioning Asian Americans below them as “honorary Whites” and above African Americans (and Latinos). This form of “relative valorization,” placing Asian Americans betwixt the Black/White binary, maintains the dominance of Whites over both groups. Furthermore, Kim (1999) emphasizes that while Asian Americans are situated above African Americans in the racial hierarchy, the processes of “civic ostracism” work to construct and subordinate Asian Americans as “immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership” (p. 107).

The historical persistence of racial triangulation as it relates to Asian Americans, being racially positioned above African Americans yet not ever achieving full civic status, is long and has been clearly documented (Kurashige, 2007; Wu, 2003). The 1990 Flatbush Boycott in Brooklyn, NY, and the Los Angeles Riots in 1992 speak to some of the more recent problematic effects of interracial violence (especially between African Americans and Koreans) stemming from Asian Americans’ precarious racial positioning in recent decades (Kim, 2003). As these struggles over equal opportunities continued throughout the second half of the 20th century, the realm of public education

Asian Americans in Higher Education

21
naturally became yet another arena of debate regarding the allocation of public resources and the pursuit of equitable rights.

The Model Minority Goes to School

It is within this political and social backdrop, praising Asian Americans’ rugged individual collectivist cultural tendencies while denigrating African Americans’ dependence on social welfare programs, that the noticeable attention on Asian Americans moved into education discourse. With the model minority emphasizing concepts of socioeconomic mobility, obedience and passivity, and concentration in high-paying, scientific jobs, the implications of this stereotype inevitably trickled down into the education system, particularly higher education. Claims of Asian American exceptionalism in academics as the new discourse of the immigrant success story worked its way into the public schools. The 1980s witnessed the rise of the Asian American “whiz kid” (Brand, 1987), from Westinghouse prizewinners to the National Spelling Bee champions. The presence of Asian Americans as academically successful was ubiquitous. Cultural and even biological explanations were given to provide “evidence” for the students’ academic prowess (Ng et al., 2007) in much the same way that these pseudosciences were used to explain Asians’ cultural deficiencies and inability to assimilate less than a century prior. Subsequent research on students and schools set out to seek why Asian American students were so successful—already operating under the assumption that this phenomenon was true rather than asking if those constructs were true in the first place. Even a cursory glance at educational research on the achievement gap points to the assumed success of Asian American students (Peng & Wright, 1994). The latest report by the Pew Research Center (2012) further perpetuates the idea of the success of AAPI’s in education and household income earnings. As the report summarily claims, Asian Americans place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work, and career success (Pew Research Center, 2012). Such statements fundamentally assume simultaneously that hard work and commitment to education by Asian Americans are inherent traits independent of any environmental influences and that
the perceived lack of these characteristics among other racial minority groups is a rational and conscious choice to be complacent with one’s position in an underclass of society. This dichotomy which places Asian Americans at a permanent advantage and other people of color at a permanent disadvantage treats those who do not fit the mold on either end of the spectrum as outliers whose experiences are anomalies, rather than important trends which should be analyzed in order to effectively address students’ needs and bolster their capabilities. In other words, it reduces educational experiences to quantifiable trends rather than addressing the qualitative nature of educational outcomes that goes beyond standardized test scores and grade point averages.

Thus, in discussing the true impact of education and the attainment of specific educational outcomes by Asian American students, it is important to note the wide range of AAPI students’ experiences along the P–20 pipeline as many, even those who seemingly do well academically, report higher levels of depression, stress, and suicidal tendencies (Cheng et al., 2010). Particularly salient are the experiences of Filipinos in this context. Approximately 3.2 million Filipinos reside in the United States, the second largest ethnic group behind Chinese (3.7 million). Nearly 36.7% of Filipino adults have college degrees, which tend to be higher than other Asian ethnic subgroups, but there exists challenges U.S. Filipino youth face in entering postsecondary institutions. Filipino immigrant and second-generation youth exhibit high secondary “push out” rates, suffer from depression and other mental health issues, demonstrate lower levels of participation and retention in higher education, face challenges in the college environment, and attend less selective colleges if they pursue postsecondary education (Buenavista, 2010; Choi, 2008; Maramba, 2008a, 2008b; Maramba & Bonus, 2013; Nadal, Pituc, Johnston, & Esparrago, 2010). Further complicating their experiences are the assumptions of monolithically identifying them as successful Asian Americans. In contrast to other Asian Americans, Filipinos are the only Asian Americans whose homeland was colonized by the United States, thus establishing a tenuous relationship between Filipinos and the U.S. government. Many Filipino American students, despite having the advantages and privileges conducive to high achievement in education, such as middle class socioeconomic status and English predominantly spoken in the household, are often racialized and
negatively treated as non-Asians due to their typically darker phenotype, and thus denied the appropriate counseling and guidance by educational professionals (Teranishi, 2010). Furthermore, they are often not targeted or eligible for institution-sponsored postsecondary access and retention programs, and often cannot receive similar benefits from their parents, who, despite being college educated, mostly received their degrees in the Philippines and thus are relatively unaware of the nuanced aspects of the American higher education experience. But in the context of color-blind educational discourse, their issues have been rendered largely invisible (Buena Vista, 2010).

