

White Paper

The APIDA Summit on Anti-APIDA and -Asian Racism & Actions for Progress

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Executive Summary

On May 20, 2021, President Joseph Biden signed into law S.937 the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act with broad bipartisan support in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate. The Bill, sponsored by Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI) and Rep. Grace Meng (D-NY) was initiated in response to an increase of anti-Asian American and anti-Asian violence as a result of COVID-19 and has made easier the reporting of hate crimes along with offering greater support for review and record processes from the Department of Justice. S.937 follows Michigan's passage of resolutions condemning anti-Asian hate H.R.0061 (2021) and S.R.0030 (2021). The national organization [StopAAPIHate.org](https://stopaapihate.org) found that 9,081 hate incidents had been reported to the group between March 2020 and June of 2021, with Michigan among the Top 20 States with the largest number of incident reports in the United States. However, current resolutions and legislative responses initiated by the state and federal governments do not provide enough action plans to address the daily challenges experienced by students, faculty, and staff at Michigan State University (MSU). Furthermore, the limited actions taken by MSU administration have perpetuated a campus climate that fails to understand or address the specific needs of the Asian Pacific Desi Islander American/Asian (APIDA/A) community.

APIDA/A faculty, staff, graduate, and undergraduate students across disciplines attended the "Imagining Inclusive Futures" Fall 2021 Summit on APIDA/A Communities at MSU, an inaugural event that helped build and sustain connections among the diverse Asian Pacific Islander Desi American and Asian communities on campus. This White Paper details the problems and proposed university-level actions identified collectively during the Summit. We do so by discussing the unique challenges of the APIDA/A panethnic community, often neglected in the Black-white binary presumed by most of the current discourse around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We also discuss APIDA/A community members' unique encounters with racism and xenophobia and the embedded essentialism when speaking about our multifaceted panethnic community. We also outline the proposed solutions such as creating increased, more nuanced visibility and representation at the university level beyond superficial and tokenized APIDA/A individuals, as well as rethinking the current implementation, pedagogy, and contents of DEI training as they related to engaging *with* the APIDA/A community.

In summary, we urge the university to greatly nuance its understanding, targeting, and outreach to the APIDA/A community, acknowledging that although there is utility in the broader construction of a panethnic coalition, it can be also accompanied by erasure and invisibility of certain groups within APIDA/A community. We also urge the university to engage with domestic and international APIDA/A students, faculty, and staff as multiple parts of a panethnic whole rather than siloed and distinct constituencies. Lastly, we urge the university administration to queer the Black-white binary which positions the APIDA/A community uncomfortably in the Black, Indigenous, people of Color (BIPOC) conversation—a moniker which is largely out of step with the current state of fields doing critical race work.

We hope that this White Paper provides an illumination of the lived realities of APIDA/A students, faculty, and staff at MSU. Amidst a changing and challenging national and international legislative environment, we hope this document serves as a guide for university stakeholders and leadership to more comprehensively and substantively support this diverse and growing community on our campus and make MSU a leader in the Midwest in creating a safe space for the APIDA/A panethnic community.

Contexts of Summit

The Asian Pacific Islander Desi American/Asian or APIDA/A summit, titled “Imagining Inclusive Futures,” sought to bring together Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) and Asian (A) communities at Michigan State University (MSU) to create a blueprint for building an anti-racist culture and climate as they relate specifically to the safety and well-being of APIDA/A faculty, staff, and students. Though anti-APIDA/A racism has deep roots in history, racist expressions and violence have intensified since February 2020 with the rising culture of fear and hate amid the coronavirus pandemic. Many APIDA/A staff, students, and faculty have been subjected to hurtful comments and actions by peers and colleagues at MSU, where there is already an unsustainable relationship between APIDA/A communities and MSU administration. This summit was invitation-only due to the fear of privacy violation and potential retaliation if it were open to the public given previous public reactions to events such as the Anti-Asian Violence Town Hall on March 25, 2021, and the Community Vigil on March 30, 2021. Some of these reactions were disruptive, threatening, and hurtful. Those who were invited to the summit were APIDA/A staff, faculty, and student leaders who have been active in APIDA/A community-related issues. The APIDA/A summit resulted in APIDA/A community members coming together to share concerns and express their demands that MSU leadership play a more proactive role in supporting the APIDA/A communities.

Discussion Questions and Summary

In the Summit, we facilitated several discussion sessions for participants. First, we presented a short video about key concepts related to racism and xenophobia against APIDA/As, such as “Yellow Peril,” the “Model Minority,” “Perpetual Foreigner,” and “China Virus,” followed by a brief Q&As. Second, four members of the APIDA/A community shared their experiences as racialized minorities at MSU, especially as these experiences relate to the key concepts discussed in the video. Thirdly, we asked questions (see Appendix B) that sought to get to the heart of the unique confrontations with racism and xenophobia that the APIDA/A community members experience. Questions were organized into three sections (1) Questions that prompt a discussion of systemic/institutional issues in higher education that are related to racism/xenophobia/climate and negatively affect APIDA/A students, staff, and faculty; (2) Questions that prompt a discussion of what a fully inclusive and equitable MSU would be like for APIDA/A students, staff, and faculty; and (3) Questions that prompt a discussion of possible steps to change/action items for MSU. The discussion that these questions prompted guided the recommendations we offer below based on the challenges and possible solutions identified in the course of the summit by participants from across campus.

