

Unseen Challenges: How Invisible Disabilities Shape College Engagement Among Asian American Students

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We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

Access and Inclusion

and

Civility and Respect

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Introduction

- Understudied population:
 - Asian college students with invisible disabilities (i.e., mental health & chronic medical conditions - MHCCs)
- Aggregated data across race and disability:
 - Overlooks this population & masks important differences in engagement and support
- **Our study:**
 - **Considers how racism & ableism intersect to shape the experiences of these students**

Background

For students with multiple marginalized identities - systems of power shape how disability, race, belonging, & engagement are recognized within educational institutions

- **Theoretical Framework**
 - DisCrit, Model Minority Myth, & Tinto's Theory of Student Departure
- **Invisible Disabilities** and...
 - Cultural Narratives
 - Social Stigma
 - Racialized Ableism
 - Institutional Structures

Study

Purpose

This study seeks to understand how unique structural and interpersonal barriers impact engagement for Asian American college students with mental health and chronic conditions

Research Questions

1. How do Asian American undergraduate students with mental health and chronic conditions differ from peers with other disabilities and those without disabilities in their perceptions of engaging college environments?
2. How do perceptions of engaging college environments among students with mental health and chronic conditions vary across key demographic characteristics?

Analysis

- Disaggregated data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
 - 37,000+ Asian undergraduates, across 871 institutions, 5,027 with mental health or chronic conditions compared to peers with other disabilities (n = 490) and those without disabilities (n = 32,259)
- Examined four engagement indicators:
 - *Quality of Interactions*
 - *Supportive Environment*
 - *Effective Teaching Practices*
 - *Sense of Belonging*

Key Findings: Engaging Environments Among Asian Students w/MHCCS (1)

Disability Status

- Students without disabilities and those with other disabilities reported significantly higher:
 - *Quality of Interactions*
 - *Supportive Environment*
 - *Effective Teaching Practices*
 - *Sense of Belonging*
- Largest gap: ***Sense of Belonging*** (strongly linked to retention and well-being)

Key Findings: Engaging Environments Among Asian Students w/MHCCS (2)

Within the MHCC Group

- **STEM majors:** lower *Quality of Interactions* and *Sense of Belonging*
- **Seniors:** lower *Supportive Environment*, *Quality of Interactions*, and *Sense of Belonging*
- **Genderqueer/nonbinary students:** lower *Sense of Belonging*
- **Students who did not disclose sexual orientation:** lower *Supportive Environment* and *Sense of Belonging*

- **Women:** higher *Quality of Interactions*
- **Men:** higher *Supportive Environment* ratings
- **Non-LGBQ+ students:** higher *Supportive Environment* and *Sense of Belonging*

Discussion

- Asian American students with MHCCs are **not a monolithic group**
- Engagement outcomes vary by intersecting identities
 - STEM students, gender-diverse students, & students reluctant to disclose sexual orientation appear particularly vulnerable to marginalization and reduced belonging
 - These disparities reflect institutional barriers, not student deficits
- **Findings illuminate how racialized ableism, cultural stigma, & structural exclusion shape educational experiences, especially among genderqueer, LGBTQ+, & STEM-major students**

Implications

Rethinking Engagement for Asian American Students with MHCCs

- Campus climate and mental health tools overlook intersectional realities
- Engagement is co-created and impacted by institutional structures and campus climate
- Current systems overemphasize personal resilience and understate institutional responsibility
- Equity efforts should prioritize: Structural accountability rather than individual resilience

Future Directions

Disaggregate Data

- Intersectional data reveals disparities across ethnicity, disability type, LGBTQ+

Increase Awareness

- Address racialized ableism, cultural stigma, and exclusionary norms

Asset-Based Approaches

- Counter stigma and the Model Minority Stereotype with asset-based frameworks & culturally responsive practices

Inclusive Pedagogy

- Shift from one-size-fits-all accommodations to anticipatory, inclusive design

Activity: Structure

- Fictional case scenario
- Small group discussion
 - Develop strategies
- Whole group
 - Share strategies/takeaways

Maya is a second-year Asian American student at X University majoring in Biology. She is the daughter of immigrants and attended a highly competitive high school where she consistently earned strong grades.

Since arriving at X University, Maya has remained academically successful by most measures. She maintains a GPA above 3.0, attends class regularly, and is involved in a pre-health student organization.

Faculty and staff generally view her as a student who is doing well. However, Maya often feels exhausted and overwhelmed by the demands of college. She needs more time than many of her peers to process complex information, organize assignments, and prepare for exams. She frequently rereads course materials multiple times and spends significantly longer on assignments than classmates.

Although she has occasionally wondered whether some of her challenges might warrant support, she does not identify as disabled and has never sought accommodations. In her family, disability is stigmatized and not discussed, and seeking accommodations feels uncomfortable because she worries it may be a sign that she is not capable enough.

Prompt: *What ideas do you have to make support systems at this institution more inclusive and/or culturally responsive?*

Takeaways

- What ideas did you come up with?
- Do the ideas/strategies seem actionable?
- What steps could you take to implement one strategy at your institution?

Conclusions

Sustainable change requires

- Recognition that engagement is a shared responsibility between students & institutions
- Disaggregated data to enable culturally responsive systems, & identity-affirming support
- Asset-based frameworks that honor cultural values & lived experiences
- Culturally responsive practices & inclusive pedagogy foster engagement & belonging

Select References

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Session Evaluation

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Thank you for attending!

Your feedback helps shape future programming.

