Research Article

Barriers and Bridges to Cambodian and Sino-Cambodian American Higher Education Success:

Voices from the Highly Successful

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ABSTRACT

Despite the Model Minority Myth, Cambodians and Sino-Cambodians have one of the lowest graduation rates among Asian Americans. What are the barriers and bridges to this community's academic success? This study's findings suggest that the barriers to Cambodians American's academic excellence are structural, intergenerational traumas and the lack of social and economic capital. The academic bridges are financial aid, parental activism, ethnic clubs, and community involvement. Public policy recommendations are to increase college readiness K–12 programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination, Upward Bound, and Equal Opportunity Program. It is also crucial to have college outreach programs such as the Journey to Success Program, service learning to cultural centers, and Asian American studies classes.

INTRODUCTION

College completion rates are used by administrators to gauge universities' success so the lower rates of graduation of first-generation students of color are an increasing concern (Akiba, 2010; Contreras and Contreras, 2015). Cambodian Americans have college graduation rates of 14 to 17 percent in comparison to other groups due to fewer

economic privileges (bridges) and more educational obstacles (barriers) (AAPI Data, 2020; Uy, 2017). This group is overshadowed by the Model Minority Myth based on the high aggregate Asian Americans graduation numbers. This article addresses the barriers and bridges impacting Sino-Cambodian and Cambodian Americans higher education outcomes. *Barriers* are obstacles that impede Cambodian American students' academic success such as lack of social capital and social economic background (Uy, 2017). *Bridges* are factors that aid in the success of college students, including programs such as K–12 college preparatory classes, government assistance, culturally competent classes, and instructors of the same ethnicity (Pitre and Pitre 2009).

RESEARCH

Cambodian Americans are an understudied group and this study aims to inform K–12 and higher education administrators seeking to increase this group's college completion rates. The following research questions guide the study: What are the unique barriers and bridges that Cambodian American students face? What accounts for the differences in college completion rates between Cambodian and other Asian American groups? Based on interviews with Cambodian American participants in this study: What are the public policy recommendations for raising college completion rates in their community?

This is a qualitative study utilizing participant observation, interviews, and ethnography. Interviews were conducted with very successful Cambodian American college, professional, and graduate school graduates, who all completed their degrees in West Coast universities. Participants generously shared their barriers and bridges to college success. They also offered educational public policy recommendations to improve the graduation rate.

LITERATURE ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICANS AND CAMBODIAN EDUCATION

OiYan Poon and colleagues (2016), reviewed more than 112 research publications on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) in higher education. These authors focused on the Model Minority Myth, which argues that all Asians are doing well academically and economically despite the vast evidence of high poverty, suicide ideation, and educational underachievement. Poon et al. argue these studies neglect to state the original impact of the myth, which was to create anti-Blackness and uphold White supremacy and drive a

wedge between Asian and African Americans or other people of color (ibid.). Bic Ngo and Stacy Lee (2007) describe the struggles of first- and second-generation Vietnamese American, Cambodian American, Hmong American, and Lao American students. They note that these groups experience obstacles such as poverty, educational underachievement, parental noninvolvement, and cultural maladaptation(s) to U.S. society. However, Southeast Asian Americans are not well studied, especially Cambodians Americans.

The varied visible and invisible perceptions of Cambodian Americans may have a detrimental effect on their academic achievement (Nhek, 2015; Tang and Ko, 2012). Chhuon and Hudley (2011) state that Cambodian identity in remedial classes was found as the "reason" for their failures. Yet, Cambodian student identity in advanced classes was viewed within the panethnic category of Asian American and thus viewed as positive within the Model Minority stereotype. Tang and Ko (2012) reveal that Cambodians were often mistaken for other ethnicities and, due to embarrassment, would not admit to their struggles. In 2014, Vichet Chhuon's "*I'm Khmer and I'm not a gangster!": The problematization of Cambodian male youth in US schools* looked at a California high school where Cambodian students were described "as apathetic students and/or gang members," (233) which the author argues redirects attention from the school addressing this group's unique academic needs.

Model Minority Myth and Cambodian Americans

Cambodian American education barriers and bridges exist due to multivariate reasons. According to the 2012 Pew study, Asian Americans are the "fastest growing, economically successful and best educated in the United States." The Asian American Model Minority Myth contrasts with the experiences of those Southeast Asian Americans who came here as traumatized refugees with undereducated backgrounds. Some of these Southeast Asian Americans have the markers of underprivilege, such as having one of the lowest college graduation rates in the nation.

Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015) argue that the educational divide has everything to do with the 1965 immigration hyperselection. Lee and Zhou maintain that the hyperselection of highly educated South Asians and East Asians had a very positive effect on how their children would perform in school. However, most Southeast Asians from the 1970s to the present came as refugees with significant trauma.

Many of the earlier waves of Southeast Asians were more educated and thus able to adapt faster to the U.S. educational systems (Chan, 2004).

CAMBODIAN HISTORY THAT LED TO U.S. REFUGEE MIGRATION

The United States engaged in a massive fourteen-month nonsanctioned bombing of the neutral country of Cambodia from 1969 to 1970, a mission called the B-52 Menu campaign (Schlund-Vials, 2014). Before the bombing there was a brutal 1967–75 Cambodian Civil War between the Communists and government forces that resulted in many civilian deaths; these events were followed by one of the worst atrocities called the "Killing Field Era" in 1975–79 when the Khmer Rouge took power (Chan, 2004; Pran and DePaul, 1999; Schlund-Vials, 2012, 2014).

During this period, Marxist–Leninist Communist leader, Pol Pot came to power in 1976 and wanted to bring Cambodia to "Year Zero." This meant transforming the country into a mythical agrarian past. Pol Pot forcibly removed all urban dwellers and made them relocate into the country to farm. His group, the Khmer Rouge, killed all educated Cambodians including teachers, doctors, and lawyers (Chan, 2004; Pran and DePaul, 1999). They also killed many singers, expatriates, and political opponents (Pirozzi, 2014; Schlund-Vials, 2012, 2014). Religious and ethnic minorities were persecuted and murdered, including the Cham (Muslims), Cambodians living in Vietnam (Khmer Khrom), and ethnic Vietnamese Cambodians.

Schools and Buddhist temples were destroyed and transformed into torture centers. These genocidal activities led to around 25 percent or 1.7 million of the population to perish from murder, overwork, and illness. The Khmer Rouge was finally overthrown by the Vietnamese invading forces in 1979. Murders of educated individuals in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge and the subsequent invasion of Vietnamese forces gravely affected education for subsequent generations. The systemic destabilizing effects of the murders of all the educated professionals on subsequent generations of Cambodians cannot be stressed enough.

This history greatly impacted Cambodian Americans' academic struggles in the United States (Ngo and Lee, 2007). Like other Southeast Asian Americans, such as the Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese, Cambodians show disproportionate high school dropout rates (Keo and Noguera, 2018; Lee and Zhou, 2015; Ngo and Lee, 2007). According to Sucheng Chan, "Most refugees who entered after 1979 were in terrible shape, both physically and mentally, after enduring years of

near-starvation, sleep deprivation, unremitting hard labor, and constant terror" (2004, 81). Such intergenerational traumas may affect the academic performances of the later generations for various groups (Gaywish and Mordoch, 2018).

CURRENT CAMBODIAN AMERICAN BACKGROUND

The total population of Cambodians living as U.S. residents and in combination with other ethnic groups number 327,719, within a total Asian American population of more than 18 million. From 2000 to 2016 the Cambodian population increased by 51 percent. Sino-Cambodian and Cambodian Americans are primarily located in five states: California (92,872), Massachusetts (29,909), Washington (23,412), Texas (17,626), and Pennsylvania (12,992) (AAPI Data, 2020. Overall, majority of Asian Americans primarily live in California, New York, Texas, New Jersey, and Hawaii. In an effort to further deconstruct the false model minority narrative, this data and aggregated Asian American statistics are presented in Table 1 so as to disaggregate Cambodian American numbers from those of overall Asian American numbers. The Model Minority Myth implies that *all* Asian Americans are economically, educationally, and socially successful, despite evidence that there is considerable economic diversity among the various groups (Chan, 1989).

