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The Push for Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions: Highlighting the Perspectives of Student Activists

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the involvement of students who advocated for what eventually became the federal designation for Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). Through interviews with 12 student activists, we document students' motivations for mobilizing, as well as the challenges they encountered. Students identified motivations such as gaining additional resources, seeking recognition through the legislation, and fostering proactive approaches to activism. Challenges included motivating their peers beyond immediate self-interest and the overshadowing of individual subgroup concerns within the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander community. We comment on the ways in which the push for AANAPISIs represents a racial project within a broader process of racial formation, and highlight both the possibilities and limitations of student advocacy.

In 2007, the passage of the College Cost and Reduction Act created a federal designation for Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) as minority-serving institutions (MSI, Park & Chang, 2009). Since then, numerous institutions (35 as of 2020) have received federal AANAPISI grants to improve and expand institutional capacity to serve students at these institutions, including Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and low-income students (Asian Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund [APIASF], 2016; US. Dept. of Education, 2021). The federal designation's existence represents a major shift in how the federal government recognizes Asian Americans in particular, from a group often aligned with the experiences of Whites, to one receiving codified status as a racial minority (Park & Teranishi, 2008). The push for the AANAPISI designation was a unique collaboration between policymakers, educators, and student activists. In the early and mid-2000s, 43 campuses participated in a national campaign for AANAPISIs initiated

by the National Asian American Student Conference (NAASCon), which involved writing members of Congress, petitioning administrators to support the legislation, and educating other students about the legislation.

While studies have recognized the role of policymakers in the legislation (Park & Chang, 2009), as well as the impact of AANAPISI programs (Nguyen et al., 2018; Teranishi et al., 2014), the stories of college students who rallied for AANAPISIs have gone largely unrecognized in the literature. This omission has left a gap in understanding what the legislation and associated racial meanings meant to the stakeholders who would be most directly affected by the legislation—students. By racial meanings, we refer to how individuals viewed, interpreted, and/or defined racial categories, such as what it meant to be Asian American and/or AAPI[1] (Omi & Winant, 2015). Related, little research has provided insight into why students themselves seek to exert influence on external political conditions through addressing policy and legal structures. Inquiry into student motivations can shed light on how activists sought to influence policy attached to racialized categorizations and the meanings associated with them, which in turn offers a window into efforts to challenge how race is viewed and used, both symbolically and as an influence on resource allocation. In turn, such research can help educators and policymakers understand both the possibilities and limitations of efforts to advance new initiatives, helping them understand how students may facilitate or complicate advocacy.

Thus, we seek to document students' motivations for mobilizing around the legislation, as well as the significance of the legislation to them. In doing so, we hope to reframe students as not just passive recipients of institutionalized racial categories, which influence resource allocation (or lack thereof), and associated racial meanings. Instead, we document their active, complex roles in trying to contest meanings and understandings around what it means to be from a particular racial group. Relatedly, we seek to examine how college students attempt to engage in panethnic identity building and the limitations of such efforts (Espiritu, 1992; Okamoto, 2014). We also hope to further advance research on the historical development of MSIs. Our overarching research question asks: What do student activists' views of the AANAPISI legislation reveal about their understanding of what it means to be Asian American and/or AAPI, as well as associated racial meanings? We follow with three corresponding sub-questions: Why did the students who organized campaigns in support of the AANAPISI legislation on their campuses find the legislation a meaningful cause to support? What challenges did they encounter? How did attitudes toward the legislation reflect their perceptions of racial and/or panethnic identity as AAPIs, if at all?

Literature

To set the context for the study, we review literature addressing student needs that spurred advocacy for ANAAPISIs, the push for ANAAPISIs, and AAPI collegiate activism.

The diverse needs of AAPIs in higher education

The ANAAPISI designation came about in part due to recognition of the diverse needs of AAPI students (Park & Teranishi, 2008). While 52% of Asian Americans overall have a bachelor's degree or higher, a substantially lower percentage of Pacific Islanders (15%), Vietnamese (28%), Cambodians (18%), Hmong (17%), and Laotians (16%) hold a bachelor's degree (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). The AAPI population consists of at least 48 unique ethnic groups collectively speaking over 300 languages (Commission for Asian American & Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2011). Over 40% of AAPIs attend community colleges (Park & Assalone, 2019). Some AAPI students have limited English proficiency, which is a risk for attrition (Yeh, 2004). Institutions may also have minimal capacity to offer student support services, such as counseling, for AAPI immigrant students (Brilliant, 2000).

The various pressures on AAPI students to handle academics, family, and work responsibilities are often unrecognized, but signal the need for tailored support services. A high proportion of AAPI students come from low-income families and are first-generation college students (Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2010). Thus, affordability and the ability to help support family members are highly relevant (Teranishi et al., 2015). Chhuon et al.'s (2010) study of Cambodian American college students revealed an ongoing negotiation with family responsibilities, including the provision of financial support, while pursuing their degrees. Filipina college women interviewed by Maramba (2008) shared they were expected by their families to do well academically to justify hardships endured by their immigrant parents.

Emerging literature has demonstrated the importance of cultural validation for underrepresented and underserved AAPI college students. The affirmation of students' identities, knowledge, and contributions can facilitate personal development and social adjustment to college (Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Studies highlight the role of institutional agents in fostering social capital and validation for Southeast Asian American students more broadly (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Culturally validating curriculum (e.g., Asian American Studies) and opportunities for cultural expression are important avenues to support AAPIs, especially underrepresented subgroups (Saelua et al., 2017).