Group discussion posters (big Post-Its) capturing the outputs of the conversations were collected after the Summit, and among the various groups, there was a substantial consensus about how MSU can better support APIDA/A communities. Many groups spoke on MSU’s need to change their language and terminology to be more responsive to and inclusive of APIDA/A communities’ cultural multidimensionality, as well as a desire to disaggregate data to truly showcase the diversity of panethnic communities without sacrificing the unity of the panethnic coalition. In response to the questions about how they imagine an inclusive future for APIDA/A communities at MSU, many participants spoke of the need for MSU leadership to more forcefully acknowledge the diversity within APIDA/A communities, to include APIDA/A

student, faculty, and staff in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, to remedy the lack of representation in senior administrative positions by more clearly recognizing and reducing systemic/systematic oppression that affect APIDA/A communities, and to openly commit to non-retaliation if APIDA/A individuals speak up. Many participants also spoke of generational differences, the different experiences APIDA/A folx have based on other intersectional identities, and the harm done by the perpetuation of the model minority myth. Some solutions proposed were inclusion in DEI training, disaggregation of data, creating resources for APIDA/A faculty, staff, and students, as well as organizing MSU-wide cultural events while championing the support for and promotion of ethnic studies programs and APIDA/A representation in higher administration.

Challenges and Proposed Solutions

Knowledge and Attitude

1. Existing knowledge gaps about the uniqueness of racism faced by APIDA/A Community compared to other BIPOC communities

When we are building solidarity with Black communities and other marginalized communities on campus, it is necessary to be aware of how APIDA/A challenges are both similar to and different from challenges that other communities of Color face. In order to create and communicate the awareness, it is important to collect evidence and validate the experience faced by different communities impacted by covert and overt racism, such as racism that takes the forms of the model minority and forever foreigner tropes. To help MSU better understand how APIDA/A challenges are similar or different from others, APIDA/A community members need to be provided a platform—panels, workshops, and symposiums etc.—to share out their needs and concerns on campus. Such platform needs to be provided at multiple levels—not only by ethnic studies or international studies programs, but also by the colleges and the University.

2. Existing knowledge gaps about multiple diversities within the APIDA/A community leading to the essentialization of APIDA/A identity

When we are building an empowering campus climate, we should be aware of whose voice is being left out under the label of APIDA/A identity. It is easy for those who are not familiar with APIDA/A communities to adopt a homogeneous and simplistic view, perhaps thinking that they are all Asians who share Asian background. And yet, ample data indicate that South and East Asians and Asian Americans, as well as international students from all parts of Asia, face unique challenges, ranging from cultural and language barriers to a lack of support for them to engage in social justice discourse and to gain a sense of belonging to the APIDA/A panethnic community. To respond to these challenges, MSU leadership needs to center the community members' voices and counter-voices, especially by 1) creating affinity spaces on campus, by 2) developing curriculum (in close consultation with APIDA/A community members who participate in these affinity spaces) to develop antiracist foundations trainings more attentive to diverse APIDA/A experiences, and by 3) implementing DEI education requirement for undergraduate students. This requirement can take the form of certificate or minor, in which students may serve as DEI educators or ambassadors for their peers across the campus.

3. Existing knowledge gaps about the different experiences of racism faced by different APIDA/A groups on campus (faculty, staff, and students)

It is important to recognize that issues faced by faculty may differ from those experienced by undergraduate, graduate, postdoctoral students, and staff members, especially at a predominantly white institution such as MSU. Faculty of Color, for example, are chronically rated lower in instructor evaluations and subject to student critiques of “Asian accent,” staff members experience harassment, racist remarks, and gaslighting, and students are routinely micro-aggressed over language, cultural, and citizenship barriers in classroom, hallway, and residential halls. Within the student population, for another, undergraduates and graduates experience radically different levels of administrative support for creating purposeful communities such as those created through registered student organizations (RSOs). The isolating impacts thereof are amplified by the small size of graduate—especially doctoral—programs, which often default to the colleges and departments to enhance community-building programming. For faculty, summit participants identified several areas in which tenure and promotion are largely subject to white senior faculty who devalue APIDA/A faculty. Indeed, some faculty participants mentioned the challenge of having a senior colleague who has exhibited micro-aggression toward APIDA/A persons on their Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure (RPT) committees. All of this indicate a need for more deliberate, targeted, and nuanced support for APIDA/A success from MSU leadership, which pays attention to different needs of students, staff, and faculty.