The current relationship between Filipino Americans and higher education is only one example of the manifestation of stressors that relate, either implicitly or explicitly, from the structural beliefs of AAPI as the model minority. These trends have begun to increase awareness within college counseling and psychological literature, especially in relation to mental health (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Ly, 2008) and relationships to immigrant or refugee family status (Meekyung, 2005). As a predominantly immigrant community, issues of acculturation and intergenerational conflict constitute significant dissonance within the lives of all Asian Americans. Whether in service to school age youth or to adults within the AAPI communities, mental health awareness and education have received growing priority among mental health practitioners for many decades (Sue & McKinney, 1975; Sue, Yan Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012; Uba, 2003). Current psychological research concludes that Asian Americans are the racial group least likely to pursue mental health counseling due to cultural values of stigma and self-reliance. Therefore, outreach to these communities regarding mental health must be proactive in order to effectively address the needs of Asian Americans (Suzuki, 2002). It is not enough to merely establish resources that are for anyone and everyone to help. Mental health professionals and educational administrators must collaborate in order to actively reach out to communities who may not be immediately aware of the effects of counseling or even the institutions within the school system or the community at large responsible for delegating such services to students.

Without a doubt, Asian American students in our K–12 systems have high variability of performance at all levels and structures of schooling and
their needs and capabilities must be effectively addressed through pedagogy, curriculum, and institutional support of teachers, students, and parents (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011). Immigration status, parents’ educational levels, gender, English language fluency, native language fluency, residential patterns, and socioeconomic status are just a few examples of factors that shape students’ lives and school performance (Kao, 1995; Kao & Thompson, 2003). Where research indicates that Asian Americans are high achieving, it typically tends to occur more frequently among East Asian and South Asian Americans, although recent scholarship also troubles notions of achievement based on class and religion among these groups (Asher, 2008; Joshi, 2006; Lew, 2006a, 2006b). However, rather than being skewed toward the higher end of the spectrum as the model minority myth leads many to believe, AAPI educational attainment typically remains bimodal, clustering in two different groups, with large numbers of high performers at one end and large numbers of relatively low performers at the other (Aoki & Takeda, 2008; Chew-Ogi & Ogi, 2002). In gauging educational attainment by those AAPI subethnic groups, Figure 3 makes visually clear the bimodal educational attainment levels of those among Asian Indian, Chinese, Pakistani, and Korean in contrast to Samoan, Tongan, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian, Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian groups.

Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander students face, on average, more dissonant experiences within the school structure. Some of the seminal research on Southeast Asian Americans indicates high degrees of academic struggles and a foreclosing of higher education opportunities stemming from a host of personal and academic issues that include complications of gender, class, and language (CARE, 2011; Maramba, 2011b; Museus, 2009; Ngo, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007). And where they do not fit within that model of success, they are castigated as juvenile delinquents—criminalized and racialized in very similar ways to African American students who may “act up” as they come “up against whiteness” (Lee, 2005). In what Aihwa Ong considers the process of being “ideologically blackened” (Ong, 2003), many Asian American youth exist in the “Black/White” binary where not being like the prototypical high-performing Asian (which is designated as an “honorary White” category)
FIGURE 3
Educational Attainment for Asian American and Pacific Islander College Attendees, by Ethnic Sub-Group (Age 25 or Older, 2006–2008)

Note: Data reported for individuals with at least some college.
renders them to the “underachieving” category that plagues students such as African American and Latino males.