Table 1. Cambodian American Versus Asian American Demographics

	Cambodian American	**Asian American**
U.S. resident, 2016 (alone or in combo)	327,719	18,000,000+
Population growth 2000–16	51%	75.2%
Top five states (of residence)	CA, MA, WA, TX, PA	CA, NY, TX, NJ, HI

Source: Bureau of Census 2016 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, B1003, BO2011, B02012, B02016, B02015, B02018, B02019, AAPI DATA. Retrieved at http://facts.aapidata.com/nationaldata/

Among Cambodians in the United States, 17.2 percent have education levels of a bachelor's degree or higher, 26.3 percent a high school degree or equivalent, and 32 percent have less than a high school degree (US Census 2019, Analysis of PUMS Data ACS 5-Year

Estimates). Likewise, Cambodians have a 19.4 percent rate of poverty with a 20.9 percent share of seniors in poverty and 23.3 percent share of children in poverty (ibid.). According to the 2020 Census Bureau Report, Asian Americans are the least likely to fill out the census and also have negative views that the census will be "used against them." With a lack census data, one can argue the poverty rate may be higher for all Asian American groups including Cambodian Americans who have Limited English Proficiency (LEP) issues; 40 percent of Cambodian Americans show LEP (AAPI Data, 2020). The most common language Cambodian Americans speak other than English is Khmer (188,632), with 76.6 percent of Cambodian Americans speaking it, or another language at home (AAPI Data, 2020).

TABLE 2. Cambodian American Education Demographics

	Cambodian American	**Asian American**
American bachelor's degree or higher	18.3%	53.5%
High school degree or equivalent	26.9%	14.8%
Less than a high school degree	30.6%	13.2%

Source: AAPI DATA http://facts.aapidata.com/nationaldata/

METHODS

Beginning in 2013 and continuing to 2019, I conducted participant observation, ethnography, and semiformal recorded interviews with ten Cambodian American graduates at three public universities: University of California, Riverside (UCR); California Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly); and California State University, Fresno (CSUF) (Bailey, 2006; Bernard, 2011. This qualitative study explored the barriers and bridges to success in higher education for Sino-Cambodians and Cambodians. Ten interviews of Cambodian Americans were conducted with six females and four males. Both open and closed interview questions and qualitative methods were utilized because they have been found to be particularly effective when conducting research on minority populations (Emerson et al., 2011). The data collection included (1) auditory recorded in-depth interviews, (2) thematic

coding, and (3) community site visits. The methods of ethnographic analysis used to interpret the data comprised field notes, transcription, and coding (Bailey, 2006). Reflexive ethnography, etic, and emic approaches were explored in interviewing participants assessed as highly successful Cambodian Americans.

The interview questions included open and closed inquiry (Bernard, 2011. Snowball, social media, and targeted methods were used to gain access to participants (Bailey, 2006). All participants are 1.5- to second-generation immigrants and highly accomplished academically and are either enrolled in some sort of graduate school program or are a graduate of a professional or medical school. Participants are from Southern California and California's Central Valley. Participant families experienced much internal migration within the United States, as well as throughout California. The methods of analysis used to interpret the interviews and fieldnotes consisted of thematic coding and comparative observations (Bailey, 2006; Bernard, 2011; Mace et al., 1994).

Participants

The participants were chosen because they were college graduates and also had postgraduate degrees. The two Cambodians interviewed in Southern California came from the Long Beach area, with the remaining eight from the Central Valley. The majority of participants came from working-class backgrounds and were first-generation college students. Four participants identified as Sino-Cambodian Americans and six as Khmer-Cambodian Americans.

Table 3. Participant Information

Name*	Gender	Age	Degree	Ethnicity
Peter	Male	51	Medical	Sino-Cambodians
David	Male	44	Business	Cambodian
Sharon	Female	33	Business	Cambodian
Serena	Female	28	Communication	Cambodian
Cecilia	Female	31	Kinesiology	Cambodian
Mary	Female	24	Education	Sino-Cambodians
Carrie	Female	33	Social Work	Cambodian
Bill	Male	28	Engineer	Sino-Cambodian
Henry	Male	31	History	Sino-Cambodian

Katie	Female	24	Communications	Cambodian

**All names are pseudonyms*

BARRIERS

To understand why there is a high dropout rate for Cambodian Americans in college, one has to understand the barriers or roadblocks they face. This section covers key barriers or obstacles identified by Cambodian American interviewees. The key barriers are intergenerational traumas; financial hardships; parents' cultural beliefs; and structural factors such as social class, family composition, inner-city residency, and school institutional characteristics. I argue these barriers are not unique to just these individuals but represent experiences of the larger Cambodian American population.