The movement for AANAPISIs

A consistent theme of research is that institutions have fallen short in meeting the diverse needs of AAPIs (Museus et al., 2016). Thus, advocates turned to legislation to create the AANAPISI designation as a viable policy response to address institutional shortcomings. Since the passage of the legislation, institutions with at least a 10% AAPI student enrollment and 50% of students receiving federal financial aid are eligible for the AANAPISI designation and eligible to apply for a Department of Education grant. Funds can be used to create/enhance curriculum and student services, purchase educational materials, expand community outreach, and hire faculty and staff (Nguyen et al., 2021). Initiatives to support AAPI students from underrepresented and lower socioeconomic backgrounds are prioritized.

Efforts to gain recognition and support for AAPI communities from the federal government have been documented as early as the 1980s (Espiritu, 1992). The creation of the White House Initiative on AAPIs in 1999 further led to a formal recommendation for AANAPISIs. Beginning in 2002, several versions of a bill to amend the Higher Education Act to establish AANAPISIs were introduced in Congress, including H.R. 333 and H.R. 2616 (Park & Teranishi, 2008). Eventually, the College Cost Reduction & Access Act of 2007 provided a policy window to establish AANAPISIs. AANAPISIs were officially designated as a new class of MSIs in the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Scholars have argued that the creation of the AANAPISI designation represented efforts to reshape the racial positioning of Asian Americans in particular (Park & Teranishi, 2008). The legislation explicitly rejected the model minority stereotype, the dominant interpretation of Asian American racial dynamics in education, as shown in Section 1 of (H.R. 2616):

> (4) ... The `model minority myth' assumption adversely affects AAPI youth, who are perceived as being academically successful and not in need of outreach, academic support systems, or other support services.

> (5) The `model minority myth' and lack of disaggregated data may prevent student services offices from conducting intentional outreach efforts ... to AAPI students, because they are perceived to not be in need of support.

By rejecting the model minority stereotype that aligns AAPIs and more specifically, Asian Americans, with Whites, the legislation sought to reposition the racial identity of AAPIs from a group that is "out-whiting the Whites" (Chun, 1995) to one warranting a MSI designation: an official, codified status as racial minorities. The legislation argued that AAPI educational interests would be better served when treated in a manner similar to other communities of color (H.R. 2616, Section 1, 8). Arguably, AANAPISI legislation sought to change the official narrative of AAPIs within the federal government and align their experiences with other racial minorities (Park & Teranishi, 2008). Since the

creation of AANPISIs, numerous studies have documented their effectiveness in serving AAPI students (Museus et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018; Teranishi et al., 2014). As noted, while previous studies documented the motivations of policymakers for seeking the designation (Park & Chang, 2009), no study has honed in on the role of student activists. Thus, we turn to literature on AAPI student activism to further establish the context for student advocacy for AANAPISIs.

AAPI student activism

Scholars have linked various moments in AAPI student activism to key turning points in how AAPIs have understood themselves as racialized beings (Espiritu, 1992). For example, in 1968, Asian American student leaders joined Black, Latinx, and Native American peers in the Ethnic Studies strikes. For Asian American students, the strikes "marked a 'shedding of silence' and an affirmation of identity" (Umemoto, 1989, p. 3). Before this moment, Asian Americans identified primarily with their ethnicity. The pan-Asian American identity emerged out of recognition of shared political disenfranchisement and social inequality (Espiritu, 1992). The demands by Asian American college students were not made in isolation; they were a core segment of the broader Asian American movement in solidarity with Black liberation and the anti-war movements (Maeda, 2009). Far less documentation of Pacific Islander student activism and leadership exists, although work has been published on the Pacific Islander Education and Retention project at UCLA (Saelua et al., 2017).

More recently, AAPI students have led movements to support undocumented students and also student-initiated retention programs for underserved Asian American populations (Maldonado et al., 2005). In 2006, less than 100 Black students were admitted to UCLA. In response, UCLA AAPI student leaders developed the Count Me In! (CMI) campaign to counter the model minority myth and insert AAPIs into racial equity efforts, proactively including Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans. It achieved its goal of disaggregating the AAPI ethnic categories on the application for all UC campuses within a year (Poon et al., 2017). Poon et al. (2017) note that over time, the CMI campaign lost its focus on challenging anti-Blackness, and centered the needs of AAPI students.

Importantly, Poon et al. (2017) showed how racial equity efforts stemming from any community may hold multiple levels of meaning and significance to participants themselves, as well as the broader socio-political forces surrounding the motivations for engaging in advocacy. Building on their work, we seek to probe these levels of meaning for students involved in AANPISI advocacy, deepening the research base on how AAPI students contest external power structures that have the potential to frame how they are viewed in educational discourse and policymaking. Focusing on the population that had the most

personal stake in the legislation, students themselves, will lend understanding into how students of color challenge, both directly and indirectly, existing structural arrangements attached to racial categories and meanings, upending portrayals of these populations as passive recipients of policy and policymaking.

Theoretical foundations: Racial formation and panethnic organizing

We use Omi and Winant's work on racial formation, as well as the concept of panethnicity (Espiritu, 1992; Okamoto, 2014), to make sense of student activism for AANAPISIs. Omi and Winant (2015) argue that racial categories and their associated meanings can change over time as a result of racial formation, "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 109). Racial formation occurs through racial projects, which are "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (p. 125). Racial projects link the racial meanings (in short, the way individuals and societal view different groups) ascribed to a group with corresponding rights and resources (e.g., the assumption that Asian Americans are model minorities leading to a lack of support, see Park & Chang, 2009). We view the legislation itself as a racial project within a process of racial formation, seeking to redefine racial/cultural meanings regarding how AAPIs were viewed (and correspondingly, resource allocation) by challenging the model minority myth and contesting the historically inconsistent status of AAPIs as minorities/people of color (H.R. 2616, subpoints 4 and 5; Park & Teranishi, 2008).

