

New research on claims that Asian American students are harmed when they cannot attend their first-choice university

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A new study finds evidence that contradicts claims in legal complaints to the U.S. Department of Justice arguing that Asian American students face negative consequences while in college as a result of not being

admitted to and not attending their first-choice institution. These complaints led to the Trump administration launching formal investigations into the race-conscious admissions practices of Harvard and Yale universities. The findings were published today in *Educational Researcher*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

The Justice Department issued its findings on the Yale investigation on August 13; its investigation of Harvard is still ongoing.

The nearly identical complaints filed by the Coalition of Asian American Associations (CAAA) and the Asian American Coalition for Education (AACE) specifically cited several [negative consequences](#) for these students: reduced time spent on leadership, public service, and co-curricular activities; diminished satisfaction in their [academic institutions](#); a negative attitude toward academics and lower academic achievement; a lack of self-confidence and assertiveness; and negative racial interactions.

To test the groups' claims, a team of seven researchers at the University of Denver and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), examined differences in Asian American [student](#) outcomes while in college, based on their college admission and enrollment decisions. For their study, the researchers analyzed longitudinal data from two national surveys administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA: the 2012 Freshman Survey and 2016 College Senior Survey. The study's sample included 1,023 students who self-identified as Asian American and completed both surveys.

The researchers assessed 27 student outcome measures spread across six general categories. The categories included academic performance and perception of academic abilities; satisfaction with college; self-confidence and self-esteem; level of student involvement; willingness

and ability to contribute to society; and diversity of racial interactions.

"Overall, our findings countered the claims made by the two groups that served as the impetus of the Justice Department's investigation," said study coauthor Mike Hoa Nguyen, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Denver. "We found that only small differences, if any, exist between the self-reported outcomes of Asian American students who were admitted to and attending their first-choice university and those students who were not."

Nguyen's coauthors include Connie Y. Chang, Victoria Kim, Rose Ann E. Gutierrez, Annie Le, and Robert T. Teranishi at UCLA, and University of Denver scholar Denis Dumas.

On 23 of the 27 outcome measures, Nguyen and his colleagues found no difference between the two groups of students, after controlling for students' SAT score, high school grade point average, gender, and first-generation college status. On one other measure—"time spent participating in student clubs or groups"—students not accepted by their first-choice institution reported higher levels of involvement than their peers. The remaining three outcome measures showed marginally higher outcomes for students at their first-choice university, with a very small magnitude of difference between the two groups.

In the 'academic performance and perception of academic abilities' category, only one of the 11 measures—time spent studying and doing homework—showed a difference between the two groups, with students at their first-choice institution indicating more time on schoolwork. At the same time, the two groups reported similar levels of academic performance and perception of their academic ability.

In the 'diversity of racial interactions' category, four of the five measures—including positive cross-racial interaction—found no

differences between the two groups of students. On the fifth measure—negative cross-racial interaction—students at their first-choice university reported fewer negative experiences.

In the 'satisfaction with college' category, students at their first-choice university scored higher on one measure—overall satisfaction with the college experience—than their peers. On the other measure in the category—satisfaction with coursework—there was no difference between the two groups.

"It is important to note that college choice and admission outcomes are not the only factor contributing to students' college satisfaction," Nguyen said. "Prior research indicates that feeling welcome and valued, instructional effectiveness, racial identity, and faculty and student interactions all impact college satisfaction."

In the 'willingness and ability to contribute to society' and the 'self-confidence and self-esteem' categories, across seven indicators, both groups showed no differences.

"The bottom line is that our findings reject the claims that Asian American students face negative consequences if they are not accepted by and do not attend their first-choice college," said Nguyen. "Our study shows that the claims are inconsistent and inaccurate."

Furthermore, Nguyen added, the findings support prior research that emphasizes the benefits of attending college, in general, even if it is not at one's first-choice institution.

"Although college choice is of vast importance for many students, including Asian Americans, our study suggests that simply relying on rankings and perceived prestige at elite universities to determine one's first-choice schools might be a disservice to students," Nguyen said. "It

is what students do in [college](#), rather than the level of institutional prestige alone, that most determines educational outcomes."

While the CAAA and AACE indicate that they broadly represent the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, public opinion research, including the Spring 2016 Asian American Voter Survey, has found that a majority of Asian Americans support race-conscious university admissions.

More information: Mike Hoa Nguyen et al, Asian Americans, Admissions, and College Choice: An Empirical Test of Claims of Harm Used in Federal Investigations, *Educational Researcher* (2020). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X20933288](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20933288)

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