Intergenerational Traumas

> I grew up during the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, mainly. I was born into a corrupted Cambodian government . . . which later was taken over by the Chinese backed Communist, the Khmer Rouge. I grew up with mainly my grandparents and my parents at times. . . . I grew up under the regime. I was separated from my parents to live in the child labor camp for about three years and three months.
> *Peter, Sino-Cambodian American Medical Doctor, 51*

All interviewees mentioned the Khmer Rouge genocide and its intergenerational trauma on their lives even if they did not experience it directly. They grew up in scarred households with parents who had experienced the full horror of the genocide. All informants described traumatic incidents experienced by themselves and their families and the physical and emotional scars left by the Khmer Rouge regime. According to Peter, a Sino-Cambodian American medical doctor, he was a child laborer for more than three years and was forcibly separated from his parents. Peter managed to channel his negative experiences into a desire to help others in his community as a physician.

There are many others who could not use education to cope with past war traumas, and experienced debilitating health issues. Many Cambodian women suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

depression, anxiety, and other mental and physical health issues (Chan, 2004).

Cambodian refugees reported exceedingly poor health when compared to the general population to the Asian participants. This disparity was only slightly reduced when Cambodian refugees were compared to the subsample of Asian immigrants who were matched on gender, age, income, and urbanicity. Although Cambodian refugees are older and poorer than the general population, their poor health cannot be fully attributed to these risk factors (Wong et al., 2011, 876).

My interviewees often expressed having health issues in connection to intergenerational scars. These health issues, when combined with financial insecurities, may be a significant barrier to Cambodian American academic success.

Different Cultural Expectations of Teachers

> It's very discouraging because when you come from a household that's making combined $15,000 a year, both of your parents together, that kind of income is very low. And when you get to an age where you realize how expensive college is, it becomes very discouraging.
> *Bill, Cambodian American Engineer, 28*

Studies note that Cambodians culturally believe that care of the student is completely the responsibility of teachers, with no need for parental involvement (Um, 1999; Wright, 1999). Cambodian parents have very high esteem for teachers, trusting fully in their role as educators so they feel they do not have a right to ever question a teacher's authority. This is negatively viewed in the U.S. educational system, as parents are expected to be highly involved in their children's educational success, even hiring tutors, if needed. Another factor of note is that many Cambodian households are single-parent female led and simply do not have the financial resources or time to question the teacher (Chan, 2004).

Hyperghetto and Lack of Coethnic Translators, Mentors, or Role Model

Many Cambodian refugees were resettled in the United States in such places as Bronx, New York, of which Eric Tang called the "hyper-ghetto"—low-income areas with great political, social, and economic marginalizations. Regarding the result of negative outcomes, Chhuon states,

> it is important to recognize that there are structural factors—social class, family composition, inner city residency, and school institutional characteristics—that also impact students' academic success. For instance, Cambodian American students often enroll in poorly funded urban schools located in working-class "hyper-ghetto" communities. Thus, Cambodian American students face economic, social and academic challenges similar to those of other . . . children of color. (2014b, 173)

This is one of the reasons there is high poverty rates which, in turn, makes college affordability an issue. This also coupled with lack of coethnic translators and role models.

> Growing up there wasn't too many Cambodian translators. There wasn't a lot of Cambodian counsellors. There just wasn't a lot of Cambodian role models in administration. And when you don't see someone like yourself, you're very timid. And I feel like a lot of the administrators were not culturally competent enough to understand my needs.
> *Henry, Sino-Cambodian Community Advocate, 31*

Henry is a community advocate and has spent his entire life in the Central Valley of California, which has many pockets of extreme poverty and crime. He saw many childhood friends join gangs and later become incarcerated. He felt pushed into dead-end retail jobs. College was never talked about, nor had Henry any Cambodian role models in school. After years of boredom, he took a local sociology course at a junior college where he was told that the community he grew up in was termed "Sin City" due to being considered the most dangerous places in America for drive-by shootings in the 1990s.

Henry became infuriated and could not convey to his professor how much harder it was for Southeast Asian Americans to succeed in academia because of a lack of English skills and cultural capital. He had not attended preschool or kindergarten because his parents did not know those options existed. He suggested that a Cambodian translator would have benefitted his family as well as having a Cambodian counselor. Also, seeing a coethnic teacher or at the very least a culturally competent teacher would have been beneficial to his academic journey (Chhuon, 2014; Chhuon and Hudley, 2011). Poverty also affected the Cultural Capital of the Cambodian participants in my study. Pierre Bourdieu describes "Cultural Capital" as a system of elite knowledge that helps the wealthy easily navigate different

spaces such as the academy. Wealthy students are trained on how to act, consume, and obtain academic services because their parents went through the same elite circles. None of my interviewees, like a majority of Southeast Asian Americans, came from wealthy backgrounds with college-educated parents (Ngo and Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016; Uy, 2017). All participants spoke of deep financial struggles they had in obtaining a college degree.

