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Ready or Not: The Academic College Readiness of Southeast Asian Americans

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The educational experiences of Southeast Asian Americans, particularly Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, and Vietnamese Americans, are characterized by numerous challenges, which can be attributed to their migration history, socioeconomic status, and English proficiency. By the end of 11th grade, a high percentage of Southeast Asian American students are not college ready. The educational challenges of Southeast Asian Americans have been overshadowed by the model minority stereotype. Educational policies targeting issues affecting the education of Southeast Asian Americans and teacher preparations that focus on getting Southeast Asian American students to be college ready could help change the educational story of this population.

The path to earning a college education is a challenging one, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Providing support through programs and services could help them start and complete the journey to a college education (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Although there are Asian Americans who need help to successfully pursue their education, they often are overlooked because of the misperception that Asian Americans do not need educational support (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Kim, 1997; Suzuki, 1989; Yu, 2006). Instead, the more common belief is that Asian Americans are doing so well educationally that they are overrepresented in higher education (Suzuki, 1989). These generalized beliefs about Asian Americans disregard the educational challenges of Southeast Asian Americans, specifically Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, and Vietnamese Americans, many of whom are struggling to start the journey to college.

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The Model Minority Myth

Awareness of the challenges Southeast Asian Americans face in their educational pursuit has been hindered for the most part by the perception of Asian Americans as the model minority. The image of Asian Americans as the model minority gained popularity in the 1960s when the media highlighted the academic and financial successes of Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans (Empleo, 2006; Hurh & Kim, 1989; Takaki, 1989; Wallitt, 2008). The term “model minority” has since been associated with all Asian Americans (Empleo, 2006; Hurh & Kim, 1989).

The stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority has been harmful to the Asian American community. It lumps all Asian Americans together without taking into consideration the differences among various ethnic groups (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Kim, 1997; Osajima, 1988; Pang; 1995; Suzuki; 1989; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998; Yu, 2006). The diversity within the Asian American community includes language, countries of origin, culture, history, socialization process, and learning preferences (Empleo, 2006; Pang, 1995). The failure to recognize the diversity within the Asian American community contributed to the feeling of invisibility for Asian American groups that are less known, such as Cambodian Americans (Wallitt, 2008).

The stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority also pressures Asian Americans to uphold the stereotypical image of the successful Asian American (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Takaki, 1989; Wong et al., 1998), causing psychological distress for students (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000). Students who do not embody the stereotype may experience lowered self-esteem and self-confidence (Pang, 1995; Wong et al., 1998).

Additionally, the model minority stereotype ignores the struggles of Asian Americans who do not fit the mold of the model minority (Osajima, 1988). Asian Americans who are struggling and need assistance are not recognized because of the misperception that Asian Americans are already successful and do not need to be

helped (Yu, 2006). The stereotype of Asian Americans as a successful group has also cost Asian Americans access to educational support services programs in high school and college which are designed to help disadvantaged groups (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Kim, 1997; Suzuki, 1989).

Furthermore, the model minority stereotype simultaneously minimizes the existence of racism within the United States while perpetuating stereotypes of racial and ethnic groups. This is done through promoting the idea of meritocracy (Osajima, 1988; Yu, 2006), which advances the belief that racism is not the reason why some ethnic groups are more socially and economically successful. If Asian Americans can overcome racism, other minority groups should be able to do the same (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Osajima, 1988; Takaki, 1989; Wong et al., 1998; Yu, 2006). Likewise, the model minority stereotype is often used to pit Asian Americans against other underrepresented groups (Suzuki, 1989; Takaki, 1989; Yu, 2006), perpetuating the belief that certain groups are preferable to other groups.

Not the Model Minority

Although the model minority label is applied to all Asian Americans, many Southeast Asian Americans do not fit the mold of the model minority. They encounter numerous educational challenges that are related to their migration to the United States, English proficiency, and socioeconomic status.

