



CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
College-Workforce Transitions

Asian and Asian American College Students' Educational and Career Dilemmas during COVID-19

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the landscape of college education and career opportunities for Asian and Asian American students. For Asian international students, the shutdown of university housing, restrictions on international travel and the tightened visa policies have made many students stuck in the pandemic. For Asian American students, the increasing family responsibility brought by nation-wide lockdown and the loss of employment opportunities have imposed barriers for this group to complete their coursework on time. Moreover, both groups have been disproportionately targeted at during the COVID-19, as anti-Asian racism surged in many US cities and campuses. Universities need to recognize the institutional racism entrenched in higher education system, send clear anti-racist messaging from leaders, educate the white community, and create robust bias response system to counter racism targeting Asian and Asian American students. In addition, institutions should also be pro-active in offering mental counseling to Asian and Asian American students, extend internal job opportunities, and push for more flexible visa policies to retain international graduates.

Institutional Racism in Higher Education

In the US higher educational institutions, imaginaries of race and racism have long been circulated and consolidated, where whiteness is often normalized. Institutional racism, defined as “the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture or ethnic origin” (Macpherson 1999, p. 34), have long negatively shaped the educational experiences of students of color. Abundant literature has pointed out the institutional racism embedded in the Western higher education systems, including the persistent high representation of white students in four-year universities (Brown et al., 2003), ubiquitous microaggressions and surveillance towards Black and ethnic minority faculties and staff (Gabriel & Tate, 2017), and the lower percentage of people of color in senior decision-making roles compared to their white colleagues (Bhopal et al., 2018).

Specifically looking at predominantly white institutions, Karkouti (2016) argues that the history of exclusionary practices and the persistent lower chances of cross-racial interactions on campus often induces a negative racial climate for minority students (p. 66). In these situations, minority students are also likely to face more challenges during their first and second-year transition in college, as well as lack a sense of belonging which leads to higher levels of stress and alienation (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In addition, since the 2016 presidential election a resurgence of racism and nationalism in the US have been increasingly targeting students of color in academic, residential, and social spaces. Racist graffiti against Black and Asian students, anti-Semitic messages to faculties, and assaults based on national origin and ethnicity rose significantly in universities (Bauman 2018). These incidents should concern all of us in higher education, and underscore to the urgency of interrogating inclusion and exclusion on university campuses.

The resurgence of racism and nationalism in the US since 2016 has negatively impacted students of color in academic, residential and social spaces on US college campuses.

It is also imperative to discuss racial equity in education because a growing number of foreign students of color are pursuing education in the US at a time that celebrates diversity but is silent on race. In 2019, international student population in the US exceeded one million, contributing an estimated 41 billion USD to the US economy (NSFSA, 2019). Among all the international students in the US, 69 percent are from Asia and Latin America (IIE, 2019). Existing literature shows that foreign students of color are more likely to experience racism than their white international student counterparts (Constantine et al., 2005; Hanasaab 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Besides institutional racism, microaggressions and stereotyping are also affecting college experiences of foreign students of color, who have a higher risk of depression (Li et al., 2014), acculturative stress (Franco et al., 2019), and victimization (Bonistall Postel, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the marginalized experiences of students of color, particularly, Asian and Asian American students. For Asian international students, the shutdown of university housing, restrictions on international travel and the tightened visa policies have made many

students stuck in the US. For Asian American students, the increasing family responsibility brought by nation-wide lockdown and the loss of employment opportunities have imposed barriers for this group to complete their coursework on time. Moreover, anti-Asian racism surged in many US cities and campuses, as COVID-19 was termed as “Chinese virus” President Trump and other conservative political leaders.

Asian International Students: Stuck in the Worst Job Market and Heightened Racism

Since March 2020, many universities have been closed nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The shutdown not only brought a shift to online teaching in a rushed manner, but also left many students “homeless.” While in-state students could return home when dorms were closed, international students found themselves having nowhere to turn to in the middle of the semester. In particular, Asian international students, which account for more than half of the total international student population (IIE, 2019), endured multi-layered distress: the concern over safety and health, visa restraints from the US, financial pressure due to losing jobs on and off campus, as well as the resurgent anti-Asian racism.

The Covid-19....Asian and Asian American students, who have faced travel restrictions, tightened visa policies, and anti-Asian racism as President Trump has called Covid-19 the “Chinese virus.”

