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**South Asian Americans in Higher Education:
Background and Future Directions**

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South Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States. Though research has broadly attended to Asian Americans as an aggregate racial or ethnic group, calls to specify the complex experiences and identities within this group have increased. This is particularly true for South Asian Americans, or Desi, groups as their ethnic and cultural identities have been increasingly scrutinized and racialized since September 11th. This backgrounder discusses South Asian Americans within higher educational institutions. More specifically, I provide an overview of identity development models, contextualize their unique challenges, and relate these models to South Asian Americans. The backgrounder concludes by outlining opportunities for supporting South Asian American students in higher education.

College campuses today are bustling with varying ideas, initiatives, and people. While the benefits of diversity in higher education are widely cited (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; P. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & G. Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, 1999; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000), there is limited research on South Asians in higher education. As such, this backgrounder explores South Asian Americans (SAAs)[1] in higher education and their cultural identity. Cultural identity formation refers to measuring the feeling of individuals as to their level of influence or belonging to a culture (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007). The nexus of SAA cultural identity formation in higher education, for both students and staff members alike, is the focus of this critical issue. This overview will provide a rationale for studying SAAs; explain the relevance to the contemporary higher education landscape; and describe unique challenges for this group.

Background and Current Literature

SAAs comprise one of the fastest-growing sub-populations in the United States, growing 900% between 1960 and 1990 (Le, 2013; Leonard, 1997). According to a 2012 report published by South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), there were over 3.4 million South Asians living in the United States. The five states with the largest South Asian populations are California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois (SAALT, 2012). In Texas particularly, the aggregated Asian population is 4.2%. Two of the largest Texas SAA enclaves are in Houston and Dallas. In the Houston metropolitan area, there were 451,000 Asians, or 7.11% of the Houston-area population, where as in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, those figures were 409,000 and 5.91% (Social Explorer, 2017). However, these are aggregate figures which combine SAAs with other Asians. As a result, the dearth of disaggregated data on Asian American college students makes it difficult to appropriately inform institutional policies and support services and programs for SAA students (Wang & Teranishi, 2012)

South Asian American (or *Desi*) college students – namely those who have roots in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal – are a sizable minority at

American institutions, yet they continue to be an understudied group as it relates to academic success, social involvement, and mental health (Roysircar, Carey, & Koroma, 2010). Furthermore, 1.5 generation and second-generation SAAs often feel disconnected from their origins while grappling with their "American" identity (Iwamoto, Negi, Partiali, & Creswell, 2013). Though limited research has explored this sub-population (Purkayastha, 2005), the South Asian college student experience is still underlooked (Roysircar, Carey, & Koroma, 2010). To explore identity development of SAA students, I draw from several studies and emerging theoretical frameworks to discuss identity development in underrepresented students with a particular focus on SAAs.

Identity Development Frameworks and Research

Several conceptual and theoretical frameworks provide a foundation to studying South Asian Americans in higher education. It is important to note that there is currently no model for South Asian American cultural identity development, but the following models are used as foundational pieces to illustrate both the relevance to existing models and the need for a specific SAA identity development model.

Asian American identity development model. Kim (1981) developed the first identity development model on Asian Americans. The model consists of five progressive stages, including: (1) *ethnic awareness*; (2) *White identification*; (3) *awakening to social political consciousness*; (4) *redirection to Asian American consciousness*; and (5) *incorporation.* As a study on Asian Americans, many aspects of the model parallel with the South Asian American experience. However, a limitation to this framework is that Kim specifically studied the sub-population of Japanese women. The study should be admired for its foundational work on Asian Americans, but with no SAA participants, it would be difficult to generalize the South Asian American community using this model.

A new model for Asian American identity development. Seeing a lack of applicability with traditional models of identity development, in which study samples were largely White men, Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee (2002) proposed a new model for psychosocial student development theory which took into account racial identity and external influences as factors. In examining existing sociological literature concerning the Asian population, the authors found that notions such as Asian collectivism, familial values, generational status, and level of acculturation all play a part in how Asian American students form their identity. Central to this new model is an interrelationship between identity and purpose. The model also depicts influences from relationships, emotions, and competency levels. Although this model was instructive and provided important implications for Asian Americans, it, too, aggregated all Asian Americans into one identity development model without considering the differences among Asian American ethnic groups.

Asian American identity consciousness model. Accapadi (2012) was instrumental in visualizing Asian American identity as fluid and contextual. Instead of a progressive or stage model, Accapadi designed a Point of Entry (POE) Model of Asian American Identity Consciousness, noting various points of entry influenced by different factors. These include environmental factors such as immigration history, ethnic attachment, familial influences, external influence, and individual factors such as self as other, and other social identities. What makes this model significant is that it considers specific factors as "sparks" of identity development in individuals rather than collectively grouping a population and insisting they

follow a trajectory. Although this model represents a pan-Asian identity, like the ones previously described, Accapadi's positionality as South Asian American informed the development of the model.