Migration to the United States as Means for Survival

Most Southeast Asian Americans are refugees or descendants of refugees who resettled in the United States after the Vietnam War (Ngo, 2006). The refugees admitted through 1986 were predominately Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese, with Vietnamese representing the largest group (Rumbaut, 1989). The refugees came in two waves, the first wave in 1975 and the second wave after 1975 (Rumbaut, 1989, 2000; Takaki, 1989). The first wave of refugees were from higher socioeconomic families and came with more transferable skills and knowledge of the English language than those in the second wave (Rumbaut, 1989, 2000; Takaki, 1989). The second and larger wave of refugees were primarily from rural areas and came from low-socioeconomic communities (Rumbaut, 1989). Vietnamese refugees were the most educated with an average of 9.8 years of education and Hmong refugees were the least educated with an average of 1.7 years of education (Rumbaut, 2000). While there was great diversity within the Southeast Asian refugee groups, they shared a similar experience in that they fled their homes due to the trauma of war and resettled in the United States out of necessity (Rumbaut, 2000; Takaki, 1989).

Struggling with English Proficiency

Migration history helps explain Southeast Asian Americans' limited English proficiency. The U.S. Census Bureau 2009–2011 American Community Survey collected data on the language proficiency of racial and ethnic groups. Individuals who identify with multiple racial and ethnic categories are included with every racial and ethnic group they identify. As shown in Figure 1, there are high proportions of Southeast Asian Americans, particularly Vietnamese Americans, who speak English less than "very well." The high percentages of limited English proficiency impacts not only the opportunities members of these communities have in the general society, but also demonstrates that many students arrive in schools needing to develop their English skills.

Living in Poverty

The impact of limited English proficiency is reflected in the poverty rates of Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, and Vietnamese Americans. As shown in Figure 2, Cambodian Americans have a poverty rate of over 20% and Hmong Americans have an even higher poverty rate of about 28%. The data suggest that Southeast Asian Americans groups are more at risk because they lack economic resources that can be used to support a college education. The high proportions of Southeast Asian Americans in poverty is not apparent when all Asian American groups are reported under an aggregate Asian American category. It is absolutely essential that data on poverty are disaggregated by the various ethnic groups. Using the aggregate gives the false impression that all Asian Americans are doing well, if not better, than Whites.

Struggling with Educational Attainment

Southeast Asian American communities have lower bachelor's degree attainment rates than other Asian American groups as seen in Figure 3 for individuals 25 years or older. As in the case of poverty rates, it is important to disaggregate data on educational attainment by ethnic groups. For example, as shown in Figure 3, about 12% or less of Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, and Laotian Americans have earned a college degree. These are much lower rates of bachelor's degree attainment in comparison to Korean Americans where 34% of the population have earned a college degree and

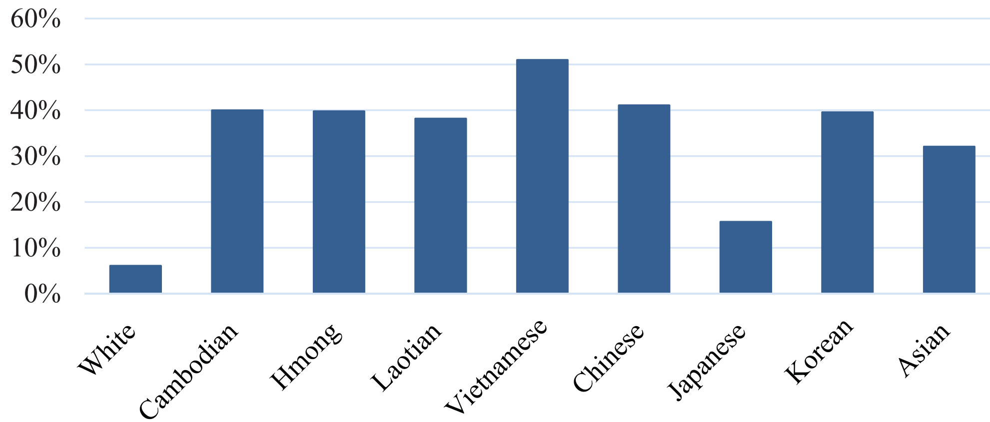

Figure 1. Limited English proficiency by racial and ethnic groups. Individuals who identified with multiple racial or ethnic groups are included in each group they identified (color figure available online). Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011.

about 30% of Japanese Americans have as well. However, the degree attainment for the Asian American aggregate is almost 30%, which can be used to overgeneralize the achievement of all Asian Americans.

