



SEARAC Priorities for the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

While many Asian American ethnic groups have higher college attainment rates compared to the general US population, Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students face unique challenges. Fifty-eight percent of Cambodian, 53.9% of Hmong, 59.3% of Lao, and 49.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college for any period of time, compared to 39.6% of white students.ⁱ As students from low-income, refugee communities, SEAA youth often struggle to bridge the gap between aspiring to attend college and achieving this goal. Because they may represent the first in their families to pursue college, SEAA students may lack awareness of and resources on how to navigate admissions processes. They also often need additional supports in preparing for college-level curricula due to language barriers or the structural impacts of living in low-income communities with under-resourced schools. Yet, these supports for SEAA students to access, afford, and complete higher education remain limited.

To ensure that SEAA students can tap into the opportunities that only a college education can provide, SEARAC's National Equity Agenda demands in any reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that 1) it centers access, affordability, and completion, and 2) lawmakers ensure data equity through disaggregated data.

ACCESS—SEARAC advocates for programs like **TRIO** and **GEAR UP** that help low-income students and students of color prepare and apply for college. A third of Cambodian and Hmong adults have less than a high school degree,ⁱⁱ as many of them arrived in the US as refugees for whom wars and forced relocation to impoverished neighborhoods disrupted their education. This means that they often lack knowledge about the college process to pass on to their children. Outreach and bridge programs like TRIO and GEAR UP can help provide this critical information.

AFFORDABILITY—SEAA communities experience poverty at very high rates, with 11% of Lao families, 13% of Vietnamese families, 14.9% of Cambodian families, and 16.3% of Hmong families still living below the poverty line.ⁱⁱⁱ That's why SEARAC calls for robust support for **Pell Grants**, which help undergraduate students with exceptional financial need, as well as other commitments in HEA that ensure low-income students can pay for college without needing to take out excessive debts.

COMPLETION—SEARAC supports **Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)** and the Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) program. AANAPISIs undertake many initiatives to increase AAPI and SEAA students' success in college, particularly in student services, curricular and academic program development, and resource and research development.^{iv} With AAPIs being the fastest growing population in the US and a sizable proportion of SEAA students still struggling to attain postsecondary education, schools that serve these communities must be well-funded and equipped to support every student. Unfortunately, current funding levels are insufficient to address the need. SEARAC also calls for allowing MSIs with dual designations to access each of the federal grants necessary to appropriately serve communities of students.

DATA EQUITY—To properly understand the unique education, socioeconomic, and linguistic barriers that SEAA students face and to provide them with the appropriate and targeted supports such as those described above, SEARAC pushes for the collection and public availability of data disaggregated at a minimum by Census race and ethnicity categories, cross-tabulated by gender, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status.

ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov>

ⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov>

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov>

^{iv} National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE). (2011). *The Relevance of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda*. Retrieved from http://care.gseis.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/2011_CARE_Report.pdf