

The Demographics of Diversity: Asian Americans and Higher Education

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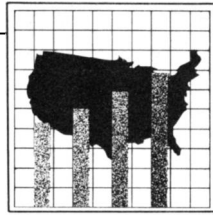
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THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF DIVERSITY

ASIAN AMERICANS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Today's media attention to Asian American talent and college-going—the stories about Westinghouse talent-search winners, allegations of bias in Ivy League admissions—is best understood in a shifting demographic context. Asian Americans this decade have been the nation's fastest-growing group of college-goers. In 1976, there were 150,000 Asian American undergraduates in U.S. higher education. A decade later, in fall of 1986, there were almost three times as many—448,000. If this phenomenal growth had *not* drawn attention, one might be surprised.

Beyond the headlines, though, there has been too thin an information base for higher education policymakers as they plan services for a set of students

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remarkable for its commitment to education—and striking diversity.

The Numbers

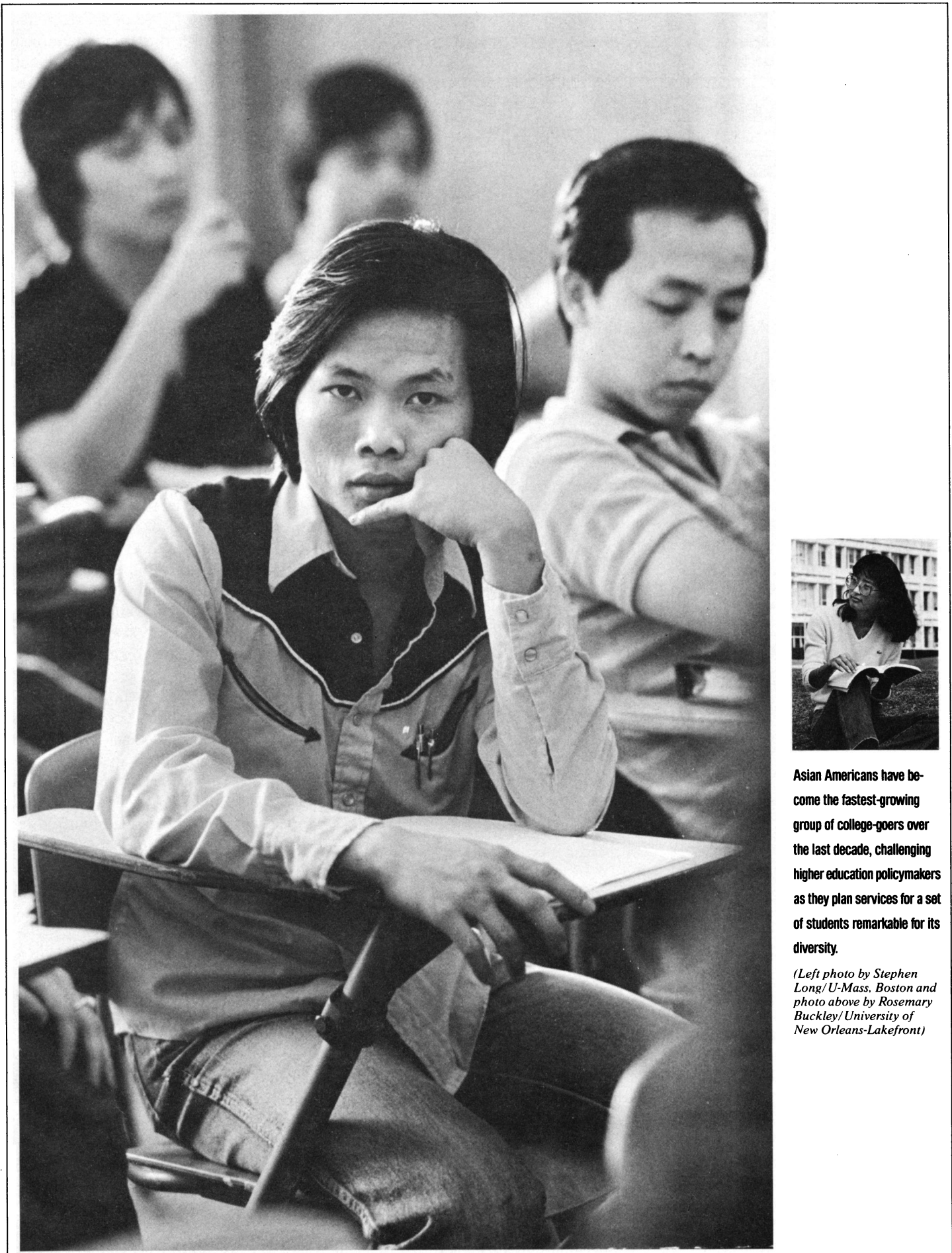
The number of Asian American college-goers tripled in no small measure because of growth in the larger Asian American population. The 1980 census reported a total of 3.5 million Asian Americans; they constituted a mere 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population. The 1980 count, however, represented more than a doubling of the previous Asian American count in 1970. The rate of growth of Asian Americans (141 percent) over that decade exceeded increases recorded among Hispanic (39 percent) and black (17 percent) persons—and for the population as a whole (11 percent).

