

Asian Americans And The Benefits Of Campus Diversity: What The Research Says¹

A key argument for affirmative action is that college students benefit from engagement in a racially diverse student body.² Because many students have few meaningful experiences with diversity prior to college, exposure to divergent viewpoints and perspectives is an essential part of spurring student growth and development.³ Engagement with diversity is also an important part of preparing students to be leaders in a diverse democracy and to participate in an increasingly competitive and global economy.⁴ However, is there evidence that Asian American college students themselves specifically benefit from engagement with diversity? This research brief examines the existing empirical work regarding benefits associated with diversity for Asian American college students. In this review of the literature, most of the studies referenced are empirical analyses of national, longitudinal datasets.

Diversity Engagement and Learning and Civic Outcomes

Multiple studies have found that various forms of diversity engagement are linked to positive learning and civic outcomes for Asian American students. Analyzing a national longitudinal dataset of 11,383 undergraduates at 184 institutions (including nearly 496 Asian Americans), researchers found that informal interactional diversity – attending a cultural awareness workshop, discussing issues related to race, and socializing with people of different races – was a positive predictor of higher levels of intellectual engagement, academic skills, civic engagement, and racial/cultural engagement for Asian American college students.⁵ In the same study, there were analyses conducted utilizing data on 1,582 students (including 266 Asian Americans) at the University of Michigan. Results indicate that sustaining interracial contact,

experiencing diversity in the classroom, and attending events and/or dialogues related to diversity were all positively linked to active thinking among Asian American students. Classroom diversity and attending events related to diversity were also positively linked with higher levels of intellectual engagement for Asian American students in the Michigan data.⁶

Another national study points to the role of engaging with diversity for promoting civic outcomes for Asian American college students. In analysis of 4,697 students from 10 universities, researchers found that Asian Americans (n = 747) who experienced positive interactions with students of other races and participated in diversity activities had significantly higher pluralistic orientations, a trait that includes the ability to see an issue from multiple perspectives, discuss controversial issues, and be open to having one's views challenged.⁷ Such skills

¹ This research brief was written by Julie J. Park, Assistant Professor, University of Maryland, College Park.

² Sylvia Hurtado, *Linking Diversity with the Educational and Civic Missions of Higher Education*, 30 *Rev. Higher Educ.* 186, 188 (2007) (ASHE Presidential Address, concluding: “The research assessing the impact on informal interaction with diverse peers has shown similar positive patterns for Black, Latino, White, and Asian students, despite their different perceptions of the climate.”).

³ Patricia Gurin et al., *Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes*, 72 *Harv. Educ. Rev.* 332, 341 (2002) (“As groups, only Asian American and Latino/a students came to the University having lived and gone to school in environments where they were not in the majority. Thus, the university’s conscious effort to help students experience diversity in and out of the classroom provide the very features that foster active, conscious, and effortful thinking.”); Victor B. Saenz, *Breaking the Segregation Cycle: Examining Students’ Precollege Racial Environments and College Diversity Experiences*, 34 *Rev. Higher Educ.* 1, 4 (2010) (“White students were the most segregated group in the nation’s public and private schools, attending schools that were on average 80% White. Asian students lived in the nation’s most integrated communities and were the least segregated in schools among all student groups.”).

⁴ See e.g., Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies* (2007).

⁵ Gurin et al., *Diversity and Higher Education*, *supra* at 354 tbl.3.

⁶ *Id.* at 352 (“The results show clearly that the largest effects came from campus-facilitated diversity activities, namely classroom diversity and multicultural events, and intergroup dialogues held on campus (the dialogues facilitate interaction among an equal number of diverse peers). For Asian American students, classroom diversity also fostered both of the learning outcomes.”).

are critical to preparing students to engage in a diverse democracy and global workforce.

Impact of Interracial Engagement

Other studies show that engaging with students of different races is associated with improved intergroup attitudes for Asian American college students. In an analysis of 3,098 undergraduate students from 28 public and private institutions, Asian American students (n = 765) who interacted more frequently with students of other races exhibited more positive attitudes toward Black and Latino/as in their senior year of college, even when controlling for prior attitudes and experiences.⁸ Additionally, both Black and Latino/a students who interacted with students of different races actually had more favorable attitudes toward Asian Americans as college seniors.⁹ This study points to two important benefits related to engaging within a racially diverse student body; not only do Asian Americans come to see other racial/ethnic groups more favorably, but other groups come to see Asian Americans more favorably. Such outcomes may play a role in stereotype reduction and improving overall intergroup relations for Asian Americans.

Racial Diversity and Satisfaction with College

In a study of a national sample of 21,651 undergraduates, results indicate that Asian Americans (n = 767) were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the racial diversity of the student body at more racially diverse institutions.¹⁰ Such satisfaction

may seem like a less tangible benefit than increased intellectual engagement or improved attitudes. However, being satisfied with campus diversity is an important part of the psychological dimension of the campus racial climate – the perceptions that students hold about the state of campus race relations and intergroup dynamics. A negative campus racial climate can lead to strained race relations and an unwelcoming environment for students.¹¹ Additionally, interacting with students of other races is associated with greater overall college satisfaction for Asian American college students, as well as feeling more prepared for post-college life and intentions to volunteer after college.¹² This finding is especially critical because studies have found that Asian Americans tend to be less satisfied with college than students of other racial backgrounds.¹³ Thus, experiences that contribute to higher satisfaction among Asian American students are beneficial to their overall college experience and may contribute to their overall retention and well-being.

