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FACTORS AFFECTING ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS' ACADEMIC LIBRARY LEADERSHIP CAREER CHOICE

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INTRODUCTION

In answer to the phenomenal growth in the diversity of students, faculty, and staff, and particularly in response to demands for social and racial justice, many academic libraries across America have established a plethora of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in the hope of making their organizations, among other things, more inclusive, equitable, and just. Among the many goals of these DEI programs is the need to diversify the library workforce, a task that includes bringing leaders from the marginalized groups into organizations. Unfortunately, the results of these efforts have been rather limited, especially with regard to the leadership advancement of Asian Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs). In fact, the number of APIAs holding top-level leadership positions in academic libraries (e.g., dean, university librarian, director) remains the same as it was a couple of decades ago. Furthermore, what is so disconcerting is that, as the present study will show, fewer APIAs aspire to become library leaders today compared to a decade ago. Similarly, many APIAs also indicated that they are very uncertain about whether to pursue a career in library administration.

These drastic shifts in attitudes toward library administration among APIA academic librarians merit a close examination. Specifically, what are the factors that have contributed to (1) the decrease in the number of APIAs who aspire to become library leaders and (2) the increase in the number of APIAs who appear to be uncertain about whether to pursue a career in library administration? To answer these questions, the results of the two surveys, which were conducted by the author in 2012 and 2020 on the leadership aspirations of Asian Pacific Islander American academic librarians, will be utilized.

TALES OF THE TWO APIA ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN STUDIES

The first study was conducted in 2012. It involved 31 APIA participants (24 women and 7 men) who entered the library profession between 2007 and 2012.[1] This web-based survey was part of a lager study on APIA academic librarians. The results of this portion of the study as well as the overall results of this study were published in several publications, including *International Information & Library Review*, *Library Management*, and *ACRL 2015 Conference Proceedings.*

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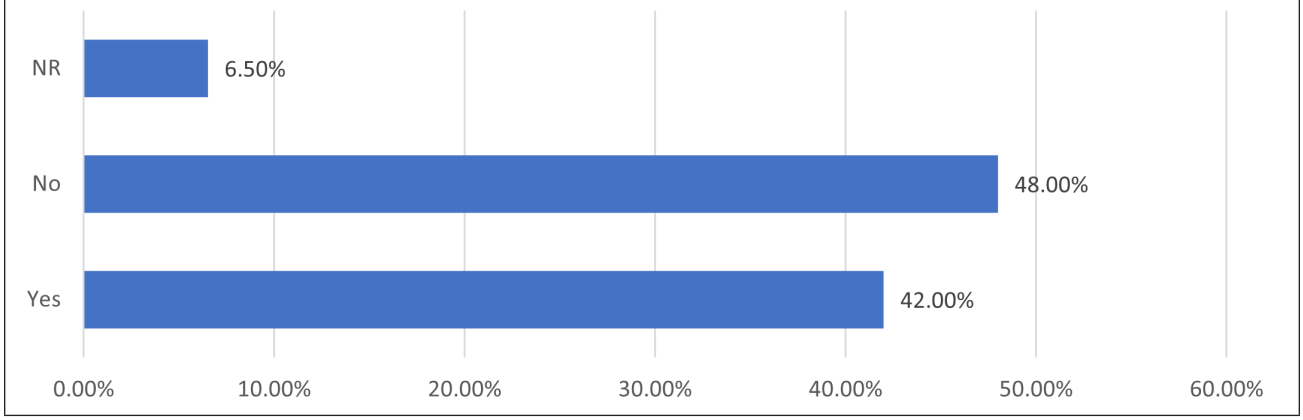
Key Findings of the 2012 Study:

- When participants were asked if they aspire to become a library leader/administrator, 42 percent (n=13) responded "yes" (nine women and four men), 48 percent (n=18) responded "no" (15 women and three men), and 6.5 percent (n=2) did not respond to the question.
- The participants who responded "yes" to the (above) question indicated that "the ability to influence library/education policy" was the most important factor in aspiring to become library administrators.
- "Racial discrimination" was the least influential factor in determining whether to aspire to a career in library administration.