In this paper, we focus on student activists' motivations to fight for AANAPISIs as a window through which to understand the process of racial formation related to racial categorizations and conceptualizations of what it means to be Asian American and/or AAPI. By examining the perspectives of AAPI students who specifically lobbied for this explicit rejection of the model minority stereotype and, in some cases, sought greater alignment with other communities of color, we hope to understand whether and how individuals (in this case, students) affected by educational racialization possibly attempted to subvert and redefine racial meanings through activism. By educational racialization, we refer to how educational policies and institutions contribute to differential experiences among racially minoritized students (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). For instance, did students feel that the legislation authenticated the status of Asian Americans and/or AAPIs as minorities in higher education? Why might students, relative outsiders to policy development, attempt to exert influence over the AANAPISI legislation, and what do their efforts say about how their understandings of the needs of AAPIs and Asian Americans?

We also use the concept of panethnicity to help us understand AANAPISIs as a racial project, some of the tensions and limitations behind student advocacy, and correspondingly, efforts to promote the racial project. Early sociological thought described panethnicity as the "development of bridging organizations and solidarity among subgroups of ethnic collectivities" (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990, p. 198). Okamoto and Mora (2014) later proposed panethnicity as "the creation of a new categorical boundary through the consolidation of ethnic, tribal, religious, or national groups" (p. 221). They also highlighted the "unique tension inherent in maintaining subgroup distinctions while generating a broader sense of solidarity" (Okamoto & Mora, 2014, p. 219). The simultaneous management of internal differences with collective goals conceptually distinguishes panethnic action from organizing based on race, which tends to rely on creating a homogenous, unified identity. Pragmatically, panethnic social movements may use a state-created racial category (e.g., "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander") to organize collective action, but the usage of race labels does not preclude interethnic differences and divisions that must be addressed to maintain group cohesion (Espiritu, 1992).

However, not all members necessarily identify with panethnic identity (Okamoto & Mora, 2014). Okamoto (2014) hypothesized that when Asian Americans are segregated in the labor market, panethnic identifications and actions are heightened. However, when within-group, or interethnic, dynamics are marked by competition, panethnic boundary formation is dampened. Asian American and/or AAPI panethnic identity among college students may be formed due to discrimination (Kodama et al., 2017), supporting the argument that institutional disenfranchisement leads to panethnic identity (Espiritu, 1992), as well as the hypothesis that racialized segregation contributes to boundary formation (Okamoto, 2014). As a site of study, the NAASCon campaign was arguably a vehicle of collective panethnic action for student organizers to develop a narrative that would activate AAPI students' consciousness around their unaddressed needs and how a race-conscious policy could ameliorate their marginalized status.

To date, little work has examined how AAPI students themselves approach, view, and contest external structures and categorizations that have implications for challenging the marginalization of AAPIs and other vulnerable populations (Kwon, 2013). Panethnicity theory offers some insight into some of the underlying mechanisms that might advance or complicate racial formation via racial projects like the AANAPISI movement. Furthermore, we are curious to see how students viewed their stake in the legislation, and whether tensions existed between individual ethnic group identity or campus issues and joining a broader panethnic effort.

Methodology

This project is a case study of a student-led campaign (Stake, 1995). Case studies require a bounded unit of study, which in this project was NAASCon's AANAPISI campaign, executed from Fall 2003 to Spring 2006. Interviews and documents of former student organizers were analyzed to uncover the process of how AAPI students articulated racial meanings, perceptions, and motivations.

Sample and context

The sample consists of individuals who participated in NAASCon's national AANAPISI campaign, which began during Fall 2003 and included 43 campuses. Prior to the AANAPISI campaign, NAASCon was best known for organizing a campaign against Abercrombie & Fitch protesting racist t-shirts (Kiang, 2004). While no longer active, NAASCon as an organization holds some historical significance, both for providing the infrastructure for a national student campaign in support of AANAPISIs and also for being one of the first AAPI student collectives to establish itself primarily through internet-based communication and organizing.

Interviews were conducted in 2006, after all participants had already graduated from college. Most were not directly involved in AANAPISI advocacy at the time of the interview, due to the lag in active advocacy preceding the surprise passage of the legislation. Overall, we found the timing of the interviews to be advantageous; it provided participants with some distance to reflect but generally, they had little difficulty recalling events and retained access to documents from when they were more actively advocating. Students represented 11 institutions, four public and seven private. Two were located on the West Coast, five on the East Coast, one in the Southwest, two in the Southeast, and one in the Inter-Mountain region. The first author identified former student organizers through several methods. She received a list of names/contact information of individuals who organized AANAPISI campaigns at their institutions by a former NAASCon board member. Second, she targeted former student organizers referenced in documents mentioning the campaign (e.g., newspaper articles). Lastly, former student organizers were asked to identify others involved in campus campaigns. All potential participants received a recruitment e-mail in January 2006. Although 16 individuals expressed interest in participating, a final sample of 12 participants was selected based on whether the first author could travel to interview them. All participants received pseudonyms. The final sample consisted of seven men and five women representing a variety of ethnicities (Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Native Hawaiian, Japanese, and Filipino).

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (Merriam, 1998) were the primary means of data collection. Interviews focused on questions surrounding why participants found the AANAPISI campaign a meaningful cause to support, college experiences, and their perceptions of the legislation. With consent, interviews were recorded and lasted approximately one hour. Document analysis of materials was conducted, including announcements posted on e-mail message boards regarding the legislation, campus newspaper articles, and student organization websites. We primarily utilized this information to verify consistency between participant accounts and documents like websites and e-mails, utilizing the documents to assess validity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Insights gleaned also guided the interview protocol, helping generate questions linked to documents and artifacts. Finally, quotations from documents were included in the final analysis on occasion, although overall we leaned more on quotations from interviews, finding them to be the richest source of data.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then hand-coded to identify emerging themes and patterns. Inductive coding was used to identify emergent codes and patterns in the data; deductive techniques were used to code for key terms and concepts linked to the theoretical frameworks and literature (Creswell, 2014). Cases were coded individually and then across cases to identify key themes and patterns (Merriam, 1998). We used Atlas.ti to organize codes. Given the significant period of time that lapsed between initial data collection and the final write-up, we were unable to use traditional member-checking procedures due to a lack of updated contact information for participants. However, we utilized peer-debriefing techniques throughout the process to support trustworthiness, having individuals with both scholarly expertise in AANAPISIs and those who were involved in the national campaign review the development of analyses and our interpretations.