Population estimates for Asian Americans *after* 1980, unlike those for larger minority groups, are at best informed approximations. None of the inter-decennial national surveys of population collect enough sampled Asian Americans to provide statistically reliable estimates. Population projections of Asian American growth by researchers from the East-West Population Institute in Honolulu put the total figure for Asian Americans at 5 million in 1985,

making Asian Americans about 2 percent of the total U.S. population. Some estimate that the 1990 Asian American population will number about 6.5 million, or just under 3 percent of the total U.S. population. Some demographers postulate that ethnic Asians could become as much as 10 percent of the U.S. population by the year 2080.

Projections aside, we address the more modest question: How did the number of Asian Americans escalate so dramatically between 1970 and 1980? It did not come about through what demographers call “natural increase,” wherein recorded live births exceed recorded deaths. Asian American women of child-bearing age recorded lower fertility rates than white, black, and Hispanic women. U.S.-born Asian American women, aged 25 to 34, recorded only 951 children per 1,000 women, while the foreign-born averaged 1,268 children. The equivalent figure among white women was 1,404. By ethnic group, fertility was highest among Vietnamese women, predominantly newcomers whose rate of 1,785 approached those reported for Hispanic and black women. Native-born Japanese and Chinese American women, who tend to be well-educated pro-

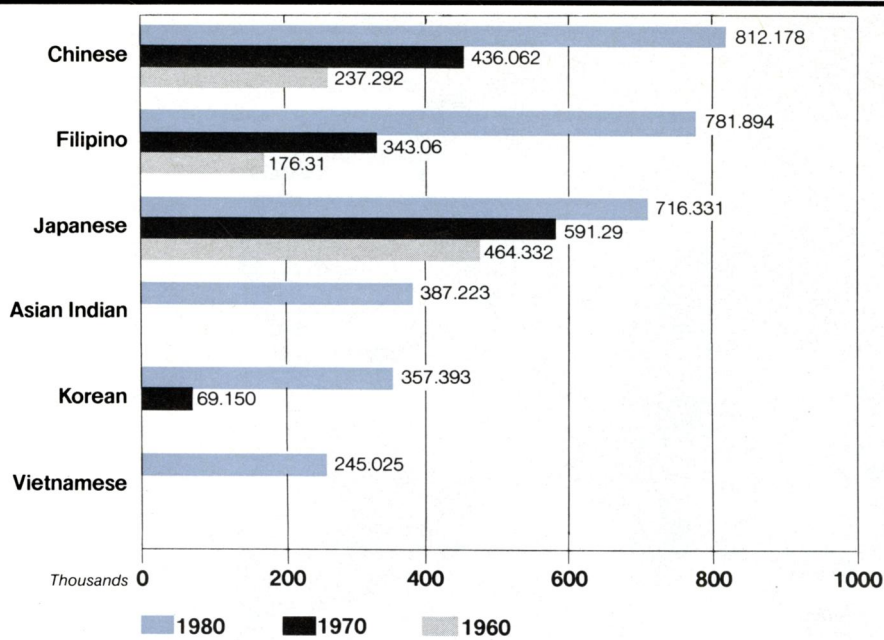
BY JAYJIA HSIA & MARSHA HIRANO-NAKANISHI



Asian Americans have become the fastest-growing group of college-goers over the last decade, challenging higher education policymakers as they plan services for a set of students remarkable for its diversity.

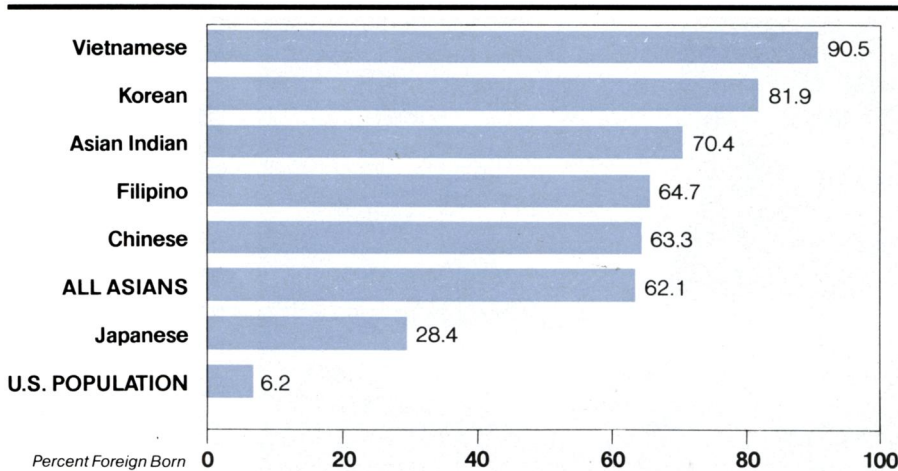
(Left photo by Stephen Long/U-Mass, Boston and photo above by Rosemary Buckley/University of New Orleans-Lakefront)