What we have noted here in terms of Asian American students in K–12 barely skims the surface, but we wanted to reveal the layers of complexity also involved in what being an Asian American student means in our school systems. Scholars who examine AAPI issues at the K–12 level have done much to expand understandings of such complex dynamics from multiple viewpoints. These works point to how school systems, operating under the assumption of innate and unwavering Asian American success, fail to understand students as individuals with their own particular needs and support systems (Pang & Cheng, 1998). Other realities that affect AAPI students in our schools concern incidents of bullying, racialized hate crimes, and growing anti-Asian incidents on K–12 and higher education arenas, particularly where South Asians are seen as “terrorists” (Sikh Coalition, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund [AALDEF], and the New York Civil Liberties Union [NYCLU], 2010). While all of these may not come as a direct result of the model minority myth, the literature would contend that it contributes, among others, to increased hostile feelings between students (both within and between racial/ethnic groups) and creates unnecessary comparisons on the part of school officials between Asians and all other groups. As Stacey Lee (1996) notes, the image of the model minority is a hegemonic device that denies difference within Asian American communities, and more importantly, “maintains the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting attention away from racial inequality and by setting standards for how minorities should behave” (p. 6). The means of internalization of the model minority myth in and out of groups and the perceptions attached to it become reified and continue to support the process of racial triangulation.

On a larger scale affecting K–12 education, recent court cases that have effectively scaled back efforts to promote diversity (Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District, 2007) indicate a long-standing effect post-1954 Brown v. Board of Education whereby our nation’s public schools have become highly resegregated. Orfield and Lee’s (2007) study provides a compilation of data that indicate the nation’s racial minority students attend schools that are the most segregated. In other words, students attend schools
with those who most match their racial and ethnic background. Orfield and Lee contend, however, that Asian students (they do not use the term “Asian American” in their study) attend the most integrated schools in that less than a fourth of fellow students are Asian and typically attend schools that are 48% White, compared to 32% for Latinos. On average, Asian (Americans) attend schools that are 24% Asian (Orfield & Lee, 2007). This schooling pattern is a result of residential (re)settlement patterns which have historically been the product of the discriminatory market actions of “White flight” which have both explicitly and implicitly controlled who lives where (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). And while Orfield has investigated the effects of segregation in the K–12 realm post-Brown, there is a limitation of understanding how school resegregation influences the ways in which AAPI students experience schooling.

Considering that AAPIs attend schools within AAPI prevalent communities, there exists the potential of schools to underserve the needs of students within particular linguistic, educational, and economic contexts. These AAPI students are most at-risk of experiencing cultural and linguistic isolation in the public schools and are the least likely of all students to find any significant representation of their own ethnicity or hear their native language being spoken by peers and teachers (NEA, 2008). Students who have immigrated from Southeast Asian countries, especially since the post-Vietnam era, are most likely to experience linguistic isolation, a shortage of cultural or community resources, and instruction from educators who are not culturally competent (NEA, 2008). In particular, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong students comprise the underrepresented AAPI populations who defy the model minority stereotype. More often they come from households with parents who hold lower levels of educational degrees and lower levels of income resulting in increased poverty (CARE, 2011). Segregated environments continue to hamper potential relationships across racial and class divides and in considering the role of peer networks for adolescent youth, diversity can also create positive social outcomes for students of all races and ethnicities, not just underrepresented Asian Americans (Goza & Ryabov, 2009).

This needed digression into aspects of K–12 education is important as it becomes the foundation upon which we can understand not only who goes
FIGURE 4
Proportion of AAPI Adults Without a High School Diploma Equivalent by Ethnicity (2000)

Note: Data reported for adults, ages 25 or over.

to college but also how, why, and where (e.g., two-year or four-year, public or private, highly selective or not, etc.). As Figure 4 demonstrates, when disaggregated by Asian ethnic categories of those group members who do not hold a high school diploma, Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander adults are 2–3 times more likely to not have attained a diploma. Nearly 60% of Hmong Americans do not have a high school diploma, followed by Cambodian (53%), Laotian (48%), Vietnamese (38%), Tongan (35%), Fijian (33%), Marshallese (32%), and Samoan (24%). These are well above the U.S. national average hovering at 20%. Clearly, how Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander groups experience
their adjustment to mainstream society and the cultural mismatch that can occur in schools contributes to the challenges they face and that lay ahead. When aggregated for the whole the total Asian American (exclusive of Pacific Islanders) population without a high school diploma mirrors the national average. This statistic in and of itself may challenge the model minority myth of achievement. Nonetheless, to gauge Asian American educational levels in the aggregate hides more important factors of the major differences among various ethnic groups. Such factors may be environmental which go beyond monolithic categorizations of some mythical predilection toward excellence.

In the next chapter, we expand our discussions regarding the model minority myth to address additional facets of the myth that characterize Asian Americans as passive and apolitical. By covering the general history of Asian American student presence on college campuses in the 20th century, we aim to establish how the very presence of Asian Americans in higher education is largely attributed to the development of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent Asian American participation in multiracial student coalitions calling for increased diversity and representation at all levels of higher education.