Limitations

Limitations include the time in between the interviewee's actual participation in the campaign and the time of the interview, approximately two and a half years. As noted, in some ways the time passed was an asset, allowing students to reflect on their activism in the context of their overall college experiences. Possibly, the overall manuscript is constrained by the memories not being "fresher" in participants' minds, although they seemed to have little difficulty recalling experiences. Additionally, while efforts were made to represent a variety of ethnicities/backgrounds in the sample, at least one-fourth of e-mail contacts were expired due to student graduations. Once again, being able to draw from the full pool of eligible participants could have yielded an

even richer study. Finally, the significant lag in time between data collection (2006) and the submission of the paper for publication (2019) is another consideration; while the researchers took detailed notes on their reflections from the interviews, it is possible that some of the insights were lost over time. Still, the researchers found that the gap in time provided the benefit of being able to comment on the contemporary significance of AANAPISIs over the last decade since the passage of the legislation in 2007.

Role of researchers

Researcher identity is highly relevant to research (Maxwell, 2012). The first author had some previous involvement with NAASCon, but was not involved in the organization's AANAPISI campaign. However, she did have some inside knowledge of the legislation, having helped draft findings later incorporated into H.R. 2616. Her earlier involvement in helping draft an iteration of the legislation may have shaped her reactions to it, and thus the role of the second author as a "check" on bias was critical. The second author was not involved in data collection, which may have precluded his ability to pick up on some of the nuances present in participants' narratives. Drawing from his previous work, the second author may have been shaped by an assumption that there would be challenges to attempting to garner support among AAPIs for race-based policies, which in turn shaped his gravitation toward panethnicity as a relevant framework.

Findings

Based on participant responses, we identified three core motivations for mobilizing: To gain additional resources, seeking recognition through the legislation itself, fostering proactive approaches to activism. Additionally, we identified two core challenges: Motivating their peers beyond immediate self-interest and the overshadowing of subgroup concerns.

Motivations for mobilizing: Resources and needs

Students had a variety of motivations for supporting the legislation. Primary was the attraction of gaining additional resources for student organizations and campuses to serve Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders. In some cases, students expressed frustration that campus administration was unaware that AAPI students even had needs, but at least three students noted that their administration was aware, but either unwilling or unable to fund projects related to AAPIs. Jodie, from a small liberal arts college in the Northeast, stated that the legislation seemed like a "no brainer" to her, given that "the main excuse, reason, whatever you want to call it that the administration

always gives when they can't do anything is that there's not enough money." Students also commented that the legislation's direct link to providing funding and resources made it easy for students to support. David, from a public university in the Mid-Atlantic region, commented that "H.R. 333 is something that could really resonate with a lot of students. Getting more money, of course, that's going to resonate with more students."

In several cases, students mentioned that the AANAPISI legislation was important because of the need for AAPIs, and more specifically (according to their words), Asian Americans, to receive special funding in the Higher Education Act like other minorities, as Monita, from a private institution on the West Coast, expressed:

> Okay, my initial thought was wait, why don't we have it? Because it was known that the other minority groups had funding from the government, why don't Asian Americans have the same kind of benefits from the government? So I was like it's about time!

Monita's comment seemed to reflect a frustration that unlike "other minority groups," generally, Asian Americans did not have the "same kind of benefits." Some students acknowledged differences between Asian Americans and other people of color, but discussions on the need for appropriate solutions for Asian American students cast the issue as one of parity with other minority groups with MSI status. Students seemed to take it for granted that other minority groups had longstanding funding that AAPIs had been excluded from, when in reality, the federal designation for Hispanic-Serving Institutions was a relatively recent phenomenon.

Interestingly, some students felt that their campuses were well resourced, but the legislation was still needed because not all campuses had similar resources. Going to conferences or interning in Washington, D.C. made them more cognizant of Asian American student needs on a national level. Alternately, participating in the national campaign made some students realize that their struggles were not unique to their campuses, commenting that the legislation and participating in groups like NAASCon made them feel less isolated. Connie, a student at a public university in the Southeast, noted:

> That legislation showed that this was not just an issue isolated to a campus, it was something larger. And then the fact that there was organizing all over the place, from coast to coast . . . it was one of those issues that you could all rally around and feel like you're fighting for one cause and so that to me was a pretty neat thing to see develop.

Not only was the legislation salient because it reflected her efforts as a student activist, but it also reminded her that her campus was not alone in its needs. The legislation was a broader legitimization of her understanding that "Asian American students had needs," and that "it was something larger" than just one's institution.

Who cares about AAPIs? Recognition through legislation

Students across campus environments expressed a sense that AAPI students were not "cared" about on campuses, regardless of whether their campuses had services that specifically served AAPIs. David, from a public institution in the Mid-Atlantic, expressed frustration:

> If you're talking about my feeling about Mid-Atlantic U and race relations, it's just like ehhh they could do something but they're not really going to do anything. With the Asian American community they can say they care but they don't really care . . .

