



The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
Senate HELP Committee  
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
Senate HELP Committee  
154 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

February 23, 2018

Dear Senators Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray:

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) appreciates the opportunity to provide recommendations to you on higher education policy. SEARAC is a national civil rights organization that empowers the largest community of refugees ever resettled in America -- Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans -- to create a socially just and equitable society. We write to express the importance of higher education to our community and the unique challenges we face obtaining it.

We are all aware that today's jobs market requires training and education beyond high school. Unfortunately, many of our Southeast Asian American students cannot access, finance, or complete higher education or training. Only 18.4% of Cambodian, 17.6% of Hmong, 15.9% of Lao, and 28.3% of Vietnamese adults over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30.7% of American adults.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, 18.5% of Cambodian, 38.1% of Hmong, 19.7% of Lao, and 16.4% of Vietnamese families live in poverty, compared to 12.2% of White families. These barriers make it more difficult for these students to graduate from high school, prepare for college, fund their college or technical education, stay in college, complete their education, and find employment afterwards.

As the committee considers higher education priorities, we urge the committee to consider the unique needs and potential of Southeast Asian American students. We stand ready and available to work with the committee to ensure Southeast Asian American students are supported in their pursuit of a post-secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, T.D., de Brey, C., and Dillow, S.A. (2018). Digest of Education Statistics 2016 (NCES 2017-094). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

## **Higher Education Recommendations for Southeast Asian American Students**

### **I. Data & Transparency**

Not enough Southeast Asian American students are completing high school or accessing higher education. Data on Asian American students overall gloss over our community's experience and make these disparities invisible.

**We ask the committee to support legislation to collect disaggregated data on educational outcomes and enrollment for AAPI subgroups using decennial Census categories for race and ethnicity.**

**We also ask the committee to remove the current federal ban on tracking student graduation and employment outcomes** in order to collect this data.

### **II. Civil rights protections**

Students regardless of their gender or sexual identities should feel safe and know their rights when attending school. **We ask the committee to uphold the current interpretation of Title IX civil rights laws to protect victims of sexual assault and students who identify as LGBTQ.**

### **III. College Access**

As students from low-income, refugee communities, community research studies have shown that Southeast Asian youth find it difficult to bridge the gaps between aspiring and being encouraged to attend college and the actual steps it takes to achieve this goal with lack of awareness on how to navigate the college-going process.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, many Southeast Asian students need support to prepare for a college-level curriculum. Because of low historical education attainment rates, many of our community's students are the first generation in their families to attend college. These students need support navigating the process to access a post-secondary education. The committee should support equal opportunity programs to support students from diverse and under-resourced backgrounds.

**We urge the committee to continue and increase funding for college preparation programs that assist low-income students and students of color** to gain access to higher education opportunities. Federal **TRIO** programs, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (**GEAR-UP**), Title IV, Part A, Special Programs for Migrant Students (High School Equivalency Program or **HEP**), and the College Assistance Migrant Program (**CAMP**) are all important programs that deserve continued support.

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<sup>2</sup> Khmer Girls in Action. (2011). *Step Into Long Beach: Exposing How Cambodian American youth are under resourced, over policed and fighting back for their wellness*. Accessed online at [http://kgalb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/KGA\\_LongBeach\\_report\\_web.pdf](http://kgalb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/KGA_LongBeach_report_web.pdf) on February 23, 2018.

**IV. College Affordability**

We ask the committee to **double the maximum Pell Grant award, make Pell Grant funds available year round, and automatically adjust the award for inflation each year.**

Additionally, the **committee should ensure need-based aid covers the full cost of attendance**, including education-related expenses such as housing, childcare, food, healthcare, transportation, and textbooks. Ensuring students' ability to access financial aid year round and allowing it to cover more than tuition expenses will help low-income Southeast Asian American students finance and complete their education.

**V. College Completion**

Minority serving institutions (MSIs) play an important role in the post-secondary experience of students of color. Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions, or AANAPISIs, provide technical support, programs, and classes for low-income AAPI students. These culturally relevant programs help to retain students who might feel otherwise alienated by the college environment. **We ask the committee to fully fund the AANAPISI program at \$30 million per year.**

Sincerely,



Quyen Dinh  
Executive Director  
SEARAC