Limited English Proficiency

> So, at Fresno State actually, my least favorite subjects were like Political Science and stuff like that, anything that involves a lot of reading and writing really mostly because I felt inadequate in those subjects in elementary school and high school. I grew up in a household . . . [that] lacked English and it wasn't a strong subject for me going into school. I felt kind of, honestly, kind of stupid. I know that not the right word to use but I felt not smart compared to these other kids, who actually had help at home with their English-speaking parents to help them with words and essays and stuff like that. So, I actually ended up excelling in math in high school.
> *Serena, Cambodian American News Camera Crew, 28*

One significant barrier for the Cambodian community is the effect of LEP on educational acquisition (Wright, 1999, 287). Post-migration stressors included learning a new language, adapting to a new environment, and culture shock (Chan, 2004; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Tang, 2015; Um, 1999). Many Cambodians had their early educational experiences interrupted; others were forced by the Khmer Rouge to go to "reeducation camps" for years (Tang, 2015; Um 1999). This led many to have ambivalent feelings about education. The fact that the educated were targeted and murdered during the Killing Fields era cannot be emphasized enough has a key factor for study participants.

Serena, a news camera operator, described how her family's lack of English skills led her to distance herself from majors like political science, which required intensive writing. Feeling "stupid" led her to focus on math instead. Serena's experience is not unusual for Cambodian and other Southeast Asian Americans who have limited English backgrounds (Ngo and Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016; Wallittl, 2008). Ngo and Lee argue that "compared to Vietnamese Americans and Hmong Americans, Cambodian Americans appear to score lower on standardized tests and earn relatively low-grade point average" (2007, 432).

In sum, one of the dominant barriers shared by all the interviewees was the deep impact of the Pol Pot genocide and how it traumatized their families even into the next generation. Another common impediment was a working-class background that made it difficult to afford college. Lack of English proficiency, cultural capital, and parental involvement were commonly experienced barriers. The structural factors of being raised in a high crime, low socioeconomic urban area with failing schools, were also shared academic roadblocks.

BRIDGES

Despite seemingly insurmountable barriers, many Cambodian Americans are succeeding in their quest for higher education. The Cambodian American participants in this study were able to utilize key beneficial "bridges" to succeed academically. The bridges they spoke about were individual grit, parental activism, and joining ethnic clubs. It was mentioned that involvement in the community, religion, and using the past tragic history to motivate them was essential.

Parental Activism and Hard Work Ethic

> And financially they [parents] support us. They work hard. They work 16 hours, 18 hours a day, 365 days a year to get us to college. They moved us out of bad neighborhoods, schools and states for our safety.
> *Sharon, Cambodian American Education Administrator, 33*

One common bridge I found among the highly successful Cambodian Americans was the amount of activism their undereducated parents engaged in on their behalf. Sharon relates how her family moved out of Long Beach, California because of crime and also switched school districts often so she could attend better schools. Many participants shared how their family literally packed up and left during the night to move their family to a safer and secure location within the United States. This meant moving out of hostile places where they felt they discriminated against and were in danger. Without money or English skills, these families were able to discern hazards and flee quickly.

Sharon, a successful educational administrator, related how her parents did so much for her and her siblings to enable them to succeed academically. They worked day and night to provide her with adequate food and shelter. They saved what little money they made

"under the table" to help pay for her college expenses. Sharon credits her parent's sacrifices as the reason for her academic success. She felt compelled to help her family face discrimination. To help them achieve academic success, Sharon diligently tutors and mentors her younger siblings. First she read to them, then helped them to get library cards to use when they were able to read themselves. Sharon attended teacher–parent conferences on her parent's behalf. Because of such sacrifices, her siblings are also college graduates. Another interviewee said, "My older sister went to Cal State, my second to UCR, my third to UCLA, my fourth to Cal State LA, and my fifth to Cal Poly" so the effect of family mentorship is significant. Virtues from the home country, such as faith, also serve as significant family bridges.

Ethnic Clubs

> I want to say being Cambodian American, as a female, like when I went to college and I joined the (ethnic) club and I wasn't alone but now I'm okay, I'm starting over and there's a fear of being alone but my *faith* makes feel I'm not alone, that it's always possible.
> *Carrie, Sino-Cambodian American Social Worker, 33*

Something that is understudied is the role of university ethnic clubs and how they create safe and thriving spaces for minorities. Carrie, majoring in social work, joined ethnic clubs that she attributes to helping her feel less alone. Ethnic clubs are places where students can build leadership skills and commiserate with fellow coethnics from their same socioeconomic and ethnic background. Clubs offer fun, socializing, and cultural pride building.