The theme of recognition, or a lack of recognition, occurred twenty-seven times throughout data collection: Either that Asian American concerns were not recognized, as David expressed, or that the legislation itself was important because it recognized Asian American needs. Eric, from a public university in the Southeast, touched upon both points when discussing the legislation:

> I thought wow, this is actually something that people care about, Asian Americans in education, because that's something that's usually a given, that Asian Americans ARE educated so why should they even need that? But then looking at it, I felt that someone was fighting for us . . . I felt that [Congressman] David Wu was a champion for us because he pressed this, I even put in one of the applications for my internship that he was my hero . . . I thought that this legislation demonstrated that we are indeed important and someone is willing to go out on a limb for us and take political action. And so I thought we finally had someone caring for us.

He expressed that the legislation represented that "we finally had someone caring for us," which was notable to him. His description of the congressman as "willing to go out on a limb for us" contrasted with participants' descriptions of campus administrators as uncaring, unwilling, or simply ignorant. Seeing a piece of legislation address concerns that resonated with Asian American students, however, gave them a sense that they were "indeed important." Further, the legislation challenged a particular racial meaning traditionally associated with Asian Americans, the stereotype that it was a "given" that Asian Americans were educated and thus not in need of extra resources. To Eric, the legislation challenged that assumption, advancing a differing set of racial meanings by reorienting how people viewed Asian American concerns.

Other students, particularly those who previously interned in Washington, D.C.,[2] noted the role of the members of Congress who advocated the legislation. Seeing Asian Americans in Congress, advocating for Asian American needs, was notable, as remarked by Eugene:

> I know that at least initially we were all interested in working on it because it was coming from an Asian American congressman and once a community representative steps up and says, this is what our community needs and we should be supporting it, you're like, okay! . . . People were getting inspired and bought the idea like we did and saw that it was

coming from Congressman Wu. You don't hear much about legislation . . . but when there's a formal announcement that an Asian American is proposing something, we're like "oh!"

Going along with Eric's description of the congressman as a "champion," Eugene notes that the legislation stood out because it was proposed specifically by an Asian American congressman on an issue directly affecting the Asian American community. This response may have been especially strong given that there are few Asian American members of Congress to begin with. Later on, both Eric and Eugene expressed some disappointment that the congressman did not push the legislation as strongly as they thought he could have.

Being proactive: Pros and cons

One motivation behind the support for AANAPISI was directly recognized by one student, Jodie. Because she played a major role in the campaign that NAASCon was previously best known for, protesting retailer Abercrombie and Fitch for portraying Asian Americans in stereotypical ways in merchandise, her insight was especially pertinent. When asked about why NAASCon decided to take on the AANAPISI campaign, she commented: "It was also at a point in terms of NAASCon's development where I felt that we needed to get more involved in proactive campaigns instead of reactive ones and it seemed like an appropriate issue to organize around." Prior to the AANAPISI campaign, the activities of the organization centered around what Jodie might deem "reactive," that is, campaigns that specifically responded to a racist incident in the media or politics. Around the same time, NAASCon launched a letter-writing campaign to protest Congressman Howard Coble's comments that Japanese American internment was justified. The Abercrombie campaign also was in direct response to another party's actions. In contrast, the AANAPISI campaign was initiated by students in tandem with legislation that had been initiated by Asian American policymakers and legislators, reflecting a more proactive approach.

However, a proactive campaign proved to be more difficult than a reactive one, as student after student organizer reflected. Although the legislation resonated with student needs and concerns, students commented that the abstractness of the legislative process made it difficult for them to sustain interest. Mike noted:

> It wasn't an entirely sexy issue, you know what I mean? It sounds good but it's kind of, students are so far removed from federal government politics to begin with. When you're telling them to support a bill that may not even pass, I mean, they aren't particularly excited for it.

To remind readers, these interviews took place before the passage of federal recognition for AANAPISIs, and many participants were dubious that the MSI designation would become a reality. Unlike a more reactive campaign with a "sexy" issue that grabs student attention and only requires short-term action, the AANAPISI campaign went on for years and languished at times. Jodie acknowledged the inherent challenge: "The reason students react to or organize around reactive campaigns is that it's an easier thing for them to organize around. It's more tangible, it's right in front of them, someone says something racist."

Making the pitch: But who benefits?

When students spoke of the difficulty of motivating fellow students, they often spoke of how they utilized various forms of messaging to get the legislation to resonate with students. Students utilized a variety of techniques to get other students to latch on to the legislation, trying to make it "as easy as possible," in the words of Daniel, from a private institution in the Southwest. During a student organization study break where food was being served, he set up a station with a laptop, pre-printed letters, and envelopes. All students had to do was tell him their zip code and sign the letter; he would look up their representative, address the envelope, and mail it. Students also tried to create a sense of direct investment in the legislation. As mentioned previously, the issue of finances made the legislation an easy sell in some senses because most students recognized the benefits of gaining more resources. Monita discussed how she would use personal experience to convey the need for the legislation:

> I brought in my personal experience in explaining why we need the bill . . . I'd sometimes bring up stories of how they put me in an ESL class and it's just amazing how many of my other fellow Asian Americans were also put in ESL even though they were born in America and learned English as their first language. And it's just astonishing how many other fellow Asian Americans who had the same sort of experience that you had . . .

Her recollection of being mistakenly placed in ESL was meant to not only highlight some of the educational needs and injustices affecting Asian American students, but also to draw commonality across Asian American experiences and foster a sense of panethnic identity. This was no small feat, given the incredible diversity of the Asian American community. Her comments reflected efforts to foster consciousness of a shared Asian American panethnic identity to advance the legislation.

While Monita drew on shared experience as a motivation, one challenge of creating a sense of investment in the AANAPISI campaign was the fact that some students attended campuses with AAPI enrollments under 10%, meaning that they were ineligible for an AANAPISI designation if one were created. Two students in the study mentioned that their involvement in the campaign

was not as extensive as it would have been if they attended schools with a 10% or greater AAPI enrollment. Several students stated that they got involved in the legislation because they saw direct benefits for their campuses; others stated that while their campuses would qualify, they were more concerned about the needs of AAPI students at large.