FIGURE 1

APIAs' Leadership Aspiration (2012)



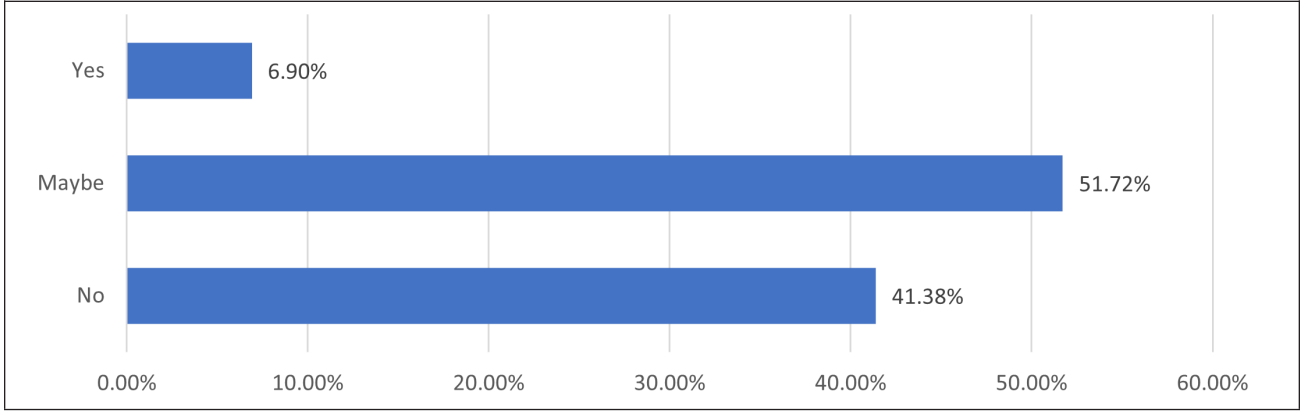
Key Findings in the 2020 Study:

The second study was conducted in the fall of 2020. A total of 105 participants responded to this web-based survey, including 77 women, 24 men, and four participants who preferred not to reveal their gender identity. Within the survey, a section was devoted to collecting data on the leadership aspirations of APIA academic librarians who currently do not hold library administrative positions.

- 58 individuals answered the questions contained in this section.
- 7 percent (n=4) of participants replied "yes."

FIGURE 2

APIAs' Leadership Aspiration (2020)



- 52 percent (n=30) of participants responded "maybe."
- 41 percent (n=24) of participants said "no."
- "More money" and "want to make positive changes" tied (26 percent) as the most important factors for pursuing a career in library administration.

FACTORS AFFECTING APIAS' LEADERSHIP CAREER CHOICE

America's Contemporary Political Landscape and APIAs

The first survey was conducted during the presidency of Barack Obama. This period was perhaps one of the most politically optimistic eras for people of color, including APIAs. Mr. Obama undoubtedly not only served as an exemplary example of what a person of color can do, including attaining the highest public office in the United States, but also inspired people of color to aspire to higher goals and purposes. He was, after all, a community leader before he became a politician. In sharp contrast, the 2020 study was conducted during the presidency of Donald Trump presidency. Mr. Trump, unlike many of his predecessors, had turned the U.S. into the most politically divided country in modern American history. In particular, he carried out many xenophobic policies, especially toward non-European immigrants. For example, during a White House meeting on immigration issues related to Haiti and several African countries in January 2018, President Trump asked why the U.S. should accept immigrants from "shithole countries" rather than from places like Norway.[2] The results of his policies and poisonous xenophobic rhetoric (e.g., China virus, Chinese virus, and kung flu) have made the country less hospitable for people of color, particularly APIAs. In fact, the publication *The Blame Game: How Political Rhetoric Inflames Anti-Asian Scapegoating* (2022), produced by the AAPI Equity Alliance, Chinese for Affirmative Action, and San Francisco University's Asian American Research Initiative, reported that "political rhetoric contributes to scapegoating across many Asian American communities."[3] The report also showed that, for example, "In the week after President Trump's first Tweet using 'Chinese virus' on March 16, 2020, Tweeter hashtags expressing anti-Asian sentiment increased by 174 times."[4] Since the COVID-19 pandemic was still in the early stage in the fall of 2020, as a result, the researcher did not include questions about the impact of the pandemic on the leadership aspirations of APIAs. However, given the harmful political and social climate at the time the survey was conducted, it would be wrong to conclude that these conditions had little or no impact at all on why many APIAs were not interested in pursuing or why they were uncertain about whether to pursue a career in library administration.

Racism and the Bamboo Ceiling

As librarians, especially librarians of color, it is impossible to disregard the proliferation of materials in all formats on racism, especially discrimination in the workplace, in America in recent years. For example, information on discrimination against APIAs, especially those who tried to attain the top-level leadership positions in corporate America, has frequently appeared on the front pages of many of the mainstream and industry publications, academic and governmental/non-governmental venues, and ethnic-centered publications (e.g., *The Chinese American Forum, Committee 100*, *Northwest Asin Weekly*, and *Ascend*), among others.

