

# INCREASE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

## Why Are Southeast Asians Not Going To College?

**Southeast Asian American students experience serious educational inequalities that are often masked due to their categorization as “Asian.”**

- 34.3% of Laotian, 38.5% of Cambodian, and 39.6% of Hmong adults over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent (Data: U.S. Census Bureau 2010).<sup>1</sup>
- 65.8% of Cambodian, 66.5% of Laotian, 63.2% of Hmong, and 51.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college (Data: American Community Survey 2006-2008).<sup>2</sup>

### Lack of High School Diplomas Across Southeast Asian American Communities

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(Data: U.S. Census Bureau 2010)

**Challenges that contribute to low educational attainment rates include the following:**

- Limited English Proficiency which can impact the academic preparedness of students, and requires that students receive additional resources to become proficient.<sup>3</sup> Low English proficiency adversely affects a student’s performance in college courses that require rigorous English proficiency, and often result in students dropping out of college. For example, an analysis done by Patricia Ryaby Backer of San Jose State University found that Asian American students who did not graduate also tended to fail their English courses.<sup>4</sup>

8.7% of the U.S. population overall speaks English less than “very well.” vs. 39.2% of Cambodian Americans, 37.6% of Hmong Americans, 38.4% of Laotian Americans, and 51.5% of Vietnamese Americans speak English less than “very well.”<sup>5</sup>

- Living in poverty creates financial barriers that may deter students from accessing college due to the high cost of higher education.

11.3% of U.S. families live below the poverty level. vs. 18.2% of Cambodian American, 27.4% of Hmong American, 12.2% of Laotian American, and 13.0% of Vietnamese American families live below the poverty level.<sup>6</sup>

- As first-generation college students, Southeast Asian American students and their families lack knowledge on the college preparation and application process. A community survey of 333 Cambodian youth in Long Beach, CA by Khmer Girls in Action found that “97% of all youth surveyed said that their parents expect them to go to college,” however, “many of the youth and their parents are unaware of the specifics regarding pathways towards accessing higher education.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE). “The Relevance of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda”, Washington, DC 2011, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne E. Wright & Sovicheth Boun. “Southeast Asian American Education 35 Years After Initial Resettlement: Research Report and Policy Recommendations” *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement* Volume 6 (2011): vi. Accessed online on 11/29/2011 at <http://jsaeea.coehd.utsa.edu/index.php/JSAAEA/article/view/114/89>.

<sup>4</sup> Backer, Patricia Ryaby. 2012 AANAPISI Western Regional Summit. De Anza College. 21250 Stevens Creek Boulevard, Cupertino, CA 95014. March 16, 2012. Plenary.

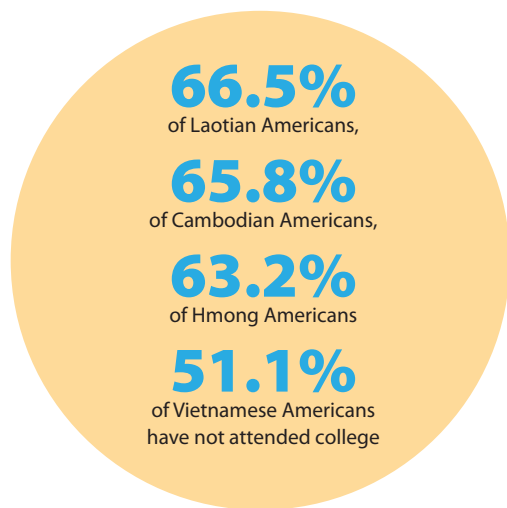
<sup>5</sup> American Community Survey 2010, 1 year estimates.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Khmer Girls in Action. *Step Into Long Beach: Exposing how Cambodian American youth are under resourced, over policed and fight back for their wellness*, November 2011, 8.



## Lack of College Attendance Across Southeast Asian American Communities



(Data: American Community Survey, 2006-2008)

*"We see major issues with transitioning to college [as] youth's study, academic, and intellectual skills are due to low quality high schools ... We see a lot of social and cultural infrastructure in university clubs that can build community, but don't know if the same level of academic support is provided. A lot of young people are in remedial classes, on academic program, and are struggling to keep up with the material in college."*

-- Jacob Cohen, Assistant Director  
Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans

*"Students don't have role models at home, and in schools there are too many students per counselor, so they are less likely to get career and future planning with higher education, and don't know what their life will be like after high school. College preparation and filling out applications is challenging, and students don't know how to do this. [CAGP staff] have been hosting college applications assistance, but we have limited capacity, and there is lack of initiatives from the schools. It would be really beneficial if schools prioritized counseling and guidance, and [provided] academic support for students to help them think through what they want to do."*

-- Rorng Sorn, Executive Director  
Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia

## What are some local solutions?

- Ensure that college outreach and mentorship programs target Southeast Asian American students.
- Provide high quality academic tutoring and support services to help all students become college and career ready.
- Provide funding to local community based organizations (CBOs) who currently prepare students for college.

## What are some federal solutions?

- Increase investment in college outreach and preparation programs for first-generation college bound students such as the Trio program and Upward Bound, and partner with CBOs to implement these programs.
- Increase access to higher education for all students through legislation such as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act).
- Preserve need-based resources such as the Pell Grant program to decrease financial barriers to accessing higher education.
- Increase federal investment in, and support for the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) Program, which provides competitive funding for institutions of higher education to strengthen programs that outreach to low-income, first generation and K-12 students. Support should also be allocated to develop programs and provide culturally appropriate academic and social retention services to college students. Finally, resources should also be allocated toward research about AAPIs and to develop courses on AAPIs.