Still, the leaders of the campaign had to construct a rationale for students from institutions that would not directly benefit from the legislation to still lobby for it. Jodie recalled: "I think the way we would spin it is that it's just a matter of equality and working for a bigger goal rather than thinking about your own school." NAASCon created a downloadable packet of resources for organizing on their website, among the documents was this testimony signed by "a student at Michigan State University":

> When I first heard about H.R. 333, it was a punch in the mouth. Coming from a school where the population of Asian Pacific Americans is barely 4%, the bill bordered on insulting. Here I am—a young, socially conscious Asian Pacific American college student who cares about his racial-ethnic community enough to strive for more resources—but the bill still won't affect me. Looking at schools like the University of Michigan and UC–Berkeley as models for where I want my university to be in the future, it seems that schools with a 10% AAPI student population are already granted some benefits for being a significant portion of the student body. I thought H.R. 333 would just hook up some schools that are already considerably hooked up, leaving the less fortunate universities out in the cold—making nose prints on the stained glass windows.

The first part of the student's narrative expressed his frustration, coming from an institution that had an AAPI population below 10%, with legislation that would possibly benefit institutions that to him that are "already considerably hooked up."

> To all those that feel that way as well, there is something we need to take into account: As of right now, AAPIs aren't even on the Higher Education Act, which is a big no-no because we are the only minority group not represented. That's why I now support getting H.R. 333 passed. While I wish that there were a bill that benefited colleges with less than 10% AAPI student population, there isn't. But that doesn't mean there couldn't be in the future. Also, if the bill passes, we can negotiate for schools that have close to a 10% AAPI student population. H.R. 333 is a foot in the door for the AAPI community that will pave the way for more legislation. When we push H.R. 333, we must make it known that it is only the first of a series of demands, and not a bone Congress can throw to us so we will go home quietly.

In urging students to support the legislation regardless of whether their institution would directly benefit, he presented two ways that the legislation could shift racial meanings around what it meant to be Asian American/AAPI. First, not only did he note that AAPIs were a minoritized population, they were "the only minority group not represented," representing an alignment with communities of color versus Whites. Second, to him, in viewing the

legislation as starting point, he rejected a view of AAPIs as a passive population ("go home quietly") and instead used active language to frame a vision for future AAPI activism ("push," "demands").

Balancing multiple priorities: The overshadowing of AAPI subgroups

In addition to garnering national support for a piece of legislation that would only affect some campuses, student activists also had to obtain buy-in across ethnic subgroups. However, a key critique of the legislation came from Paul, the sole Pacific Islander member of the sample:

> A lot of the resources are probably going to be Asian American slanted, but at the same time, I don't think that's going to be the case in every situation. I think that for the universities in Hawaii that this money could help a lot of the campuses that serve Native Hawaiians, that in American Samoa it could serve the indigenous people there, in the higher education system they have in Guam, it could serve the Chamorro. In a number of California schools, it could serve a sizeable Pacific Islander population as well, maybe some schools in Utah too, so I think for that reason it is something that could have a really positive impact on Pacific Islanders and our education. Even if it didn't, if we as Pacific Islanders expect Asian Americans to care about our issues when they're completely different from theirs, we in turn I feel should support them as they're pursuing some of their issues, even if it's going to help them more than it helps us. And so that was another reason why I would've helped even if I concluded that it wasn't that helpful for Pacific Islanders.

He expressed concerns that the legislation would not adequately serve Pacific Islander students, but rationalized his support, seeing the need to build coalitions with others ("even if it's going to help them more than help us"). His comments expose some of the tensions inherent within an AAPI pan-ethnic coalition, in which the needs of certain communities or ethnic subgroups can become marginalized (Espiritu, 1992; Espiritu & Ong, 1994). In their discussions of why they felt that the AANAPISI legislation was important, 10 out of the 12 participants cited needs such as student organizations or Asian American Studies that would broadly support the Asian American/AAPI student population, while only two participants expressed that underserved subgroups (e.g., low-income students, Southeast Asian American students) should be the top priority, and only three participants listed subgroup needs as being among the most pressing concerns. One example was Rose, who attended college in a city with a large Southeast Asian American community: "I was more concerned about low-income areas and Southeast Asian students around the country who would benefit." Still, to most participants, addressing the needs of AAPI subgroups had more of a secondary appeal, reflecting perhaps that their motivations were driven by a vision of panethnicity that foregrounded Asian American concerns.

David acknowledged that he was not even aware that the legislation addressed certain subgroups and suggested that issues affecting subgroups were not emphasized strongly in the activism lobbying for AANAPISIs. When asked "why do you think that message wasn't communicated?" he responded:

> I don't think it really resonates with students. I don't think it does at all, not unless they're deeply involved in the admissions process, it doesn't resonate at all. It doesn't involve their academics, their student clubs or what they're really active in—why are they going to care about other people getting in at that point? Maybe the people who have financial need are really interested in it, but you don't see those people get too involved in college I think. They need to focus on working part-time or working on their education and classes and stuff. I think that I came from a very privileged background so I was able to focus more on activities. I didn't care about money that much. But then it's not everybody at universities and when I hear about people in debt afterwards, it's that arrogance of being a socio-economically privileged person.