Carrie increased her knowledge of her rich heritage through participation in cultural dances. She attributes her perseverance to her faith. One of the tenets of the Buddhism she practices is the notion that all human beings are tied together. Due to her Buddhist beliefs, she feels less alone as she embarks onto graduate school, so she believes she can achieve her graduate degree.

Community Involvement

> I really want to utilize my training experience and my ability to access city hall, the police department and any way else to try to incorporate people to be involved . . . I encourage students to continue their education, also to come back and serve their community.

David, Cambodian American Police Officer, 44

David, a police officer, emphasizes community involvement as a big bridge to his academic success. He always joins any Cambodia-related organization as an avenue to give back. He is a 1.5-generation refugee and remembers that going to school was a privilege he did not have as a child. Many Cambodians were "rescued" and put in secondary countries such as the Philippines or Thailand before being fully resettled in a third country. After David's family fled Cambodia, they were held for a while in the Philippines, where he was not allowed to attend any school. He spoke emotionally about his childhood and being stuck in a Philippine holding camp while seeing other students in classrooms. He uses his memories of that horrendous time to motivate himself to keep pursuing academics and achieve his goal of masters and doctorate degrees.

> Growing up, I think it has always been instilled in us . . . my parents, personally, have always told me that knowledge was power because under the Khmer Rouge they have everything stripped away from them. Because of this I network and always ask for help.
> *Henry, Community Advocate, 31*

Henry, a community advocate, also stresses the importance of networks and asking for help. This is a crucial and distinct point he makes because in many Asian cultures it is not the norm to ask for help. In addition, for many Cambodian Americans who survived the genocide there is a valid distrust of authority. When the Khmer Rouge came to the capital of Cambodia, most people thought they were being liberated only to become victims of a massive human rights travesty (Pirozzi, 2014).

In sum the most common academic bridges were parental activism, joining ethnic clubs and becoming leaders in their community. All interviewees evoked the terrible time of the Khmer Rouge as a motivator to study hard because so much knowledge was destroyed during that time. One interviewer said that knowledge could never be taken away for you. They all networked, made various outside friends, and asked for help. As noted, asking for help is a significant bridge because it goes against the Asian norm of being stoic, and living isolated from other groups. All the successful Cambodian Americans in this study were very loquacious and connected with different ethnic groups to

get further academic support. Many cited perseverance, despite many failures, as an important key to their success.

Interestingly, then, the trauma Cambodian Americans suffer can serve as both a barrier and a bridge to academic success, though its role in success is not one anyone would recommend for replication. Factors that are recommended are activism, asking for help, and clubs, translators, and other assistance in negotiating language and cultural differences. Language acquisition and financial stability are also significant bridges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public policy recommendations advocating for increases in college graduation were offered by the Cambodian Americans interviewees. They emphasize not just individual traits but also structural changes that can be implemented at the K–12, community, and university levels. Community and university partnerships, Southeast Asian conferences, and Asian American and Cambodian language classes were also recommended.

Four Keys to Success, Perseverance, and Support

> One: Watch and don't talk.
> Two: Mimic exactly what they do, which is duplicate what they do.
> Three: Replicate that successful ways until you perfect it. Or I should say perfect it. Replication. Until perfection is achieved.
> Four: Innovate. It's like making a donut.
>
> *Peter, Sino-Cambodian American Medical Doctor, 51*

Peter, a Sino-Cambodian, shared these "Four Keys to Success" as his recommendations to help both Cambodian Americans and other first-generation immigrant college students. His advice addresses the lack of cultural capital for many underprivileged students. His culturally competent advice is based in his understanding of how many Asians were raised while providing a way to improve themselves. In short, Peter's advice encourages Cambodian Americans to watch, mimic, replicate perfectly, and then innovate. Peter emphasizes that students need to keep trying even after many failures.

Like Peter, Sharon also emphasizes learning from failure as a good personal motto. She was the Cambodian Student President at U.C. Davis and describes key personal and structural recommendations

for college success. She recounts the story of a professor, whose failure motivated him to the extent that he became a dean in one of the best colleges in the world. This gave her a great deal of hope to persevere and successfully graduate from the elite University of California, Davis, despite her 2.48 GPA.