Chart 1
Asian American Population Growth from 1960-1980: Six Largest Ethnic Groups as of 1980



Source: Gardner, Robey & Smith (1985)

Chart 2
Percent of Six Largest Asian Ethnic Groups in 1980 Who Were Born in Foreign Countries



U.S. Census Bureau (1980)

professionals living in urban centers, recorded the lowest fertility rates of all groups, with 768 and 669 children per 1,000 respectively. (For a group to "naturally increase," fertility rates need to approach 2,000 births per 1,000 women of child-bearing age.) In short, Asian Americans have not given birth to enough children to maintain their numbers, let alone explain the explosive growth among Asians. That growth has been due principal-

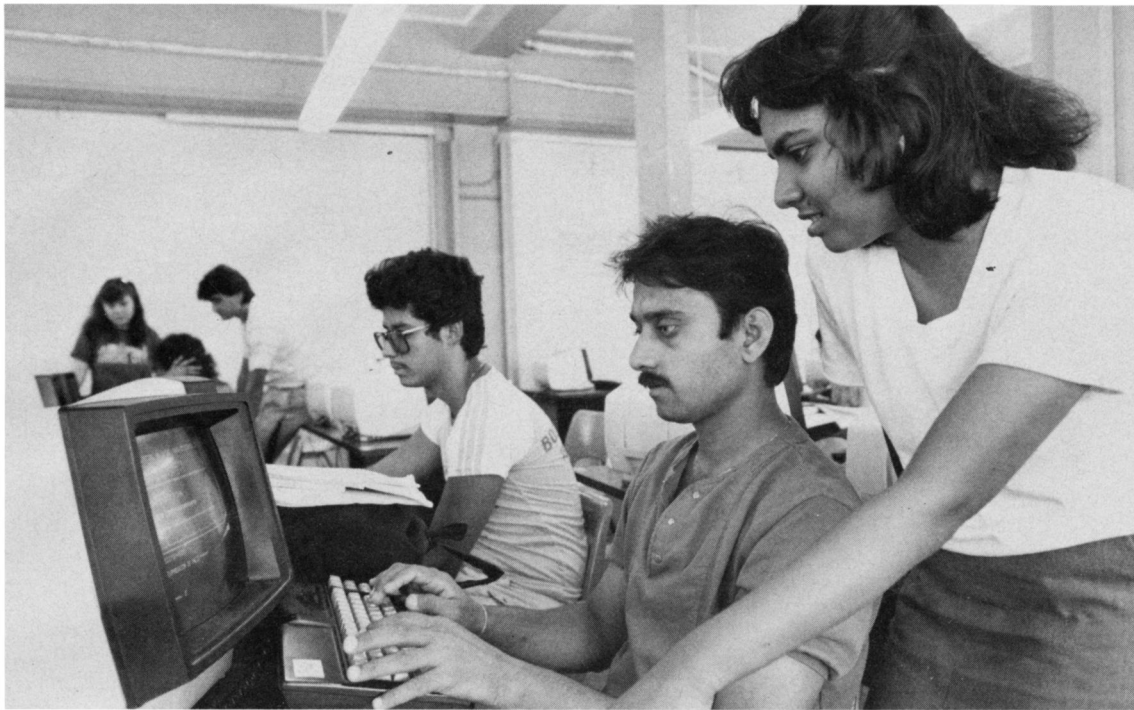
ly to a steady stream of Asian immigrants and refugees. It must be noted that the last 20 years of Asian immigration have been unlike any other in the history of Asians in America. Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a series of racially motivated, restrictive immigration laws, such as the 1924 National Origins Act, virtually halted immigration from Asia. The year 1968 is a landmark in changing that situation: it was the year the Im-

migration Act of 1965 took effect. The 1965 law abolished the national-origins quota system and classified immigrants according to whether they originated from the Eastern or Western hemispheres. The annual quota for the Eastern hemisphere, which included Asia, was set at 170,000, with no more than 20,000 permitted to emigrate from any single country.

A preference system for ranking potential immigrants also was established, which emphasized reunification of families of U.S. citizens. Since 1980, the family-reunification preference has been the driving force for admission among all Asian immigrant groups. In earlier years, the third preference, which favored specified professionals, scientists, and artists of exceptional ability, and the sixth preference, which focused on skilled and unskilled workers in occupations that suffered from labor shortages in the U.S., were important vehicles for Asian immigration. As examples, one out of five immigrants from the Philippines was admitted under the third or sixth preference in 1970; 19 percent of Asian Indian immigrants in 1975 entered under an occupational preference.

