The Asian Pacific American Network (APAN) of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) is disappointed and concerned with the report, The Rise of Asian Americans, recently released by the Pew Research Center (2012). As an entity dedicated to addressing the concerns and issues of Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) faculty, staff, and students in higher education, APAN cautions against accepting the findings within the report on face value, as the overly-simplistic portrayal of data and framing of themes paint an incomplete picture of the diversity within the APIDA community. With enrollment of APIDA students projected to increase by 30% throughout the K-12 and higher education pipeline (CARE, 2011), it is critical for student affairs professionals to understand the nuanced complexity of the socio-political and educational experience of the APIDA population in the United States.

While the Pew study contains a wealth of information and statistics on an oft-overlooked and under-researched racial group, there are several aspects of the report that APAN believes to be problematic:

**Language of Press Release & Report**
For those who do not even read the report, the headline of the press release, “Asians Overtake Hispanics...surpass U.S. public in valuing marriage, parenthood, and hard work” has managed to already be divisive and pit the APIDA community against other communities of color. Instead of addressing the systemic issues impacting success, the report recycles the narratives of family values and hard work and reinforces the “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” ideology. This language encourages institutions to overlook APIDA students in recruitment, advocacy and retention programs for higher-risk students. As student affairs professionals, it is important that we challenge our institutions to be more critical in considering who is included in the higher-risk student population, and that we actively work to dispel stereotypes and myths around APIDA achievement in higher education.

**Inclusivity & Representativeness**
This report is beyond limiting. Instead of speaking to a broad inclusive APIDA community, it captures the experiences of just six ethnic groups. As of the 2010 U.S. Census, 48 different APIDA ethnic groups are represented in the United States, occupying a full range of socioeconomic statuses - from the poor and underprivileged to the affluent and highly skilled. Much of this spread is related to the varied immigration history of different ethnic groups. The groups represented in this report (i.e., Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese) are groups whose immigration history spans a greater length of time in the United States, which has led to a greater acquisition of social and cultural capital over generations.

The authors report that “more than six-in-ten (61%) adults ages 25 to 64 who have come from Asia in recent years have at least a bachelor’s degree” (Pew Research Center, 2012, p. 1). From CARE (2011), we know that “50-65% of Southeast Asian and 50-60% of Pacific Islander adults (25 or older) have not enrolled in any form of post-secondary education” and that “35-50% of Southeast Asian and 50-60% of Pacific Islander adults (25 years or older) reported having attended college, but not earning a degree.” It is this differential access to, and completion of, post-secondary education that the Pew Report neglects.

**Lack of Disaggregated Data**
This report illustrates one of the greatest flaws in regards to how the APIDA population is consistently portrayed and conceptualized in research. If data on APIDA populations is not disaggregated by ethnicity, we fail to capture a complete picture of the APIDA experience; the unique needs and experiences of ethnic groups that lower in population size are inevitably masked or rendered invisible. This is directly relevant and applicable to our institutions when we assess and collect data on APIDA students; are we able to name the specific APIDA ethnic groups on campus, describe their experiences, and identify their needs?

As previously mentioned, the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum is represented in the APIDA community, and most APIDA ethnic groups experience poverty at rates higher than the U.S. average
(CARE, 2008). Failure to acknowledge the economic diversity of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders contributes to perception that APIDA college students do not demonstrate financial need, an assumption that organizations like the Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) are refuting through their scholarship programs.

The lack of disaggregated information also limits our knowledge of the experiences of APIDA students from ethnic groups with lower than average educational attainment rates. Are they being retained on, and graduating from, our campuses? What support, services, and resources are we providing them? Are they utilizing services that could impact their overall success? Answers to these questions can only be determined once we have data to accurately inform us of who the APIA students on our campuses are.

Realities of Discrimination

According to the Pew report, “today’s Asian Americans do not feel the sting of racial discrimination or the burden of culturally imposed ‘otherness’ that was so much a part of the experience of their predecessors who came in the 19th and early 20th centuries.” (p.12) In addition, the report includes the statistic that 81% of respondents believe being Asian American either helps or makes no difference in the job search process, and 75% believe the same for job promotions. (p.12) Compared with recent incidents on our campuses involving discrimination or marginalization of APIA students, and the remarkably low number of Asian Americans in leadership positions within our institutions (CARE 2010; Wang & Teranishi, 2012), the Pew report’s findings and statistics in this area ring hollow. We must continue being attentive to what our APIA students, faculty, and staff are experiencing at our institutions, attuned to the campus climate for our APIA communities, and responsive to incidents or concerns affecting this population.

Despite the above flaws, however, we believe there are themes embedded within the Pew report that are of relevance and interest to the student affairs profession. Awareness of differences among APIA ethnic groups’ histories in the U.S., their immigration and settlement patterns, and their religious and cultural identities are critical in more effectively engaging, understanding, and supporting APIA students, as is the finding that Asian Americans may be more likely to identify with their ethnic group label (e.g., Vietnamese, Indian) than a racial group label (e.g., Asian, Asian American). In addition, the fact that Asian Americans comprise 10-11% of the undocumented immigrant population means our outreach and support of undocumented students on our campuses must to be inclusive of the APIA population. APAN encourages further exploration of these areas through both research and practice, as we strive to better understand, support, and serve the APIA student communities on our campuses.

In closing, we would be remiss if we did not include a few recommendations for higher education professionals:
1. Contact your office of institutional research and learn what demographic information is gathered at your university regarding APIA students, faculty, and staff.
2. Review the level, type, and quality of APIA student involvement in your departmental programs. Does their involvement match that of the general campus population? Are APIA students adequately represented in your programs?
3. Find out how your institution defines “underrepresented” or “minority” students. All too often APIA students are intentionally omitted from this group due to perceived lack of need. Challenge this notion on your campus.
4. Educate yourself and others within your sphere of influence - whether students, faculty, staff, or peers - on the APIA experience and its impact on APIA students’ experiences in higher education.

Sources