> I keep trying and trying and so perseverance [*sic*]. Faith. Friends that have the same goal as you. Family support is very key. . . . Upward Bound has been helpful . . . exposing me to college campus. Sports has helped me. Making a definite impact in my community has helped me.
> *Sharon, Medical Field, 33*

Family support and using all the resources available were crucial to Sharon, along with her involvement in various activities and her becoming a community leader. One structural public policy she noted was the high school and college preparatory program called Upward Bound, which she considered very important to her academic success.

Promising K–12 Programs

In both K–12 and higher education, there are many programs found to help Cambodian Americans succeed. These programs usually target African Americans and Latinx minorities. I would argue that they should also target Southeast Asian Americans, and in particular Cambodian Americans. There are still detrimental effects from the Cambodian genocide, one of which is lack of academic knowledge and programs available to Cambodian Americans.

Mary, a Sino-Cambodian, says, "I did not go to preschool or first grade because my parents did not know about it." A targeted program that would benefit the Cambodian American community is Head Start. Head Start is a free preschool program available to low-income families and provides educational childcare. As indicated earlier, many Cambodian American families come from households where English is not the main language (Chan and Kim, 2003; Lee and Zhou, 2015). Translating Head Start flyers into the Khmer language and advertising in local Cambodian community centers would be a positive intervention to the Cambodian American community. This program starts accepting children as early as three years old. Head Start provides comprehensive programs in education, health, social, and managing disability. Head Start's goals are to make children and families better equipped for school.

> AVID: Advance Via Individual Determination: I was in a program since I was a 7th grader on how much college education was needed to pursue fantastic achievements in life and the expense as well as how long it would have taken. I had to sign in and be interviewed in order to get in the program.
> *Mary, Sino-Cambodian Educator, 21*

While in school, Cambodian Americans need mentoring and familiarization with options for college and ways to succeed. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is an effective college readiness program for underprivileged students. This program was designed to address the lack of college readiness in economically disadvantaged communities. AVID uses the most up-to-date pedagogy to teach study skills, leadership, and professionalism. For example, AVID teaches Cornell Notes, which is a hyper note-taking system. AVID is open to all students, but direct marketing to Cambodian families would be effective.

Thirty-three-year-old Sharon, who is in the medical field, recounts, "Upward Bound has been helpful for me, exposing me to college campus. Scholarships have helped me." Upward Bound, a grant program helping more than 51,000 students annually, is one of eight federal TRIO programs that aim to help low-income and rural high school and university students. To be a participant you must be underprivileged, from a rural area, or have two parents who did not go to college. TRIO was created by the 1965 Higher Education Act to assist underserved students in achieving high education success.

Effective College Programs

Equal Opportunity Program

There are other programs that help college students, such as the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP). Henry, a Sino-Cambodian American graduate student, points out "I think there needs to be a program to target us. I noticed that with the Hispanic community, they have EOP (Equal Opportunity Program). And they accept some Asian kids, but it wasn't initially designed for us." Cambodian Americans, like other Southeast Asian Americans, would improve their academic standing if they had more coethnic teachers, administrators, programs, and translators. EOP is geared to help underprivileged and first-generation college students succeed. At California State University, Fresno (CSUF), EOP offers students a counselor, peer mentoring, and an academic advising session. EOP also has major advisors and graduation

checklist advising. These programs help EOP students reach their full potential through knowing and maximizing all the college *resources.*

The largest public state college system in the world is the California State University system, with twenty-three campuses and 427,000 students. "In 2010, the CSU Chancellor of California convened a meeting of AAPI community leaders and representatives from Pre-K-16 educational institutions throughout the state of California to explore ways to provide AAPI students and parents with information about how to prepare for, gain admission to and finance college" (Takemoto et al., 2017, 167). What came from the talks is the Journey to Success (JTS), a university-community partnership program aimed to improve college acceptance and graduation rates of underprivileged AAPI communities.

Journey to Success

The JTS is a university-community partnership program at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), which has demonstrated results in helping Cambodian American college students (Takemoto et al., 2017). Four CSU campuses developed the JTS to fit their campus. CSULB, which had the largest Cambodian community, was selected to address the needs of Cambodian Americans. They partnered with Cambodian Long Beach community-based organizations (CBOs), local junior colleges, and school districts. It was determined that the JTS leaders would also come from the grassroots Cambodian American community. It would not be a top-down partnership but instead culturally "customized" and respectful to the actual community they are supporting. The JTS provided in-depth workshops and specifically tailored programs in getting AAPI students, and in particular, Cambodian Americans ready for college. Khmer Girls in Action (a CBO) and CSULB are other examples of successful community-university research partnerships (Patraporn, 2018).