South Asian immigrant identity model. Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu (1997) developed the first immigrant identity model specific to South Asians related to the field of counseling. They argued that conformity is not necessarily an achievable or desired goal for South Asians, as they have strong cultural ties and pride to their homeland. Using this notion as a foundation, Ibrahim and colleagues' model consists of four stages, including: (1) dissonance; (2) resistance and immersion; (3) introspection; and (4) synergistic articulation and awareness. In this final stage, Ibrahim and colleagues argue that South Asian immigrants are able to accept or deny cultural values of both dominant and minority groups. Although this model offers research on the South Asian ethnic-specific group, it only highlights immigrant stories and does not necessarily reflect the identity development of the children of these immigrants, nor of SAA college students, the sub-group of interest in this backgrounder.

Acculturation among second-generation South Asian Americans. Generational and immigrant statuses affect how college students view themselves and form their cultural identity. The term *acculturation* refers to cultural changes resulting from individuals who have managed to adapt to a new cultural context (Berry, 1997). In a study on South Asian Muslim Americans, Syed Ali (2008) found that acculturation is more complex and dynamic than previously cited. Instead of a linear process where individuals become more assimilated to their host culture as time progresses, the author proposed that acculturation is affected by situational context, relationships with peers, and life events (Ali, 2008). This research is useful because it highlights how situational factors influence individuals' sense-of-self. With this overview of foundational theories and models framing the South Asian American narrative in the United States, I introduce challenges unique to this community with specific attention to the higher education context.

Challenges in Higher Education

Aside from being one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in higher education institutions, Asian Americans encounter daily microaggressions and indignities relating to their identity (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2001; Teranishi, 2002). South Asian Americans have been the target of discrimination from microaggressions to hate-fueled violence, with incidents increasing noticeably after the September 11th terrorist attacks (Isler, 2006). This racial oppression, manifesting in the form of microaggressions, discrimination, and bullying, creates psychological challenges for people of color, leading to negative associations with SAA cultural identity and sense of self (Birman, 1994). On a similar note, research has shown that SAAs have been characterized as perpetual foreigners and experiences of discrimination have led to negative self-concepts and mental health consequences (Iwamoto et al., 2013). Unfortunately, literature shows that there are few culturally-competent and culturally-adaptive clinical interventions to assist with SAA mental health (Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007). This in turn leads to SAA college students relying on each other for support as they navigate through their respective identities.

As SAAs build a support network in college, they often connect through affinity groups. Student organizations, dance groups, intramural sports, Greek life, and other leadership positions have provided safe spaces for SAA students to express themselves and support each other.

Research has shown that these spaces are deemed safe because they allow historically underrepresented students to relate candidly and openly with each other in predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Inkelas, 2004). In an article for this issue, Bilal Badruddin discusses the importance of South Asian affiliated fraternities and sororities in regards to peer support. Badruddin draws on the concept of "safe spaces" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) to discuss how SAAs and other minoritized groups and communities create outlets to develop a sense of belonging to the institution.

There has been a rise in studies regarding Asian American college student identity formation, but anecdotal evidence supports the idea that, as previously discussed, broad Asian identity formation models do not apply to SAAs. With little literature on the demographic group, higher education administrators should inquire about optimal opportunities so SAA students are afforded the same opportunities for college success as their non-SAA student counterparts.

In Support of South Asian American Students and Administrators

With an overview of SAAs and their unique challenges identified, current scholars and practitioners have begun to explore ways to support this sub-population. The subsequent articles for this critical issue highlight the challenges introduced in this overview, while also exploring other barriers for SAA success in higher education. While the amassed issues regarding SAA in higher education seem daunting, the authors provide ample opportunities for higher education leadership, policy makers, and researchers to acknowledge, advocate, and support this growing sub-population.

In their op-ed, Purvi Patel and Viraj Patel challenge higher education institutions, and specifically diversity and inclusion practitioners, to enhance their understanding of South Asian Americans. Namely, they demystify the stereotypes associated with SAAs and provide an honest case for disaggregation of Asian American data, as well as disaggregation *within* the South Asian American community. They also discuss topics such as Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia, while listing applications for practice.

Bilal Badruddin authors a piece drawing attention to culturally-based fraternities and sororities by specifically discussing South Asian-affiliated organizations. These affinity groups provide comradery amongst their members, but they also serve as support structures for SAA college students. Although South Asian-interest fraternities and sororities are relatively young organizations, there is much work to be done by college administrators and national assemblies to recognize their growing presence on college campuses. In the article, Badruddin provides directions on how advisors can best support these groups.

To provide an appropriate closing to this critical issue, Shruti Desai situates the current complexities of understanding SAAs while providing fodder for future directions. Desai's perspective on SAAs as existing in a "racial gray space" and "in-between" other races have been the catalyst to many of the issues the community faces. Desai concludes by dismantling current notions and recentering the South Asian identity. The author discusses three key implications for student affairs educators. Those implications include a need for: the consideration of the role of family expectations in academic advising, awareness of emotional perspectives of Asian American students in counseling settings, and better understanding of the impact of microaggressions and racism targeted towards Asian Americans.

These important pieces contribute to the warranted conversation on South Asian Americans, one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the country. Although not an exhaustive discussion on all the challenges affecting this community, this critical issue helps to shed light and provide a firmer foundation for future discussion and research.

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Suggested Readings

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[1] The term South Asian Americans, or SAA, is used in this overview. However, this community is also referred to as the South Asian Diaspora, Desi, or simply South Asian, in other articles.