For perspective, it is worth noting that, from 1971 to 1980, Asian immigration totaled about 1.6 million; this was the first time Asian immigration ever exceeded 500,000 in any 10-year period. For immigrants from the Americas the figures were higher. Asian and other immigration remained much lower than the historic inflow from Europe. In the decades between 1841 and 1971, the median decade-long immigration figure for Europeans to the U.S. was a little over 2 million.

Current U.S. immigration policy, then, may be viewed as one that seeks to remediate past imbalances and that recognizes that Asian peoples constitute over half of the world population. The figures continued to rise from fiscal 1981 through 1988. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1.75 million East, Southeast, and South Asian immigrants were admitted legally to the U.S., with Asians now constituting the largest group of legal immigrants annually. (The numbers of illegal Asian immigrants in this country are quite small.) Perhaps the



Asian Indian organizations lobbied effectively to be counted as Asian Americans for the 1980 census, a step that increased the count of Asian Americans by over 200,000.

(Photo by Gene Luttenberg/
Omni Photo Group)

most remarkable point that can be made here is that the number of Asian immigrants coming to the U.S. during the '80s exceeded all Asian Americans counted in the 1970 census.

Parallel with immigrants, Southeast Asian *refugees* have also been admitted under a series of parole authorizations granted by the U.S. Attorney General since 1975, with the flow enhanced by events abroad and a broadened definition for "refugees" in the 1980 Refugee Act. Refugees can take new steps to become permanent residents after a year's residence in this country; most eventually acquire U.S. citizenship through naturalization. In the 1980 census, just over 300,000 Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians were counted in the U.S. From 1980 to May 30, 1989, a total of 657,000 refugees identified as Vietnamese, Khmer, Cambodian, Laotian, or Highlanders were admitted, with the trendline decreasing in successive years from a high of 168,000 in FY 1981 to 26,000 during the first half of FY 1989. Thus, even before we get to the 1990 census count, we know there are more than a million Southeast Asians in the United States today—a substantial new addition to the mix called Asian Americans.

In the 1990 census, which begins in April, we can expect that the Asian American population will have lost some individuals through death, emi-

gration, or repatriation and gained others through birth, immigration, refugees, and asylees. Asylees? Refugees come from abroad; asylees are already in the U.S., or at a port of entry, when they seek shelter. Recent events in Tiananmen Square and the response of U.S. leaders suggest that some fraction of the 26,000 students and additional numbers of political dissidents from the People's Republic of China may be granted asylum. The uncertain political climate in Hong Kong as of 1997 also may increase emigration; some U.S. legislators have urged that the current quota of 5,000 from Hong Kong be increased several-fold. Indeed, political or economic instability in any of the Asian nations can act as a push to increase future migration.

Finally, it should be noted that definitional changes in the 1980 census also increased the count of Asian Americans. Asian Indians have been treated historically as Asians—indeed, they were barred for decades from migrating to the U.S., and were denied U.S. citizenship through naturalization until 1965. Somewhat startlingly, through 1970 the Census Bureau generally classified Asian Indians as Caucasians. The contradictory categorizations occurred despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that India is the second most populous nation in the world and has enormous racial, ethnic, and linguistic

diversity. Some of the discrepancy here, of course, stems from the use of forced choices about race, which until recently were limited to Caucoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid. Given the social, economic, and political uses of the census, Asian Indian organizations lobbied effectively to be counted as Asian Americans for the 1980 census, a step that increased the count of Asian Americans by over 200,000.

Change and Diversity

Until the recent influx of immigrants and refugees, the structure of the Asian American population had remained relatively stable for decades. Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans comprised the three largest ethnic groups. In the decades up to 1970, the Asian American population became increasingly U.S.-born.

The new influx changed the picture. By 1980, the proportion of foreign-born Asian Americans had jumped to 62 percent. That census, for the first time, counted six specific Asian ethnic groups. In descending numerical order, these were Chinese (812,178), Filipino (781,894), Japanese (716,331), Asian Indian (387,223), Korean (357,393), and Vietnamese (245,025). Chart 1 shows the changing ethnic Asian demographics across the last three census counts. According to demographers, Filipinos will have surpassed Chinese

Between 1976 and 1986, when the Asian population doubled in the U.S., its post-secondary participation rose threefold — accounting in the process for a big chunk of higher education's growth during those years.

(Photo by Bob Kalmbach/
U-Michigan)



as the largest group by 1990, and the number of Japanese probably will have fallen below those of Vietnamese and Korean Americans.

The proportion of foreign-born among Asian American groups varies widely, from 28 percent among Japanese Americans to 91 percent among the Vietnamese. Chart 2 shows the relative proportions of foreign-born among the six groups.

