

A haven for Asian students - Full - Sacramento Bee, The (CA) - October 15, 2015 - page 1B

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Tucked away in a corner of the university library building, just beyond the bustling Java City coffee shop, the **Full Circle Project** office is a small haven for many of Sacramento State's Asian American students.

They spill into the hallway outside the crowded front room on a recent Thursday morning. Charlie Thao and his friends sit in a circle on the floor, chatting in Hmong and interrupting each other's studies with traditional ghost stories. Reading her biology textbook at a table inside, Christine Chen opens up a package of rice crackers to share with others.

Khalid Shah is burrowed in his laptop finishing computer science homework. When the second-year computer engineering major became overwhelmed last year by the number of units in his degree, mentors at the **Full Circle Project** supported him through doubts about his academic plans and connected him with clubs on campus that have kept him motivated whenever he gets stuck.

"I had a state of mind that you had to finish in four years," said Shah, who moved from Pakistan to Stockton with his family in 2009 and took three English classes his senior year of high school to qualify for Sacramento State. "Without FCP, I probably would have dropped out."

Launched in 2012 with a \$1.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the **Full Circle Project** is an academic and advising program that aims to boost retention and graduation rates among Asian and Pacific Islander students.

It's a group that often gets overlooked in higher-education success initiatives. With high college completion rates - about 49 percent in California, compared to 31 percent of adults in the state - Asian Americans have long been treated as a "model minority" that disproves the need for affirmative action.

But advocates are working to bust that stereotype, one that they argue has harmed many communities by erasing their unique struggles and depriving them of needed attention and resources.

A report released last month by the Campaign for College Opportunity showed striking disparities in college achievement among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in California, who now comprise a sixth of the state's population.

While 70 percent of Indians and 52 percent of Chinese who are at least 25 years old have a degree, only 16 percent of Cambodians, 13 percent of Hmong and 10 percent of Laotians do. It's 15 percent among Pacific Islanders, including Native Hawaiians. Similar gaps are found in college readiness, application and acceptance rates to the state's public universities, and graduation levels.

"We have to stop looking at this group as a monolith," said Audrey Dow, an author of the report. "This is our fastest-growing population in the state. That means the success of everyone within this group is intimately tied to California's future."

Low English-language proficiency and widespread poverty are significant barriers to college in some Asian American communities.

Vincent Pan, director of the San Francisco-based civil rights organization Chinese for Affirmative Action, said the history of those populations has intersected with class to limit their access to education.

"The East Asian immigrant experience is different than the Southeast Asian refugee experience is different than the Pacific Islander immigrant experience," Pan said. People who came to the United States fleeing war, he said, cannot simply be lumped in with those who arrived on a graduate school visa or for a job in the tech industry.

"We have to be honest and truthful about differences," Pan said, so that "we can figure out how to help everyone."

At Sacramento State, which draws from large Hmong and Filipino populations in the region, only 40 percent of Asian American students graduate in six years, one of the lowest rates in the California State University system.

That surprised Tim Fong when he began researching ideas five years ago for what would become the **Full Circle Project**. Sacramento State had recently been recognized by the Department of Education for serving a large number of low-income Asian Americans, and Fong was looking to apply for grant money that had become available as a result.

"I, like everyone else, thought Asians were doing fine," he said.

His proposal was to create a "freshman learning community" for about 100 students annually who might need additional support to get them on track - 60 percent have been the first in their families to attend college and 90 percent are low-income.

Very few are Pacific Islander. Fong said he'd like to develop an outreach effort targeting Pacific Islander students at community colleges in the area, where they often get stuck without ever transferring.

Each cohort takes several classes together, including introductory courses on Asian American studies and ethnic studies, as well as a service-oriented freshman seminar. The **Full Circle Project** then connect participants with campus clubs and community organizations, and brings them back in following years to serve as peer mentors to new students.

"My theory was that Asian Americans weren't doing well at Sacramento State because there wasn't a sense of community," Fong said.

Some early results have been promising: More than 90 percent of students from **Full Circle Project's** first two classes stuck around for their second year, 10 percentage points higher than Sacramento State freshmen as a whole. And they've been quicker to reach unit-completion milestones that give them upperclassmen status.

"They take what we've given them and build on it," Fong said. "The fire that we lit freshman year is continuing to grow and be fueled."

Students describe the **Full Circle Project** as a home base on campus, where they do just about everything except sleep. They speak profoundly of how it has connected them with their own ethnic identities and helped them to better understand their families, many of whom immigrated to the United States.

Chen, a sophomore on the pre-nursing track, said the ethnic studies courses gave her a sensitivity to cultural values that she has been able to apply to other classes, like one on child psychology. She also got involved with a club that has used the university's Wayne Maeda Asian American Studies Archives to create library displays about Japanese internment and the history of Chinese restaurants. After becoming president of the club this fall, Chen is now thinking about jobs where she could take a leadership role.

For Thao, it's been an opportunity to confront apprehensions about whether college would be worthwhile and if he was cut out for it.

"There's always rumors that Asians are smart, they're on top of things, they're going to graduate from college," he said. "But we all struggle."

Thao said he often felt isolated in the mostly black and Latino Sacramento neighborhood where he grew up. Being a part of an Asian community for the first time has made transitioning from high school to college much easier.

"I was pretty bedazzled" arriving at Sacramento State, he said. "I was afraid, because I was here by myself. I'm not afraid anymore."

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