Benefits of Diversity in Professional Schools (Law and Medicine)

It is less common in legal and medical education to utilize national longitudinal datasets to measure the educational benefits of diversity, and among studies using nationally representative samples there are often not large enough numbers of Asian Americans to conduct separate analyses.¹⁴ However, some studies of diversity at leading professional schools confirm important benefits for Asian American students specifically. For example, Orfield and Whitla's survey of law students at Harvard and the

⁷ Mark E. Engberg & Sylvia Hurtado, *Developing Pluralistic Skills and Dispositions in College: Examining Racial/Ethnic Group Differences*, 82 J. Higher Educ. 416, 434 (2011) (“While the effects of intergroup learning on the pluralistic measure were significant for all other groups, Asian students seem to demonstrate the strongest benefit compared to White and Latino students.”).

⁸ Nicholas A. Bowman & Tiffany M. Griffin, *Secondary Transfer Effects of Interracial Contact: The Moderating Role of Social Status*, 18 Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychol. 35, 38 (2012) (“In addition, Asian students’ contact with Hispanics was related to improved attitudes toward Blacks, their contact with Blacks was related to improved attitudes toward Hispanics, and their contact with Whites was related to improved attitudes toward Blacks.”).

⁹ Id. at 38 (“Black students’ contact with Asians was related to improved attitudes toward Hispanics and Whites, and their interactions with Hispanics and Whites were both related to improved attitudes toward Asians. Hispanic students’ interactions with Asians were associated with improved attitudes toward Blacks...”).

¹⁰ Julie J. Park, *Are We Satisfied? A Look at Student Satisfaction with Diversity at Traditionally White Institutions*, 32 Rev. Higher Educ. 291 (2009).

¹¹ Samuel D. Museus et al., *Racial differences in the effects of campus racial climate on degree completion: A structural equation model*, 32 Rev. Higher Educ. 107, 127 (2008) (“Asian and Latina/o college students’ levels of satisfaction with their campus racial climates were only slightly higher than those of their Black counterparts. Thus, institutions of higher education have a long way to go with regard to creating and sustaining welcoming campus racial climates for the minority undergraduates whom they serve.”). See also Tara Yosso et al., *Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates*, 79 Harv. Educ. Rev. 659 (2009).

¹² Nicholas A. Bowman, *The Conditional Effects of Interracial Interactions on College Student Outcomes*, J. College Student Devel. (forthcoming).

¹³ Robert T. Teranishi, *Asians in the Ivory Tower* 128 (2010); Julie R. Ancis et al., *Student Perceptions of the Campus Cultural Climate by Race*, 78 J. Counseling & Devel. 180 (2000); Dawn R. Johnson et al., *Examining Sense of Belonging among First-Year Undergraduates from Different Racial/Ethnic Groups*, 48 J. College Student Devel. 525 (2007).

¹⁴ Nisha C. Gottfredson et al., *The Effects of Educational Diversity in a National Sample of Law Students: Fitting Multilevel Latent Variable Models in Data With Categorical Indicators*, 44 Multivariate Behavioral Research 305, 318 (2009) (national sample of students at 64 law schools uses structural equation modeling and finds finding that racial diversity is associated with reduction in prejudiced attitudes and increased perceived exposure to diverse ideas by the end of law school).

University of Michigan (1,820 students, 10.3% Asian American) asked whether “discussions with students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds changed your view of the equity of the criminal justice system” and 45% of Asian Americans reported a shift in their views by virtue of these interracial discussions in law school, a higher percentage than either whites (31%) or African Americans (27%) reported.¹⁵ A more recent analysis of the University of Michigan Law School documented how positive interactions among diverse students generally and in the classroom – including for Asian Americans specifically – improves students’ overall educational experience.¹⁶ Likewise, a survey by Whitla et al. of medical students at Harvard and UC San Francisco (639 students, one quarter were Asian American) found that 68% of Asian American medical students reported that “having students of different races and ethnicities” was a “clearly positive element of their educational experience.”¹⁷

Conclusion

While the vast majority of studies examining the benefits of diversity analyze datasets that include all students in a single pooled sample, this brief identifies studies that report research finding separately for different racial/ethnic groups. Such studies provide noteworthy evidence that Asian American students indeed benefit from engaging with diversity during college and professional school. However, in order for Asian American students to reap the educational benefits of diversity from engaging with peers of different races, they need to attend institutions that are racially diverse in the first place. Affirmative action is an important tool that universities need to foster environments that are welcoming, rigorous, and democratic for all students of all races, including Asian Americans.

¹⁵ Gary Orfield & Dean Whitla, *Diversity and Legal Education: Student Experiences in Leading Law Schools*, in Gary Orfield with Michal Kurlaender Eds., *Diversity Challenged: Evidence on the Impact of Affirmative Action* 143, 163-64 (2001) (contracting with Gallop Poll to ultimately reach 81% of the law students at Harvard and Michigan).

¹⁶ Meera E. Deo, *The Promise of Grutter: Diverse Interactions at the University of Michigan Law School*, 17 Mich. J. Race & L. 63, 110-11, 114 tbl.14 (2011).

¹⁷ Dean Whitla et al., al., *Educational Benefits of Diversity in Medical School: A Survey of Students*, 78 Acad. Med. 460, 463 fig.1 (2003) (reaching 97% response rate for the 55% of medical students who could be contacted for a telephone interview done by Gallop Poll, included 338 Harvard and 301 UCSF responding students).