Southeast Asian Family Conference

CSUF also has effective outreach programs, such as the Southeast Asian Family Conference. This day-long event invites all the local school districts, junior college, and high school students of Southeast Asian American descent to learn more about Fresno State. Counselors, tutors, professors, administrators, and staff setup tables to distribute flyers and discuss their programs, such as Asian American studies. There are many summer-bridge programs such as Fresno State's

program for Hmong Americans, UCSD's program for Southeast Asians, particularly Southeast Asian males. Based on the success of these programs, a summer bridge program for Cambodian Americans is recommended. Other successful approaches in helping minorities include having an Asian coordinator in the university's Cross-Cultural Center. The university offers robust financial aid as well as many on campus job opportunities, which are crucial for Cambodian American success.

Community Partners and Asian American in Higher Education Conference

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center is a national civil rights organization highlighting issues of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese immigrant groups. Outside Southeast Asian American and Asian American organizations could also be good partners. Additionally, Cambodian Americans might have needs similar to low-income East Asians and Pacific Islanders. This could be an avenue to advocate for specific projects such as more college preparatory English and math classes. Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education has a yearly three-day conference that advocates for Asian American college students in California. There is much to do to achieve parity between Cambodian Americans and East Asian American college rates. In Long Beach, California, MAYE—an acronym for meditation, agriculture, yoga, and education—is a community center offering Cambodian Americans a safe space for self-healing from PTSD and intergenerational traumas. They offer cooking classes, therapy, and yoga (Bennett, 2017). Khmer is the main language spoken, which makes everyone very comfortable.

Cambodian American Students Club Needs

There are more than one dozen members of the Cambodian American Students Club at California State University, Fresno. Recently, their club advisor expressed the students' wishes to be part of the public hearings organized by the California Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs to in Fresno on Issues of health, census, education, and immigration policies (February 18, 2020)

[1] These college students and future leaders of the Cambodian American community requested heritage Khmer language and culture classes, which would increase their knowledge and pride of their culture and help them to stay connected (Akiba, 2010). They also requested more specific Cambodian American classes to learn their

cultural history. Having K–12 Asian American and coethnic teachers is crucial so they can identify with authority figures who looked like them. Knowing instructors are culturally competent and understand what they are struggling with at school and at home creates a sense of comfort.

Students emphasized a need for robust Asian American studies courses and an Asian American studies major. A Stanford University study found that taking at least one ethnic studies class increases happiness, graduation units, and graduation rates (Donald, 2016). Ethnic studies professors are also founts of knowledge for social justice events that make college exciting and relevant for all students. They also know ways to find coethnic mentors and professors. Ethnic studies courses also train culturally competent teachers who can give back to their own community. Disaggregating the Cambodian community from the overall AAPI community is crucial, but it is also important to see the overlap of needs with other Southeast Asian American communities and low-income Asian American communities.

CONCLUSION

Cambodian Americans are part of the fastest-growing Asian American population in the United States; yet their specific academic needs are not being addressed. Aggregate numbers have pushed the false narrative related to the "Model Minority," suggesting all Asian Americans are successful educationally, which is shown to not be the case for Cambodian Americans. This study's findings suggest that the barriers to Cambodian American academic excellence are due to structural, intergenerational traumas that create a lack of social and economic capital. Cambodian American student academic bridges are financial aid, parental activism, and community involvement. Being a leader in ethnic clubs, networking, and asking for help were also seen as important.

Specific public policy recommendations include summer bridge programs; community partnerships and workshops; advocates inside the university system; outreach to K–12 students; and use of existing programs to help financially stressed families as means to increase and advocate for more college readiness. The discussed programs would be further successful by having university students intern with Cambodian community-based organizations. Offering an Asian American major in Asian Americans studies classes, along with Cambodian language and history classes are crucial to the Cambodian American

club members. This research raises fruitful academic questions about not just Cambodian Americans academic success but also those of other Southeast Asians and Pacific Americans, who might be having similar issues.

NOTES

1. The California Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs held ublic hearings in Fresno on issues of health, census, education, and immigration policies on Tuesday, February 18, 2020, at 1:00–4:00 pm at California State University, Fresno Smittcamp Alumni House, Whitten Board Room, 2625 East Matoian Way, Fresno, CA 93740-2323.

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