Since 2016, Trump’s presidency has promoted the interplay of racialization and xenophobia in the US, and Chinese students have been constantly subject to US nationalist political rhetoric that portrayed them as threats—to intellectual property and national security. This anti-Chinese racism was heightened after Trump’s recent Twitter post of the COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” Incidents of violence against Chinese quickly increased, and anti-Chinese graffiti began finding its way into in university campuses (Gover et al .,2020; Chappell 2020). In March 2020, Trump administration also temporarily froze the H1B visa to green card as well as foreign worker visas in March, reinforcing his “buy American, hire American” executive order introduced in 2017. H1B allows US employers to temporarily hire foreign workers that “require specialized knowledge and skills,” and it is valid from three to six years (Sonnenfeld, 2020). A similar program, Optional Practical Training (OPT), provides foreign students authorization to work in the US during their university studies or upon graduation. As many companies and organizations froze hiring and internship programs nationwide, it has been extremely difficult for international students to find work during the pandemic. Hang Wu, a Chinese graduate student at Columbia University, had to give up her summer internship in Shenzhen, China, because of the flight restriction during the pandemic. She started looking for new internships in the US but found it extremely difficult. One of her interviewers hung up after 30 seconds into their talk, when he learned that Hang was an international student and needed visa sponsorship. “It has been really hard to get a job as non-Americans,” Hang said.

Sentiments on limiting Chinese students’ enrollment in US universities have also heightened since the pandemic. On June 9, 2020, Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) introduced the “Secure Campus Act of 2020”, which aimed to “secure the research enterprise of the United States from the Chinese Communist Party”

by canceling F and J Visas to Chinese pursuing graduate level studies in STEM. The bill has been read twice and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations (Congress.Gov, 2020). Stephen Miller, a senior advisor to President Trump, commented on the “trickle down” effect of limiting student and work visas: as the chance of the entry of a new immigrant into the US is reduced, thus, future migration such as transferring student visa to H1B work visa is also reduced. However, a study conducted by *Business Roundtable* and the University of Maryland’s Interindustry Forecasting Project showed that foreign-born workers create jobs rather than displace jobs from native-born workers: foreign-born workers were not only consumers in the US economy, but also helped business to expand and hire additional workers (Forbes, 2020). In the US, about 18 percent of the labor force is foreign-born. An American Immigration Council analysis of American Community Survey data also show that, one in four STEM workers are immigrants (Sonnenfeld 2020). Despite the abundant evidence of immigrant students’ contribution to the US economy, nationalist policies and sentiments continued to hurt foreign students’ educational and career outcomes in the US.

Asian American Students: College Completion Delay and the Rising Unemployment

For Asian American students, college education has long been perceived as an important pathway to social mobility (Xie & Goyette, 2003). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian American students have experienced more challenges in completing their degrees compared to other racial groups. A study entitled “Understanding Coronavirus in American Study,” drawing from nationally represented surveys of 998 households, found that nearly 30 percent of Asian American students plan to take a lighter course load in fall 2020, compared to 25 percent of Latino students, 7 percent of Black students and only 3 percent of white students (Key, 2020). The report suggested that these gaps could be explained by the impact of COVID-19 on the increased family responsibilities among Asian American students. This finding resonates with some existing research which indicated that family responsibility was a big factor affecting Asian American students’ college decision and career choice (Kodama & Huynh, 2017). The probable delay in graduation among Asian American students is troubling, because students might need to take out more student loan to complete college education. In the workplace, Asian Americans were also taking a big hit during the COVID-19 economic downturn. In August, the unemployment rate for Asian Americans reached 10.7 percent, higher than the 7.3 percent for White Americans and 8.4 percent for workers overall (Gandel, 2020).

Asian Americans have also become the target of racism in addition to the academic challenges of graduating during the pandemic (Arman et al., forthcoming). A Pew Research report (2020) has documented that since the COVID-19 outbreak, Asian Americans are more likely to feel subject to slurs or jokes because of their race or ethnicity. Furthermore, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council has established a center called Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Hate to report instances of hate speech, discrimination, and violence. Within the first week of its opening in March 2020, AAPI center received 673 reports of COVID-19 related anti-Asian discrimination in the US. After President Trump’s tweet of coronavirus as “Chinese virus,” Asian Americans have experienced a surge of cases of verbal and physical attacks, which often portrayed them as “disease carriers” (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council,

2020). In New York City's Chinatown, restaurants witnessed up to an 85 percent drop in business since January 2020 and continued to suffer after the stay-at-home orders (Tessler et al., 2020, p. 640).