Not the Stereotypical Academic Achievement

Migration history, limited English proficiency, and socioeconomic backgrounds of Southeast Asian Americans affect, in many cases, the educational outcomes of Cambodian American, Hmong American, Laotian American, and Vietnamese American students. Kim (1997) found that in 1992 there were larger proportions of Southeast Asian high school seniors at the bottom quartile of standardized reading and math scores than other Asian American students. The lower academic achievement of Southeast Asian students in comparison to other Asian groups in Kim's study was consistent with the findings of later studies (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011, 2013). These findings suggest that despite the passage of time, lower academic achievements of Southeast Asian American students continued to persist.

The findings by Pang et al. (2011, 2013) also revealed that the disparities between Cambodian American, Laotian American, and Vietnamese American students and other Asian American students started as early as elementary school and increased as students progressed through the grades. The studies by Pang et al. (2011, 2013) suggest it is essential that teachers place more attention on the educational needs of Southeast Asian American students.

The Importance of College Readiness

Taking note of the academic achievement of Southeast Asian Americans is important as it can be an indicator of Southeast Asian Americans' college readiness. College readiness is defined, in part, as not needing remedial courses in college (Conley, 2008). While remedial courses are designed to help students successfully transition to college-level courses, Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and

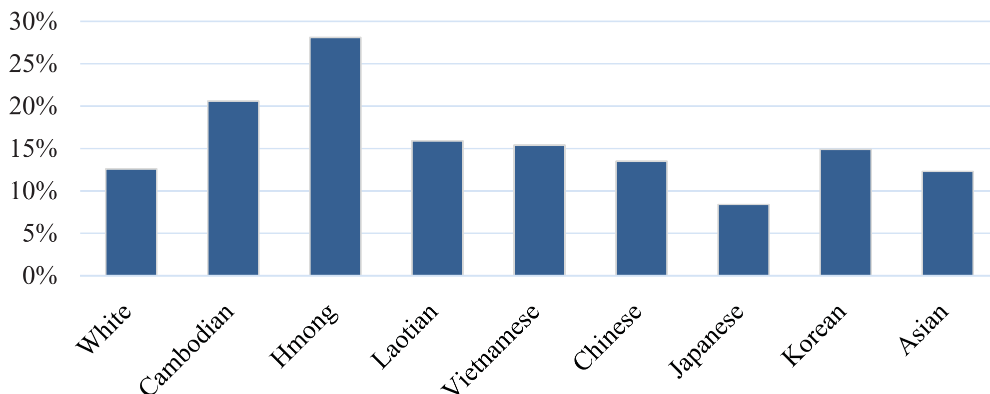

Figure 2. Poverty rates by racial and ethnic groups. Individuals who identified with multiple racial or ethnic groups are included in each group they identified (color figure available online). Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011.