Below are some of the headlines that have surfaced in a number of prestigious publications, such as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *Harvard Business Review*, among others.[5]

- *Asian Americans May Have an Educational Advantage, But They Face a "Bamboo Ceiling" at Work*
- *Asian Americans Are the Least Likely Group in the U.S. to Be Promoted to Management*
- *Study Finds Few Asians Occupying Few Corner Offices*
- *Asian Americans Think an Elite College Degree Will Shelter Them from Discrimination. It Won't*
- *Asians in America: Excelling in Academics, Failing to Get Ahead in Leadership*
- *Why Aren't There More Asian Americans In Leadership Positions?*
- The list goes on.

Similarly, numerous scholarly studies on the underrepresentation of APIAs in top-level leadership positions in various sectors of the U.S. economy have appeared in academic journals (e.g., *Asian Indian Americans in the*

Bay Area and the Glass Ceiling and *Revisiting the Bamboo Ceiling: Perceptions From Asian Americans on Experiencing Workplace Discrimination*), books (e.g., *Stuck: Why Asian Americans Don't Reach the Top of the Corporate Ladder*," "*Glass Ceilings and Asian Americans*," and "*The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*"), and governmental and organizational reports (e.g., *The Illusion of Asian Success: Race, Gender & the Double Glass Ceiling*; and *Lost in Aggregation: The Asian Reflection in the Glass Ceiling*).[6]

Not surprisingly, according to Buck Gee and Demise Peck (2018):

> Asian American white-collar professionals are the least likely group to be promoted from individual contributor roles into management—less likely than any other race, including blacks and Hispanics. And our analysis found that white professionals are about twice as likely to be promoted into management as their Asian counterparts.[7]

Concerning Asian Pacific Islander American women, Chang Hwan Kim and Yang Zhao (2014) reported that "What's surprising is when it comes to landing coveted management positions in corporate America, Asian women are the least likely of these groups (e.g., Asian American men, white men and women) to be successful."[8] Several years after this study was published, the challenges for women of Asian descent remain the same. Margaret Chin (2020) pointed out that "When it comes to breaking the bamboo ceiling, Asian American women still have a long way to go. Many obstacles stand in their way."[9]

APIAs face similar challenges in the library profession. For example, one survey participant responded that "I find that APIAs in general academia face some challenges (dearth of leadership opportunities, 'Likability,' being mistaken for younger or less experienced), but I think these are more pronounced in librarianship because the demographics of the profession are so white." Another participant, who is a senior library administrator, stated,

> On the one hand, I encourage others to pursue it (library administration) because I'd love to see more representation. On the other hand, I'm cautious to encourage others because of the isolation, devaluation, and microaggressions that I know they will experience—and the lack of understanding of them among their (mostly white) peers. There needs to be more of us there, collectively, and supported collectively.

Given these racial challenges (as well as the sharp rise in anti-Asian violence in the U.S.), it is no wonder that so many APIAs find it difficult to fathom a career in library administration. It is worth noting that in the 2012 study, "racial discrimination" was the least important factor among APIAs in determining whether to pursue a career in library administration.

DEI: APIAs' Illusory Goals

Today, almost every public and private institution in the United States puts diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as one of its top institutional goals. The main reasons these institutions carry out DEI programs are (1) to confront or being forced to confront as well as to find solutions for detrimental issues such as racial injustices and gender inequities, among others, (2) to avoid colossal financial and reputational damages due to legal challenges, and (3) to harness the benefits of having diverse workforce/organizations. For example, according to the studies conducted by McKinsey & Company (2020), diverse companies outperform less diverse ones.[10] The problem, however, is that many DEI programs have not been successful. A host of factors have been given as to why many DEI programs failed, including lack of financial resources, limited institutional commitment, absence of accountability, a lack of systemic reforms, etc.[11] According to Michelle Penelope King (2023):

> Despite overwhelming evidence that workplaces are becoming more demographically diverse, research finds over half of us feel excluded and isolated at work. A lot of companies are experiencing employee fatigue with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Workers feel exhausted, frustrated, and skeptical that their DEI efforts will result in tangible outcomes.[12]

Similarly, in a recent interview titled "Why Your DEI Programs Are Not Working," published in *American Libraries*, Elaina Norlin (2023) mentioned that "90% trainings fail on multiple levels and can create more harm than good."[13]

Generally, many of these DEI programs were designed to address a host of issues (e.g., cultural, curricular, staffing issues). As noted, some components of DEI programs are concerned with demographic diversity. These initiatives are designed to increase the representation of minoritized groups in the workforce. The problem for APIAs, however, is that many institutions no longer consider them a minority or an underrepresented group. As Buck Gee and Denise Peck (2018) pointed out:

> Asian American white-collar professionals are the least likely group in the United States to be promoted into management. Yet it may not be obvious to companies that there's a problem, because Asian Americans are not considered an underrepresented minority.

