Remember Asian American and Pacific Islander Students

By Neil Horikoshi

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When looking back at my leap from corporate America to the education community almost three years ago--after spending more than 30 years as an executive at tech giant IBM--I'm still shocked at what I found out about Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students: They have some of the largest disparities in education such as high secondary school dropout rates and low college attendance. In addition, AAPI students have educational levels that are below the national average, with several ranking among the lowest in the nation.

My first reaction was, "Wow! How didn't I know about the extreme gravity among AAPI students? Is there anyone protecting the interest of AAPI students? And, why is the nation not talking about this?"

Immediately, I thought about the valuable lessons learned from my years in corporate America. Whenever there is a problem it is important to find out first what was broken and then fix it immediately. Fortune 500 companies, such as IBM along with the Boeing Co., Coca-Cola Co., Lockheed Martin Corp., and Procter & Gamble Co., lead with this "best" practice. Why then not use the same "rule of thumb" to address our nation's most significant education challenges?

Although I have always had a working knowledge about some of the issues among AAPI students--particularly related to access, achievement and outcomes--I never realized how widespread those issues were until I became the president and executive director of the Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF). My role offers me an opportunity to learn first-hand about the unique needs of AAPI students and how, if at all, policy and higher education leaders can align their priorities with the reality of these students' lives.

It should first be acknowledged that AAPI students are a part of a population unlike any other racial/ethnic group in America with regard to their heterogeneity. The AAPI community itself consists of 48 different racial categories (U.S. Census Bureau) that occupy positions along the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum, from poor to under-privileged, to the affluent and highly skilled.

A large proportion of AAPI students are from low-income backgrounds, they are the first in their families to attend college, and oftentimes they struggle to secure the financial resources to support themselves while in school. AAPI students are also more likely than other students to be immigrants, non-native speakers of English, and students who often enroll in English-Language Learner programs. Once on a college campus, AAPI students also face a variety of challenges when it comes to engagement to include: A reluctance to utilize support services like academic tutoring centers, career services and counseling; difficulty finding supportive classroom learning environments; a lack of culturally relevant and/or appropriate curricular and extra-curricular activities; a perception of pervasive discrimination on campus; and the challenge of resisting insidious stereotypes of AAPI students.

All of these variables led me to recognize there is the lack of federal policy attention being paid to the AAPI student population. Even more troubling is AAPI students seem to be an invisible racial/ethnic group in many policy discussions. The tendency for policymakers to overlook AAPIs makes it difficult to address the complex set of their social realities.

To be fair, the U.S. Department of Education has made new investments in the AAPI student community. We are very appreciative of Education Department officials for recently recognizing Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions, or AANAPISIs--institutions with at least a 10 percent enrollment of AAPI students, among other criteria - on their website listing of Minority-Serving Institutions, or MSIs. This was a landmark change allowing AANAPISIs to be recognized and listed among other well-known MSIs such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities. In fact, it is because of this acknowledgement that we now have a new national "umbrella" organization advocating on behalf of all AANAPISIs: The Asian Pacific Islander American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Definitive and clear policy investments, such as in the case with AANAPISIs, bring much-needed attention to AAPI students. With the AAPI community continuing to be one of the fastest-growing populations within the United States, the participation of AAPI students--along with students from other underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups--is essential to ensuring that the United States can lead the world in creativity, productivity and achievement.

It is for this reason APIASF is leading the conversation about issues impacting AAPI students and, in fact, all underserved students--including African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and low-income students. During our recent annual higher education summit, the 2011 APIASF College Completion Forum: Strengthening Institutions that Serve Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (June 27-28), our goals were to generate an active dialogue about the national college completion agenda and its impact on the entire AAPI community. We wanted to be clear and push forth our belief that increasing AAPI college completion and student success can make a positive difference for America.

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*Editor's Note: APIASF, in partnership with the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, will be hosting a thoughtful and actionable discussion about the mobility and educational opportunities for AAPIs in America's education system. The event, "The Relevance of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda," will be held on Tuesday, Oct. 11, at the Capitol Visitor Center in Washington, D.C. REGISTER today for this free event. Space is limited.*

*About APIASF*

*Based in Washington, D.C., the Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) is the nation's largest non-profit organization devoted solely to providing college scholarships for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Since 2003, APIASF has provided a critical bridge to higher education for APIA students across the country by distributing more than $40 million in scholarships to students. APIASF manages two scholarship programs: APIASF's general scholarship and the Gates Millennium Scholars/Asian Pacific Islander Americans funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*