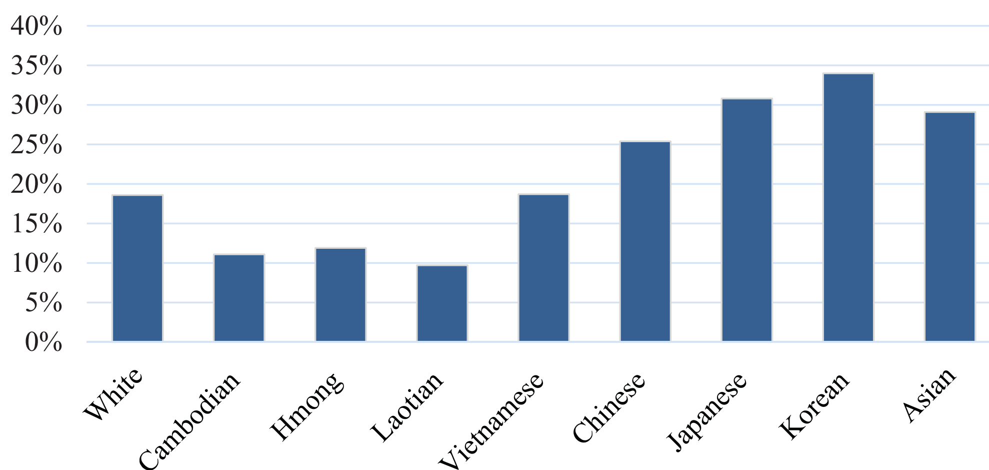

Figure 3. Bachelor's degree attainment of the population 25 years and over by racial and ethnic groups. Individuals who identified with multiple racial or ethnic groups are included in each group they identified (color figure available online). Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011.

Levey (2006) argued that remedial education also functions as a gatekeeper for higher education. Students who cannot satisfy the remedial education requirements either dropout or are not permitted to continue their academic studies (Attewell et al., 2006). In examining the effects of remediation in reading, math, and writing on graduation, Attewell and colleagues (2006) concluded that taking remedial courses, particularly in reading, at a four-year higher education institution lowered the odds of graduating with a bachelor's degree. Kreysa (2006) also examined the effects of remedial education on degree completion and noted a significant positive correlation with minority students and enrollment in remedial courses. While Kreysa (2006) found no difference in the college graduation and retention rates for students in remedial courses compared to those who did not participate in remedial courses, he did find that economically disadvantaged students were less likely to graduate. Kreysa (2006) argued that as economically disadvantaged students were positively correlated with minority students, the combination of financial and academic hardships for low-income minority students could result in an increased dropout rate. The findings by Attewell and colleagues (2006) and Kreysa (2006) suggest that Cambodian American, Hmong American, Laotian American, and Vietnamese American students, particularly those who are not college ready, may encounter more obstacles in attaining a bachelor's degree. It is imperative that Southeast Asian American students are college ready to increase their odds of college success.

Are Southeast Asian Americans College Ready?

To assess the academic college readiness of Cambodian American, Hmong American, Laotian American, and Vietnamese American students, I examined the results of the Early Assessment Program (EAP). The EAP is a collaboration with the California Department of Education, the California State Board of Education, and the California State University (CSU) system to determine if students in 11th grade are ready for college-level math and English (California State University, n.d.). Scores are categorized as: exempt, meaning students are ready for college-level work; conditionally exempt, meaning students may be ready for college-level work provided they take and pass specific courses their senior year; or non-exempt, meaning that students are not ready for college-level work (CSU Success, n.d.). Students who do not demonstrate college readiness with the EAP need to take the CSU English and math placement exams before beginning their freshman year at a CSU campus. Students who do not demonstrate proficiency in college-level English and math with the placement exams are required to enroll in remedial courses their freshman year. The percentages of students who took the EAP between 2011 and 2013 and were not college ready are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentages of Students Not College Ready Based on EAP Results

	2013		2012		2011	
	English	Math	English	Math	English	Math
White	49	32	48	32	66	34
Asian	40	16	42	17	59	18
Chinese	33	10	34	10	50	11
Japanese	34	16	36	15	53	14
Korean	30	8	34	9	53	9
Cambodian	64	36	68	36	84	38
Hmong	81	40	78	40	93	43
Laotian	73	39	72	43	86	42
Vietnamese	43	17	46	18	63	18

Source: Data from California State University (n.d.).

Comparison of the EAP results by racial groups revealed that higher percentages of White students were not college ready for English or math than Asian American students. However, when the Asian American category was disaggregated, the results of the EAP revealed that there were consistently higher proportions of Cambodian American, Hmong American, and Laotian American students who were not ready for college-level English or math than White students. Hmong Americans were also consistently the least prepared for college-level English. Although a higher proportion of Vietnamese Americans demonstrated college readiness than the other three Southeast Asian American groups, Vietnamese Americans were still not as prepared for college-level English and math as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans.

The EAP results also indicated that these four Southeast Asian American groups were less prepared for college-level English than math. The low proportions of Southeast Asian American students who were ready for college-level English may be reflective of their limited English proficiency. Furthermore, studies have found that students from higher-socioeconomic status families score higher on standardized tests than students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds (Krashen, 2005; Taylor, 2005). The low percentages of Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, and Vietnamese Americans who are college ready might also be explained by their socioeconomic status.