With the exception of scholars, bureaucrats, and political activists, Americans of Asian ancestry rarely think of themselves first and foremost as "Asian American." Most ethnic Asians, particularly newcomers, are more likely to identify with their specific national or regional identities: Vietnamese, Korean, Hmong, Punjabi Sikh, Cantonese or Taiwanese, Visayan or Ilocano. A third-generation Japanese American typically would be fluent in English and well assimilated in the mainstream society, but have only passing knowledge of Japanese language or culture. A first-generation Asian Indian—admitted under the third preference—with a good job, possessing advanced degrees, and proficient in several languages including English, typically

would fit with ease into a professional milieu and live in a middle class neighborhood. By contrast, a Laotian refugee who disembarked from a jumbo jet after years in refugee camps might have considerable trouble communicating in English and find life in the U.S. almost as alien as Alice found Wonderland. Yet, all are classified "Asian American," and are too often treated as members of a homogeneous population.

Beyond the six groups reported by the 1980 census, 166,000 persons were counted in a catch-all "other Asian" category. The designation included 22 specified ethnic groups. Laotian, Thai, Kampuchean (Cambodian), Pakistani, Indonesian, and Hmong people were each counted in the thousands. The remainder consisted of more than 26,000 East, Southeast, and South Asians who identified themselves as everything from Bangladeshi and Bhutanese to Singaporean and Sri Lankan.

Asian newcomers speak hundreds of mutually unintelligible languages and dialects. They transmit their diverse cultures by means as ancient as the oral traditions of pre-literate societies and as modern as the weekend classes for

Korean students in Hangul, an orthography developed by a royal commission in the fifteenth century, but officially adopted by the Korean government only at the end of World War II. In short, when most Asian American ethnic groups communicate across subgroup lines, the only real language of common communication is—as one should expect in America—English.

Along other dimensions that define ethnicity and cultural identity, there are Asian Americans affiliated with virtually all the world's faiths, from Buddhist to Zoroastrian. And while country of origin often is the manner by which people identify themselves, country of *ancestry* is the choice of many, such as people from Vietnam of Chinese ancestry.

Finally, striking variations abound *within* each Asian American ethnic group. These are associated with a panoply of factors—time or generation in the U.S., origin from regions at peace or strife, socioeconomic status in the country of origin and in the U.S., and the transferability of skills and foreign credentials to the U.S. As an example, the early Vietnamese refugees were predominantly of the educated, urban,

middle-to-upper class, with a working knowledge of English, having lived in the United States for many years now. The more recent wave of Vietnamese "boat people" consisted of people much less advantaged in almost every way upon entry into the United States. Their trek to our shores was harrowing and tragic. Unfortunately, bringing so little with them, their days here have also been fraught with stress and pain. In 1980, 9.6 percent of U.S. families lived below the poverty line; the proportions of Vietnamese (33.5 percent), Cambodian (48.7 percent), Hmong (62.8 percent), and Laotian (65.9 percent) families living at poverty level were many times greater.

Participation in Higher Education

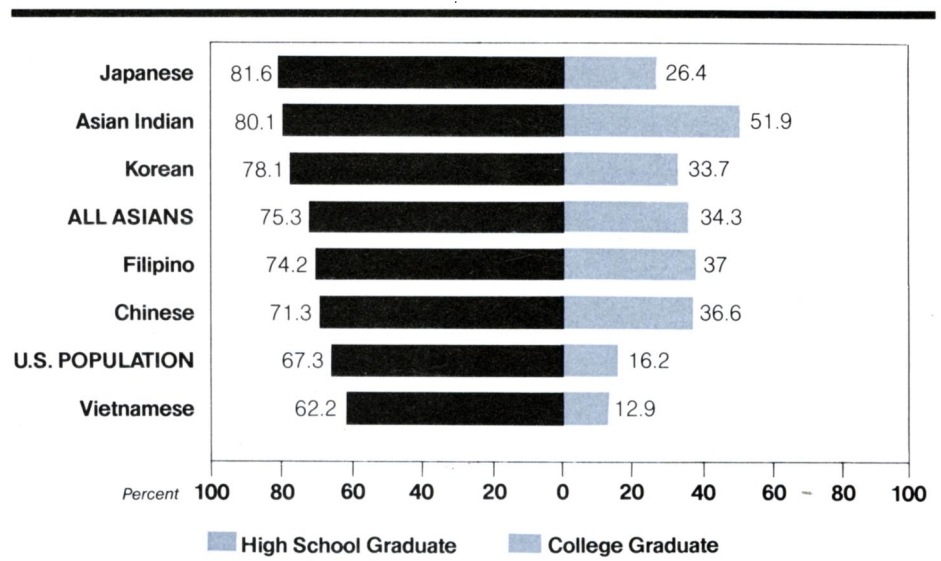
Differences notwithstanding, there are characteristics shared by most of the groups that magnify impact upon higher education.