The racialization of Asian Americans as carriers of disease has deep roots in US immigration history. In "The Foreignness of Germs", Markel and Stern (2002) document how early immigrants have been strictly inspected for syphilis, polio, and other infectious disease once arriving in the US. In particular, Asian immigrants, mostly poor, have been stigmatized as "dirty" and "sick." In *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki (1989) documents early Chinese immigrant groups between mid-1800s and the early 1900s, arguing that although Chinese came to the U.S. because of the hope for better opportunity and a new life, they had to rely on kinship networks due to the intertwined ethnic antagonism and economic exclusion. Developed as an enclave of ethnic networks, Chinatown became: "an arbitrary classification of space, a regionalization that has belonged to European society" (Takaki, 1989, p. 583). The racialized spaces of Chinatown reinforced the views of Chinese as "unhealthy," "unassimilable," and "undesirable" immigrants (Anderson 1987; Takaki, 1989), and thus Asian Americans are often represented as "perpetual foreigners" in the US (Lee, 2008). When anti-Chinese sentiments were fueled during the bubonic plague in San Francisco in the early 20th century, Chinatown was the first to be quarantined, with house-to-house inspection.

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The racialization of Chinese migrants underwent a format change in the middle of the 1960s, when the 1965 Immigration Act—to focus on selectively attracting professional immigrants—This increased the socioeconomic and educational levels required of new Chinese immigrants. Since the 1970s, most Asian immigrants came as international students and scholars, and settled permanently after graduation. The 1965 immigration policy contributed to the educational success of the second-generation of Chinese Americans and generated a new trope of Chinese as a "model minority." Facilitated by the federal immigration policy, the concept of a "model minority" is a neoliberal and racial project that reinforces the construction of Chinese Americans as perpetual foreigners in American society (Ng et al., 2007). It portrays Asian Americans as intelligent, self-sufficient, law-abiding citizens whose academic and economic successes can be attributed to their hard work, while making invisible the experiences of Asian Americans who face academic and economic struggles (Lee 2008, 2009). Also, the "model minority" trope is an implicit variation of the whiteness ideology, which incorporates Asians into the dominant ideology of white supremacy to help sustain the white power. It also indicates a fear: Asians have taken places that are conceptualized as White in education, high-level professions, and the middle-class. When racialized Chinese bodies are not concentrated in ethnic enclaves, but incorporated into the mainstream, they are seen "out of place" and naturally become the targets of racial antagonism.

Moving Forward

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, anti-Asian racism and the tightened the employment of foreign students and immigrants have had serious consequences on stigmatizing Asian and Asian American populations. Universities and colleges, as educational institutions that host large numbers of Asian and Asian American students, must be aware of the implications of the surgent anti-Asian racism and xenophobia on campus, and be pro-active in combating providing substantial support for these student groups. First and foremost, universities and colleges need to recognize institutional racism entrenched in the higher education system. They should send clear anti-racist messages to students, educate white students and communities about the systematic racism, and develop robust bias response system to counter anti-Asian racism on campus. Institutions should also take this moment to educate students, faculties, and staff that the systematic racism is not only salient in education, but in almost all facets of life: housing, health care, employment, the criminal justice system and more. This not only helps institutions to reflect on their role in perpetuating racism in society, but also creates opportunities to build coalition among people of color for racial justice. For instance, universities and colleges could encourage Asian and Asian Americans joining BlackLivesMatter movement to fight against white supremacy, and also raise the awareness of how uprisings among Black communities could also benefit from Asian communities' resistance against white privileges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Second, given the unique challenges facing Asian and Asian American students during the pandemic, institutions should provide multi-faceted support to better facilitate these students' success in education as well as career development. Studies have found that campus counseling centers became critical resources for Asian and Asian American students during the COVID-19 (Beckstein 2020). Consultation by email, phone or video calls could support these students, who were experiencing academic, financial, and mental stress. In particular, pro-active strategies, such as reaching out to Asian and Asian American students, are important, as these groups may be concerned about being stigmatized if voluntarily accessing counseling services. In addition, universities could distribute need-based scholarships and stipends to students who lost their campus jobs or could not travel to take internships elsewhere. Moreover, alternative housing resources are necessary especially for Asian international students who do not have the option to return to their home countries. The dire job market for international students also requires universities to offer more career development support, such as expanding on-campus job opportunities. Besides universities, local business communities could also make efforts to fight for more flexible OPT regulations and H1B work visas for recent college graduates.

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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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