Finally, the results of the EAP suggested that there may be high proportions of Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, and Vietnamese Americans who may need remedial courses once they begin college. If these students cannot satisfy the college remedial requirements, they might not be able to continue with their postsecondary education at the four-year higher education institution, making it much more difficult for them to attain their baccalaureate degree.

Preparing Teachers to Help Southeast Asian American Students be College Ready

The achievement gap that began in elementary school (Pang et al., 2013) and persisted with low proportions of Southeast Asian Americans being college-ready is alarming. In analyzing the American Community Survey, Uy (2008) found that the Southeast Asian American population in the United States has been increasing. This increase in population means it is critical to prepare prospective teachers to work with Southeast Asian American students to help them become college ready.

What should be included in the teacher preparation process? Nagaoka and colleagues (2013) proposed that college readiness requires both cognitive and non-cognitive factors. Cognitive factors reflect content knowledge and academic skills while non-cognitive factors reflect behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies students utilize in the educational setting (Farrington et al., 2012; Nagaoka et al., 2013). Teaching strategies that focus on non-cognitive factors are as important as cognitive factors in the academic performance of students (Farrington et al., 2012; Nagaoka et al. 2013).

Farrington and colleagues (2012) identified academic mindsets as one of the main non-cognitive factors that impact academic performance. Academic mindsets include students feeling that they belong, have the ability to improve academically, can succeed, and find value in what is being taught (Farrington et al., 2012; Nagaoka et al., 2013). Thus, the teacher preparation process could include strategies teachers can employ to help Southeast Asian American students feel included, believe in their academic ability to succeed, and find the academic content they are learning to be of value to them.

Historical Knowledge

Teachers can help Southeast Asian American students feel included in the classroom if they are knowledgeable about the history of Southeast Asian Americans. For many Southeast Asian American students, their history may be an important aspect of their identity. Southeast Asian American history includes the livelihoods of Southeast Asian Americans before their migration to the United States, their traumatic journey for refuge as a result of the Vietnam War, their resettlement in the United States, and their subsequent adjustment to life in the United States. Many Southeast Asian American students might be the first, or at most the second generation, in their family to reside in the United States. Their family history is intertwined with the sociopolitical forces that resulted in them living and growing up in the United States. It is important that teachers not only know, but also include the history of Southeast Asian Americans in their curriculum. For example, the history of Southeast Asian refugees and their contributions to U.S. society can be included in grades five and eleven when the curriculum focuses on American history. As Wallitt (2008) pointed out, students who do not learn about their history in the classroom could perceive that they are not important or invisible in society. Integrating students' history into the curriculum could contribute to students' sense of belonging and belief in their potential.

One way teachers and preservice teachers can gain insight into the history of Southeast Asian Americans is through courses that examine the culture and history of specific Southeast Asian American groups. California State University, Stanislaus, recently announced a new on-line course on the history and culture of the

Hmong people. The course is available to all interested individuals, including those seeking the Hmong Bilingual Credential in Multiple Subject or Single Subject. Taking such a course could be a first step for teachers in responding to the educational needs of Southeast Asian American students.

Culturally Responsive

Teachers could potentially affect students' belief in their academic ability to succeed by being culturally responsive. Multicultural education researchers have attested to the importance of preparing teachers to be culturally responsive to address the learning needs of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2002; Pang, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive teachers draw on their deep knowledge of the students' culture, experiences, and learning preferences to engage the students in effective learning (Gay, 2002; Pang, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Understanding the cultures of Southeast Asian Americans could help teachers better understand their students' perspectives, behaviors, and learning needs as Southeast Asian American cultures are quite different from that of mainstream Western culture. Although there are differences between the cultures of the various Southeast Asian American groups, there are also many similarities. Some of the similarities include expected social behaviors that demonstrate respect for authority and elders, humility, the importance of bringing honor and pride to the family, and the belief in the collective good of the group (Matthews, 2000; Van-Si, 1992). Educators can integrate cultural knowledge of students in the curriculum content taught in schools. This could include the integration of culturally responsive literature such as *Dia's Story Cloth* (Cha, 1996) which recounts the Hmong history, and *Running Shoes* (Lipp, 2008), a story of a Cambodian girl who received the gift of a pair of running shoes that allowed her to go to school.