The most important of these characteristics is that education has long been associated with status and respect in most Asian societies. For early waves of Asian immigrants, heavy investments in education provided one of the only avenues of mobility in an otherwise restrictive environment. That value is strong, too, among Asian newcomers. Between 1976 and 1986, while the Asian population doubled, its post-secondary participation rose three-fold—accounting, in the process, for a big chunk in higher education's total growth over those years.

This valuing of education is demonstrated also in the superior levels of educational attainment held by almost every older-adult Asian subgroup in 1980. Chart 3 indicates that, with the exception of Vietnamese, Asians (25 and older) held high school degrees in higher proportions than the U.S. average. Significantly greater proportions of Asians over 25 (with the exception of Vietnamese) hold the equivalent of at least a four-year college degree. Over 50 percent of older-adult Asian Indians have college degrees—more than triple the national average.

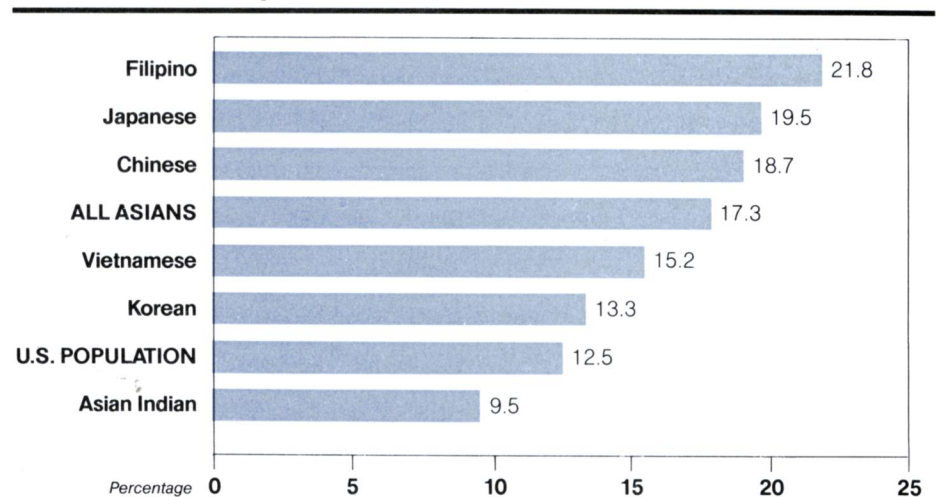
Chart 3 also indicates the apparent *underattainment* of Japanese Americans in higher education in comparison to Asian peers. Among Japanese American older adults, over 70 percent of

Chart 3
High School and College Graduates in Asian Subgroups Who Were 25 or Older in 1980



U.S. Census Bureau (1980)

Chart 4
Percent of Families with Three or More Workers in Six Largest Asian Ethnic Groups



U.S. Census Bureau (1980)

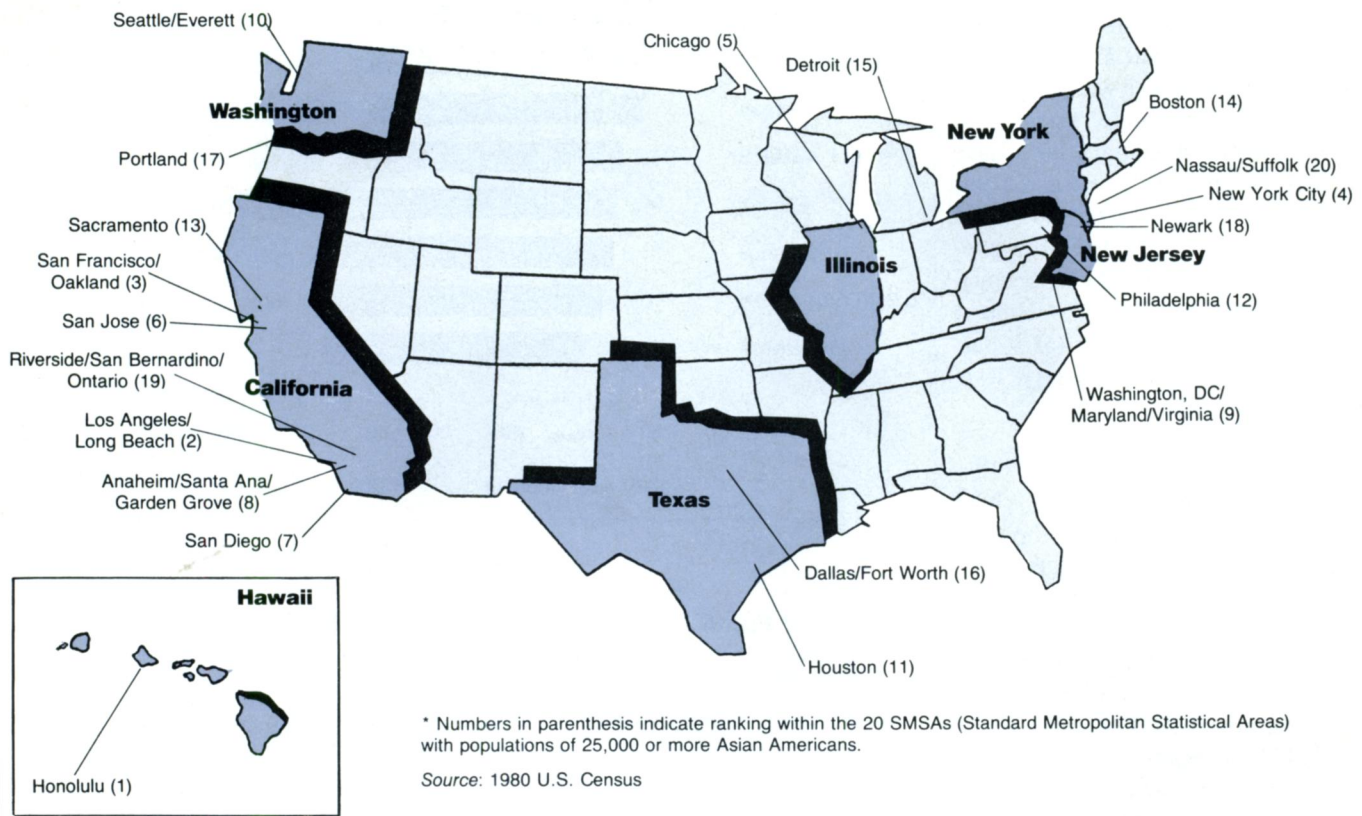
whom are native-born, the lower rate reflects the fact that many were prevented from attending college by various restrictive policies, not the least by their wholesale incarceration in concentration camps during World War II.