The impact of this practice is detrimental to the representation of APIAs, who presently constitute only a tiny fraction of the academic librarians in the library profession. For example, one survey participant stated, "I don't see a lot of APIAs in academic librarianship. I am the only one at my institution" (2020). Likewise, exclusion of APIAs from institutional DEI programs, policies, and practices has also been consequential, particularly in the areas of recruiting and advancing APIAs into top-level leadership positions.

In addition to racism and other factors, many of these DEI programs have not helped in bringing APIAs to their institutions/libraries as well as in promoting/advancing APIAs to top-level leadership positions. Reflecting on this matter, one participant in the 2020 survey pointed it out:

> Many times, the reasons [why I was not chosen for certain position] were not disclosed. For being internal candidates at my previous institutions, given qualifications were equal (in some cases, I was better), it appeared to me that I am not as much a 'minority' as the selected ones. Of course, those were not the public reasons given to me (fit of my version.)

CONCLUSION

Together with the substantial growth of Asian Americans among the U.S. population and (international) Asian students, Asian and Asian Americans constitute a significant number of students at American colleges and universities. At some universities (e.g., the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California, Irvine; and Harvard) Asian students (both domestic and international) represent a large percentage of their student bodies (in some cases, over 35 percent). Similarly, faculties of Asian descent also make up a large segment of the professorial population in the U.S. In addition to the massive increase in the number of Asian students and faculty members at many colleges and universities throughout the U.S., many of the institutions of higher education have also offered numerous Asian and Asian American studies programs, from courses on Vietnamese language to Asian American literature (e.g., Dartmouth's *Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature* and Foothill College's *Asian American Literature*) to doctoral degrees in Asian American studies. Indeed, these are truly encouraging developments. However, the same cannot be said about the status of APIAs in academic libraries. As noted, the number of APIA academic librarians has declined significantly in the past two decades. Also, only a tiny number of APIAs holding top-level library leadership positions in academic libraries, especially at institutions that Asian students attend. What is more troubling, however, is that because of the racial climate and repressive systemic practices, many APIAs are uncertain about whether to pursue a career in library administration. If these issues are not honestly addressed, they can create enormous losses for both APIAs and institutions of higher education because, as both surveys have indicated, APIAs who aspired to become library leaders stated that "the ability to influence library/education policy" is the most important factor in determining why they aspire to a career in library administration.[14]

NOTES

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5. See Stefanie K. Johnson and Thomas Sy, "Why Aren't There More Asians Americans in Leadership Positions?" *Harvard Business Review*, https://hbr.org/2016/12/why-arent-there-more-asian-americans-in-leadership-positions. Eva Pereira, "Asian in America: Excelling in Academics, Failing to Get Ahead in Leadership," *Forbes*, http://www.frobes.com/sites/evaperreira/2011/07/27/asian-in-america. Jennifer Lee and Karthick Ramakrishnan, "Asian Americans Think an Elite College Degree Will Shelter Them from Discrimination. It Won't," *Los Angeles Times,* March 7, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-lee-ramakrishman. Jennifer Lee and Van C. Tran, "Asian Americans May Have an Educational Advantage, But They Face a 'Bamboo Ceiling" at Work," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/opinion.la-oe-lee-asian-american-at. Kyle Stock, "Study Finds Asian Occupying Few Corner Offices," *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2011, http://search.proquest.com/docview/878795292? Buck Gee and Denise Peck, "Asian Americans Are the Least Likely Group in the U.S. to Be Promoted to Management," *Harvard Business Review*, May 31, 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/05/asian-americans-are-the-least-likely-group-in-the-u-s-to-be-promoted-to-management.
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7. Gee and Peck, "Asian Are the Least," 2018.
8. Chang Hwan Kim and Yang Zhao, "Are Asian American Women Advantaged? Labor Market Performance of College Educated Female Workers," *Social Forces*, 93, no. 2 (2014): 623-52.
9. Margaret M. Chin, *Stuck: Why Asian Americans Don't Reach the Top of the Corporate Ladder*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020).
10. McKinsey & Company, "Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters," 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters.
11. See Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, "Why Doesn't Diversity Training Work? The Challenge for Industry and Academia," *Anthropology Now*, 10, no. 2 (2018): 8-55. Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalav, "Why Diversity Programs Fail," *Harvard Business Review*, 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail. Constance Iloh, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts Are Not Working Because They 'Cost' Nothing, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, July 4, 2022, https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15293853/diversity-equity-and-inclusion. Jesse Singal, "What If Diversity Trainings Do More Harm Than Good?" *New York Times*, January 22, 2023, p. 9.
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14. Le, "Leadership Aspirations," 2016.