

Southeast Asian Americans & Community College Success



SEARAC

Rising Up: The Southeast Asian American Educational Journey

For many Southeast Asian American students, community college provides an accessible and affordable pathway to higher education. However, access alone does not guarantee success, and many Southeast Asian Americans face barriers to completing their degrees or transferring to a four-year institution. These challenges underscore the need for disaggregated data, culturally responsive programs, and funding to support Southeast Asian American community college students.

Community college expands access to higher education

Community college is an affordable path to higher education, an important consideration for many Southeast Asian American families. Nationally, more than a quarter of Southeast Asian Americans live within 200% of the federal poverty line (a household income of \$66,000 a year for a family of four).¹ Tuition and fees at a community college cost on average \$4,150 a year, far less than four-year colleges.² Community colleges are also much more likely to be located in or near communities where students already live.³ This proximity allows many students to reduce costs by living at home.

Community colleges also offer more flexibility in supporting non-traditional students—those who do not fit the model of a full-time student attending college immediately after high school. Two-thirds (65%) of community college students attend part time, compared to 27% of those attending four-year institutions.⁴ This flexibility is valuable for many Southeast Asian American students, who balance higher education with familial responsibilities such as caregiving, translating, and providing financial support.⁵

However, less than a third complete community college

In California, home to the nation's largest Southeast Asian American population, fewer than one in three Southeast Asian American community college students complete their programs within three years (Figure 1).

Disaggregated data illuminate hurdles to success

With access to disaggregated data, Southeast Asian American communities have been able to identify their students' needs and advocate for resources to address them. For example, Southeast Asian American faculty at Sacramento State University, a four-year institution, analyzed campus data to identify how graduation rates differ for Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese students who transferred from community colleges compared to those who entered as freshmen. The report culminated with recommendations on improving experiences and outcomes for Southeast Asian American students.⁶

AVERAGE ANNUAL COLLEGE TUITION & FEES

Community college
\$4,150

Public, in-state four-year
\$11,950

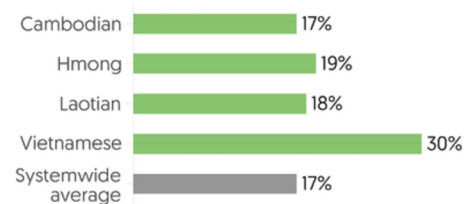
Public, out-of-state four-year
\$31,880

Private, nonprofit four-year
\$45,000

Source: College Board, 2026

CALIFORNIA DATA

Figure 1. Systemwide Completion Rate, California Community Colleges (2020-21 Cohort)



Sources: The RP Group, 2025; California Community Colleges, Chancellor's Office, 2025.

However, almost all government and institutional data sources do not disaggregate—or collect, analyze, and report—data specific to Southeast Asian American communities. As a result, there are no national completion or transfer rates for Southeast Asian American community college students. This absence is not accidental: it reflects decades of political and institutional failure to account for the diversity across Asian Americans.

Culturally responsive academic supports improve outcomes

Coursework and academic supports that are culturally responsive to Southeast Asian American student experiences increase student outcomes. Students participating in Fresno City College’s United Southeast Asian American Academic Program, for example, are more likely to graduate or transfer in two years compared to general students and have a higher persistence rate. The program bundles counseling, coursework, and academic supports—such as mentoring, study sessions, and field trips to transfer institutions—with programming around Southeast Asian American culture and experiences.⁷

Institutions should also increase the pipeline of Southeast Asian American professors, counselors, and other educators. Their lived experiences enable them to serve as “cultural brokers” who bridge students’ experiences with the institution.⁸ Equally important is training educators of other backgrounds. At Coastline Community College in California English language learning staff serving a primarily Vietnamese American population engaged in a workshop familiarizing them with the community’s unique history and providing them with guidance on pronouncing Vietnamese first names.⁹

Historically, the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) program has supported higher education institutions, including community colleges, to better meet their students’ needs. The program is effective: after 10 years, students who attended community colleges that received AANAPISI funding earned approximately \$4,400 a year more than their peers who did not.¹⁰

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF AANAPISIs

After 10 years, students who attended AANAPISI-funded community colleges earned

\$4,400

more each year than their peers who did not.

Source: The Institute for College Access & Success

Recommendations

- ✦ Demand full, timely implementation of Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (SPD 15), which requires all federal agencies to disaggregate race and ethnicity data beyond the major categories such as the aggregate “Asian” category.
- ✦ Invest in ethnic studies, Southeast Asian American Studies, and other areas of study that recognize the unique history of Southeast Asian Americans.
- ✦ Strengthen the pipeline of teachers of color, including Southeast Asian American educators. Support educators of all backgrounds to gain proficiency with culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.
- ✦ Invest in academic support services, such as advising, peer mentoring, and leadership development, for Southeast Asian Americans students.
- ✦ Demand that the federal government restore AANAPISI discretionary funding.

About this fact sheet

This fact sheet is one in a series accompanying [Rising Up: the Southeast Asian American Educational Journey](#) (2026), a report on Southeast Asian American students from Southeast Asia Resource Action Center.

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