Depressed as degree-earning is among the Nisei, it is high when compared with the proportion of college graduates among the older-adult Hmongs (2.9 percent), Cambodians (7.7 percent), and Laotians (5.6 percent), most of whom found no opportunity for advanced study in their homelands—and precious little here.

Asians' educational commitment translates into the phenomenon that the children—newcomers and native Asian Americans alike—enter *and* stay in school. In every age range, from kindergarten to young adult, higher proportions of Asian Americans enroll in school than their white, black, and Hispanic peers. Asian American high school sophomores and seniors, followed for six years by the 1980 High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey, recorded the lowest high school dropout rates and the highest cumulative grade point averages among all groups. A

Chart 5

Seven States with 100,000 or More Asian Americans and Twenty SMSAs with 25,000 or More Asian Americans*



higher proportion of Asian high school graduates went right on to college than graduating peers. Among Asian American seniors who enrolled in four-year colleges, 86 percent persisted, and 12 percent transferred to a different institution, only 2 percent reporting they had completed a short term program or withdrawn. Among all students, 75 percent persisted, 15 percent transferred, and 10 percent completed a short course or withdrew. The persistence and transfer figure for Asian Americans attending two-year colleges was 91 percent, compared with 75 percent among all community college students.

In the jargon of higher educational research, there is little "leakage" of Asian Americans from the U.S. educational pipeline.

Note, however, that the sample of Asian American students in HS&B was inadequate for analysis by subgroups. But there is growing evidence that all is not uniformly rosy for Asian ethnics, especially for the growing segment of

Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants. There have been reports of higher dropout rates among students from some Southeast Asian refugee groups in urban areas. Public schools in Boston and a number of Midwestern cities report high school dropout rates of Khmer, Hmong, and Laotian students that approach the rates of other disadvantaged minority students. To the extent that these phenomena are validated, Asian-ethnic students may be polarized over time into two segments, one in grave need of all forms of special assistance, the other a group appearing at first blush to exceed all expectations. Worse, the former may be lumped with the latter and lose sorely needed help.

Besides Asian cultural traditions of support for education, practical reasons for investing in higher education have always been a driving force for Asians. The socioeconomic position of ethnic Asian families in American society has improved markedly in recent decades, accomplished in no small

measure by the Asian family's "over-investment" in higher educational credentials—that is, getting the highest degrees possible even while earning less than white counterparts with equivalent qualifications. Asians also tend to pool resources by living in larger households and having more family members work (Chart 4). Over-investment in education, with family members sharing the earnings load, has been a principal strategy of Asian Americans to gain entry to good jobs and a more comfortable life.

A common strategy, too, has been to optimize academic strengths in choosing a college major. First-generation and children of first-generation Asian Americans generally have shown above-average quantitative skills and compiled enviable high school records, but many have yet to achieve ease in speaking or writing English. For them, majors of choice have been those that take advantage of their mathematical reasoning abilities and minimize the need for eloquence. Thus, as first-genera-

tion students, Asians have focused on engineering, computer science, the physical sciences, and mathematics. Often coupled with this optimization strategy is the pragmatic view that study in technical fields will provide marketable skills and entry to secure, high-status, well-paying jobs.