Relevant Curriculum

Students will find what they are learning to be of value if it is interesting and relevant to them (Farrington et al., 2012). In discussing the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, Wallitt (2008) noted that Cambodian American students found the curriculum to be relevant and interesting when it included Cambodian history and culture. Thus, incorporating the history and cultures of Southeast Asian Americans into the curriculum would not only help Southeast Asian American students feel included, it would also make the learning more interesting as students can then relate to the content.

One way teachers could make the curriculum relevant is by including literary works by Southeast Asian American writers. *Bamboo Among the Oaks* (Moua, 2002), an anthology of literary works by Hmong Americans, and *Tilting the Continent: Southeast Asian American Writing* (Lim & Chua, 2000), an anthology of literary works by Southeast Asian Americans, could be used to engage students in reading. Reading literary works by Southeast Asian American writers with whom students can possibly culturally relate to could potentially enhance Southeast Asian American students' own sense of self-efficacy. After reading these literary works, students could then be encouraged to write their own literary work.

Literacy is developed through reading (Krashen, 2005). Enhancing literacy skills could potentially enhance Southeast Asian American students' math achievement as math requires reading and writing skills (DiGisi & Fleming, 2005; Furner, Yahya, & Duffy, 2005). Thus, incorporating relevant reading and writing activities that may be of interest to Southeast Asian American students could be a step toward reducing the achievement gap so students are college ready.

Educational Policies

While teachers play a critical role in reducing the achievement gap and preparing Southeast Asian Americans to be college ready, changes to educational policies are also needed to address the issues affecting the achievement gap and subsequent college readiness of Southeast Asian Americans. Southeast Asian Americans need to be identified in educational data sets to continue to monitor their academic achievements. Additionally, Southeast Asian Americans' limited English proficiency and struggle to demonstrate college readiness in English suggest a need for bilingual education to support their English language skills.

The Need for Disaggregated Data

Despite the differences in academic achievement among Asian American groups, national educational data is often aggregated (Pang et al., 2011). Aggregated data combined with the model minority stereotype have contributed to the misperception of Asian Americans as a homogenous group (Pang et al., 2011). When disaggregated data, such as those obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau and the CSU EAP, are available, the social, economic, and educational challenges for the various Asian American groups are illuminated. Educational policies that encourage disaggregating data can help debunk the misperceptions associated with the

model minority. Additionally, with disaggregated data students from underrepresented Asian American groups who are struggling academically can then be identified and supported.

Bilingual Education

Developing English language skills is essential for Southeast Asian Americans to be college ready. Language and culture both contribute to the cognitive development of individuals (Garcia, 2005). Students gain an understanding of the world around them through their first language, which provides the social and cultural context for their learning (Garcia, 2005; Pang, 2010). In this sense, bilingual education acts like training wheels for English learners. Thus, incorporating the students' home language and culture through a bilingual education program could help students develop their English language skills. As the number of bilingual and dual language programs increase in schools, it is important that some programs are built on heritage languages such as Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, or Lao. Offering bilingual education will allow Southeast Asian American students to draw on the knowledge and experiences they have already acquired at home, in the community, and in their interactions with others to help them develop the skills to be academically successful.

Conclusion

Southeast Asian American students must confront major challenges that obstruct their educational journey toward college. Unfortunately, their educational needs have been obscured by the model minority stereotype. Their obscurity in the American community has hidden the large academic achievement gap in math, reading, and English, which has contributed to their lack of college readiness. Educators, community members, and policymakers all have the potential to help change the educational story of Southeast Asian American students. The process starts with preparing teachers and adopting educational policies to eradicate the obstacles in Southeast Asian American students' educational journey. It is time to lift away the model minority curtain and address the educational needs of Southeast Asian Americans so they will be college ready.

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