While the needs of underserved AAPI subgroups were mentioned by many participants, in order to garner broad student support for the campaign, organizers had to pitch the legislation to appeal to students who had the time to be involved in advocacy—including those from more privileged backgrounds. Arguably, they also had to draw connections to issues and experiences that would also resonate with middle-class Asian American students. The following e-mail, sent to various listservs, documents how the legislation was sold:

> What is H.R. 333?
>
> Let's cut to the chase. Among other things, getting H.R. 333 passed could give your school more $$$ for AAPI studies, AAPI cultural centers, or increase the variety of Asian languages taught on your campus. The legislation would provide money to colleges and universities that have at least 10% Asian American and Pacific Islander undergraduate enrollment to enable such schools to improve and expand their capacity to serve Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (personal communication, Sept. 23, 2003).

Interestingly, the e-mail did not mention the additional requirement for institutional eligibility: the required threshold of low-income students. Additionally, it highlighted academics, cultural centers, and language instruction, rather than recruitment and retention programs or other types of services that would target various AAPI subgroups. Overall, mobilizing support posed a complex challenge for student activists as they motivated their peers to think beyond self-interest. The campaign narrative had to appeal to students from varying campus demographics and perceptions of underrepresented ethnic subgroups

Discussion

The study's findings demonstrate that several key factors made the AANAPISI legislation and its associated racial meanings significant to students, such as the desire to challenge misconceptions around the needs of the

Asian American/AAPI communities, support a broader political movement, and engage in proactive activism. Building on these motivations, the NAASCon organizers constructed a pan-AAPI narrative (that generally foregrounded the needs of Asian American students, with less mention of AAPI subgroups or low-income AAPIs) to rally support from students who attended an array of campuses, from those with very low AAPI representation to those with more established AAPI student services. Participants' responses revealed tensions in how the students perceived racial dynamics both on their own campuses and the broader needs of AAPI college students nationally.

The realities faced by the organizers deepen scholarly understanding of how racial projects are enacted and the possibilities and limitations of panethnicity in mobilizing communities. More specifically, the competing needs that participants encountered illuminate tensions within panethnic organizing. The advocacy for AANAPISIs represented a strategy to harness the state-imposed AAPI race category as a platform to obtain more rights and resources: a racial project (Omi & Winant, 2015). The AANAPISI racial project called for panethnic solidarity among Asian American *and* Pacific Islander subgroups in order to showcase support and relevance of the legislation; however, such solidarity was likely impossible without stronger recognition of the diverse needs that make up AAPI, and not just Asian American, student concerns. Instead, organizers embraced a more Asian American-focused definition of panethnicity.[3] For example, one student (David) said that he did not even know that the concerns of ethnic subgroups were an issue related to the legislation. Tellingly, almost all participants referred to Asian Americans instead of AAPIs or other language that would recognize Pacific Islanders, reflecting this oversight. In one case, the listserv e-mail sent out to mobilize a broader audience of students, the term "AAPI" was used, perhaps indicating a strategic leveraging of panethnic interests.

Arguably, the legislation represented an effort to shift racial meanings around Asian American identity (e.g., challenging the model minority myth, which Pacific Islanders are less directly affected by, see Poon et al., 2016; Wright & Balutski, 2013) by selective co-option of the Pacific Islander category, thus demonstrating some of the tensions around efforts to leverage panethnicity for the sake of advancing a racial project. While James was one Pacific Islander participant who joined the campaign recognizing that Pacific Islander needs could be overshadowed by broader pan-Asian American concerns, his peers from other underserved AAPI subgroups may have been less attracted to the cause or unwilling to see their interests marginalized in the conversation (Kauanui, 2005; Wright & Spickard, 2008). The campaign demonstrates how the theoretical power of community leaders and a shared narrative is complicated by varying campus environments and ethnic/panethnic identifications among students (Okamoto, 2014).

One unanticipated finding was how students perceived the legislation vis-à-vis other racial minority groups. While we expected that students would support a greater alignment with other minority groups, as opposed to Whites, we found the rhetoric invoked that it was "unfair" that AAPIs (or as they more commonly referred to themselves, "Asian Americans") were the only minority group without a MSI designation to be interesting. While students distinguished AAPIs from other minority groups in discussing how different groups were seen or treated on campus and the larger society, they felt that AAPIs surely deserved the same MSI designation and status already granted to other communities of color, and they tended not to reflect much on whether and how Asian American needs differed from other groups. Students linked the lack of an AAPI MSI designation to a broader lack of recognition of AAPI educational needs, responding to the current absence of AAPIs from the Higher Education Act, as one student expressed: "Are we not important? Don't we have needs also?" The student organizers recognized the inequality in resources and recognition, which somewhat reinforced panethnic boundaries (at least among Asian American students) as theory would suggest (Okamoto, 2014).

While an element of "panminority" alliance in seeking alignment with other communities of color may have existed (Ocampo, 2013), it did not appear consistently in the data, nor did it appear that student organizers were explicitly interested in disrupting hegemonic narratives around anti-Blackness that are foundational to the model minority myth (Poon et al., 2017). Students may have had some interest in disrupting the narrative aligning Asian American students with Whites (Koshy, 2001), but apparently not to the extent that would demonstrate a stronger commitment to disrupting the forces of racial triangulation, which position Asian Americans as a wedge group between Whites and Blacks (Kim, 1999). Similar to activists in the CMI campaign (Poon et al., 2017), the data indicate a centering of Asian American needs, wherein a MSI designation was most attractive because of access to funding and also because it would create a sense of parity with other communities of color. While understandable, and perhaps reflective of how most participants did not have access to Ethnic Studies or Asian American Studies curriculum that could have challenged them regarding panminority coalition building, it also suggests that students' embrace of the racial project of AANAPISIs was driven by a centering of Asian American concerns, and perhaps less a true disruption of structures upholding racial hegemony.

Related, the question of whether AAPI, and in particular, Asian American students will continue to support such efforts may lie in the question of whether advocates can identify some form of interest convergence between Asian American interests, Pacific Islander interests, and the interests of other communities of color (Park & Liu, 2014). Advocates should be wary that such

alliances are easily splintered by forms of interest divergence, wherein major-ity-group interests come to overshadow the immediate needs of minority-status members (Poon et al., 2017; Park & Liu, 2014).