Given these strategies, and the fact that future increases in Asian American college enrollment will come from immigrant families, it doesn't take a crystal ball to make reasonable guesses about the major fields that enrollment will head for. An important key to steering these talented students into broader fields will be to find ways of addressing their limited English proficiency.

We know also that Asian Americans choose public over private institutions. In 1986, 83 percent enrolled in public colleges and universities, compared with 77 percent of all college students. Financially limited, predominantly urban newcomers take advantage of community colleges. While 63 percent of all postsecondary students are enrolled in four-year colleges, only 58 percent of Asian Americans did so.

Demographic factors help explain the generally heightened participation of Asian Americans in higher education, but that participation is not spread evenly across institutions. According to Dr. Sam Peng of NCES, this 2 percent of the U.S. population accounted for 37 percent of the 23,000 students at the City College of San Francisco (fall of 1986), 25 percent of all students at UC-Irvine, 20 percent of Cooper Union, and 12 percent of the women at Wellesley. How could there be 758 Asian Americans out of 9,757 students at MIT, but only 427 Asian Americans out of 100,000 students in the entire state of Mississippi?

The short answer is, as Chart 5 shows, that Asian Americans are concentrated geographically. In 1980, 56 percent lived in the West and only 12 percent in the Midwest. There are, of course, differences among ethnic groups. In 1980, the Japanese (80.3 percent), Filipinos (68.8 percent), and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese (52.7 percent) lived in the West. Proportionately more Asian Indians (34 percent) and Chinese (27 percent) lived in the Northeast than Asian Americans in general (17 per-

cent). Southeast Asians are more widely distributed as a result of a dispersal policy in the refugee resettlement program. But there has been migration over time, with resulting clusters of Southeast Asians in Texas, Louisiana, Northern Virginia, and California. Six out of 10 Asian Americans live in California, Hawaii, or New York. Nine out of 10 live in urban areas. Seven states had 100,000 or more Asian Americans, and 20 standard metropolitan statistical areas had 25,000 or more, as shown in Chart 5.

An examination of recent higher education enrollment shows parallel concentrations of students in specific regions, states, and institutions. In fall of 1986, there were a total of 12.5 million students enrolled in higher education institutions. About 448,000, or 3.6 percent, were Asian or Pacific Islander Americans. Asian enrollments were highest in the three states with large Asian American populations: California (192,837 students), Hawaii (36,478 students), and New York (32,532 students). In California, for example, with its pyramidal system of 106 community colleges, 19 campuses of California State University (CSU), and nine campuses of the University of California (UC), Asian students in 1987 constituted about 9 percent of all high school graduates (20,640 Asians), 7.3 percent of all community college first-time freshmen (5,439 Asians), 16 percent of all CSU freshmen (3,574 Asians), and 20 percent of all UC first-time freshmen (3,578 Asians).

When some observers see these figures, they are quick to point out that Asian Americans are *not* primarily attending the "flagship" UC campuses—that over 40 percent attend the basic level of postsecondary education, the community colleges. In the hands of others, the same figures are used to raise questions of Asian "over-representation" in the more-selective CSU and UC sectors. Others still, who know that 26 percent of Asian high schools graduates are academically eligible for the UC (double the eligibility of the total high school graduate pool) and that 49 percent are academically eligible for CSU (about 1.7 times the eligibility rate of the total high school graduate pool), wonder if Asian Americans

are under-represented, given their qualifications. Suffice it to say here that the increase in the Asian American college population in California, coupled with its strong educational record and propensity to participate in higher education, have created tension and placed Asian admissions in the political spotlight.

In 1985, a sample survey of students was undertaken by the CSU system across its campuses. Overall and on individual campuses, Asian American students were uniformly more critical of academic programs and practices than students of any other ethnic group. They wanted a greater variety of course offerings, enhanced instruction, improved career guidance, and personal counseling. Cognizant that the "model minority" image of Asian Pacific students conceals real problems that students face, CSU has a system-wide committee at work to assess needs and recommend ways of more effectively meeting them.

This review of demographic trends highlights the striking diversity of the nation's Asian American population. In years to come, that diversity will increase—somewhat unpredictably, given pending changes in immigration policies and political instabilities around the Pacific Rim. One certainty is that the nation and its colleges must increase assistance for the current and coming waves of refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia—people who sink under the poverty line and leak along our educational pipeline.

At the other end of the distribution, it will be increasingly important for educational decisionmakers to be mindful that Asian Americans have believed in the meritocracy that is part of the American promise. Asian Americans have not only invested in education, they have invested in that promise. All evidence points to the observation that Asian American students work hard on studies and on the job, do well on tests, and, despite allegations to the contrary, participate in extracurricular activities. They seek stronger academic programs, courses, guidance, and counseling. The tensions over Asian American participation in higher education must and eventually will be settled, for more is at stake than a seat in a class. □