The study also raises questions about how racial projects are constituted and enacted. The MSI designation for AAPIs was a "no brainer" for students, but the stagnancy of the legislation at the time of data collection in the mid-2000s showed that it was actually not an easy or logical sell to Congress or the general public, given the overriding perception that Asian Americans are a tremendously successful group. A racial project can be a reification (e.g., the 2017 Muslim travel ban) or transformation (e.g., the AANAPISI legislation) of a racial group's status and relationship to the state (Omi & Winant, 2015). The conceptualization of a racial project in this manner touches upon what rights and resources are being redistributed, or taken away and withheld. However, this framing overlooks the meaning that members of that racial category may actually ascribe to the racial project, a gap in the research that we have attempted to mitigate through this study. The insights learned from the NAASCon AANAPISI campaign suggest that the motivations, tensions, and processes driving a racial project are worthy of attention, in addition to the outcomes of the actual racial project. Both may have a significant impact on how particular groups within higher education are viewed and treated, by the government and by individuals on the ground. The student organizers thus understood that the passage of AANAPISI legislation would redefine AAPIs to the federal government, but would not necessarily benefit all AAPIs nationally, given the eligibility criteria. Racial projects may therefore not have a uniform effect in their implementation. Furthermore, altering how a governmental body classifies a racial group will not necessarily alter the daily experiences of everyday students and the people they interact with; discrimination can persist even when a critical mass of Asian American students exists at a campus (Park & Liu, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, our work demonstrates that the national campaign for AANAPISIs represents a critical time point in how students sought to address and challenge racial meanings around what it meant to be Asian American and/or AAPI in the context of higher education (Omi & Winant, 2015). However, the campaign's overall embrace of a panethnic framing as a platform for their efforts generally led to the prioritization of panethnic Asian American concerns over an effort that more strongly articulated the need for resources for low-income and ethnic subgroups underrepresented within higher education—a broader, AAPI (and not just Asian American)-focused definition of panethnicity.

Our analysis highlights the complexity behind efforts to advance racial equity. Higher education research, practice, and policy largely operate from a racial lens in the attempt to create equitable educational environments for racially minoritized communities (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). According to racial formation theory, racial equity requires changing the relationships between racial groups and the societal structures which distribute rights and resources (i.e., a racial project, Omi & Winant, 2015). Relevant to higher education policymakers and practitioners, findings indicate that attracting student support for racial equity initiatives cannot be automatically assumed given the complex issues that influence within-group diversity. An investment of time may be required to understand and cultivate students' understanding of critical issues related to racial inequality to obtain buy-in. Similarly, the focus and implications of racial equity research may have less immediate application in contexts where communities based on race-conscious identifications are not as cohesive due to other more salient identifications, such as ethnicity or social class.

While the students who lobbied for the legislation did not always have the concerns of low-income, Southeast Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities at the forefront, we contend that contemporary AANAPISI grants should make serving under-resourced subgroups their top priority. These two bodies of concerns, subgroup and panethnic, are not mutually exclusive areas: panethnic initiatives seeking AANAPISI funding can and should clearly articulate how they will prioritize the support of under-resourced groups. Successful programs initiated through AANAPISI grants and other forums can help universities understand how to more effectively help AAPI students succeed holistically (Nguyen et al., 2018), and such efforts require attention to the numerous subpopulations within the community. Altogether, we must better understand how and why AAPIs continue to live racialized experiences, both positive and negative, in higher education and society, and what policy solutions can best meet needs.

In regards to the AANAPISI legislation, findings reveal how a major motivation for student activism was the symbolic impact of the legislation: As one student, Eric, commented, the legislation showed students that they were indeed "important." While the introduction of the legislation and eventual federal recognition of AANAPISIs were historical landmarks, universities themselves have a continued responsibility to demonstrate authentic caring to AAPI students and all students of color by visibly providing both panethnic and subgroup resources to support a variety of initiatives: diversifying the curriculum, the hiring/retention of AAPI support staff and faculty, and broadening access and equity for groups that experience heightened marginalization (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2018; Rendon, 1994).

Continued focus on the contemporary needs and issues of AAPI college students is especially pertinent as their enrollment rises nationwide, and understanding how AAPI students advocate for themselves nationally is necessary to understand the capacity of AAPI communities to engage in collective action. However, is the racial project avenue even a possibility given media coverage that focuses more on the so-called achievements of the community, versus the impact of inequality (Park & Liu, 2014)? We challenge educators and students alike to push back against these monolithic portrayals and representations of Asian Americans. Making visible the history and continued relevance of AANAPISIs is critical in showing how AAPI students, educators, and policymakers have actively sought to reframe racial meanings around how Asian Americans/AAPIs are viewed by themselves, their campuses, and the state.

Notes

1. Note, depending on the context we will alternately refer to either AAPIs generally or Asian Americans as a group that is distinct from Pacific Islanders.
2. Summer internships with Asian American/AAPI civil rights organizations in Washington, DC and other major metropolitan areas were a particularly influential avenue that influenced student leadership in the AANAPISI campaign. NAASCon itself came about through relationships built through internships, and subsequently, students learned about the legislative process and in some cases, the AANAPISI legislation itself, through summer internships.
3. This phenomena likely occurred in part because the majority of participants themselves did not come from underrepresented subgroups, which could be an issue with the relatively small size of the sample. However, the sample reflected the general demography of the student leaders who organized around the issue (as well as some of the dynamics of general AAPI enrollment in higher education, wherein Southeast Asian American and Pacific Islander students are severely underrepresented, see CARE, 2011).

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