4. Weak solidarity with ongoing, Black-led anti-racist work

Summit participants highlighted a need to build a campus climate that is empowering for APIDA/A communities while also rejecting the implied competition between communities of Color for visibility. This composite need makes it all the more critical that we stand in solidarity with Black-led civil rights activism and leadership on campus as we continue to build an empowering environment for APIDA/A communities that centers our panethnic community’s unique challenges. To reiterate: when fighting for an equitable and safe education experience at MSU, it is important for marginalized communities to support other marginalized communities rather than enhancing division and separation. To accomplish this goal, MSU leadership needs to more explicitly recognize and offer resources to the multiple layers of coalition-building (within the APIDA/A community and between communities of Color) that require ongoing negotiation, education, and understanding. By going beyond “Black History Month,” “AAPI Heritage Month,” “LGBTQ History Month” etc. celebrations, which are important but can also give an unfortunate impression of old-school, siloed DEI effort especially if not paired with a longer-term, sustained community support, MSU leadership can become a leader in DEI by more intentionally supporting inter- and intra-community alliance and advocacy-building.

Structural and Organizational Resources

1. Weak emphasis on addressing issues faced by APIDA/A community within current DEI strategies and work

Participants provided critical and constructive feedback on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Foundations online education program that was launched by MSU. The program needs to acknowledge various forms of racism, including those that APIDA/A faculty, staff, and students face on campus. At the same time, DEI training needs to avoid the essentialist and simplistic stance when it refers to the APIDA/A community. The current DEI Foundation falls

short on both accounts. It is critical to unpack the power dynamics and diversity under the label of APIDA/A identity, instead of folding them into a vague, thus weak, representation of APIDA/A communities by Asian-looking actors.

2. Lack of or insufficient mainstreaming of DEI awareness and work at the departmental and academic programmatic level

Many Summit participants addressed how DEI hires and strategic documents have become the token solutions for issues of inequity and marginalization, and that DEI work is “ghettoized” as the work of particular units and/or individuals on campus. If certain units or individuals are doing the critical work of DEI, then MSU leadership should make more explicit efforts to better recognize, support, and promote them. Equally important, DEI work needs to be shared by all MSU members, including those in the more privileged group than others. In this regard, it was striking that many Summit participants spoke critically and thoughtfully about their privileges, despite the fact that they are clearly underprivileged because of their race, nationality, and/or culture as APIDA/A persons. Several participants wondered why this kind of self-reflection and recognition of privilege has not been forthcoming from the MSU leadership. All of this suggests a need for a frank, authentic recognition of white privilege from MSU’s white leadership, as such recognition is a critical foundation for all DEI efforts to be more equitably and collegially shared at MSU.

3. Insufficient APIDA/A representation in leadership

Participants addressed a need to incorporate more folx from APIDA/A communities on campus into academic leadership positions. To accomplish this goal, it is important to create institutional and structural support mechanisms that respond to specific issues faced by APIDA/A leaders with specific cultural-insider knowledge. This kind of culturally attuned support is especially urgent as the APIDA/A community rapidly grows in the U.S. Midwest. At this moment, however, the need to center the unique challenges of APIDA/A students, faculty, and staff *in the Midwest* remains a persistent concern because of the concentration of national resources on institutions and organizations on the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts. Rather than following the models of coastal institutions with larger APIDA/A communities (e.g. U.C. Berkeley and Rutgers), we encourage MSU to develop specific and regionally responsive institutional infrastructure which can start by encouraging institutional collaboration between Asian and Asian Pacific American Studies Programs. Such collaboration can provide more spaces for interactions among APIDA/A community members, and for understanding, acknowledging, and celebrating the contributions and assets brought by APIDA/A communities to MSU.

Who even is “Asian [American]”?

We believe that further care needs to be taken at the university level about the terminology used to refer (or speak about) the community of Americans who claim ancestry in places referred to as the “Asia-Pacific” or “Indo-Pacific” regions. Since the onset of the pandemic and with the escalation of the anti-Asian and -Asian American racism, violence, and hatred, social media hashtags like #StopAsianHate and #StopAAPIHate have gone viral as a show of conspicuous visibility to contravene the model minority stereotype that Asian Americans are passive, persevere, and compliant. Yet, these efforts have also shown how Asian Americans are, in fact, a *panethnic* community which “lumps” people from many contexts into a

single label. These different contexts contain radically different regional, cultural, sociolinguistic, and national-political identities. For example, acronyms like AAPI (Asian American & Pacific Islander) lump together two communities that have radically different experiences with colonialism and also ignore South Asians' (Desi, in the case of the APIDA acronym) or Southeast Asians' encounters and experiences with white supremacy and racism that are unique to folx from the Global South.

Part of the issue identified during the Summit is that certain groups may be under- or over-communicated within university-level directives, policy, and communications because of this panethnic lumping. We recommend careful consideration of how the panethnic label "Asian American" or "AAPI" terminology is used, and how it lumps together groups of persons who have radically different experiences. We suggest using the terminology of the "APIDA/A Panethnic Community" in university-level communication to more carefully identify who is the intended subject and/or recipient of these communications. For example, the March 17, 2021, university-level communication, while using roughly appropriate language, did not address the unique challenges international students experience as a result of not consistently knowing the American context of race and racism and, therefore, not being able to speak up about incidents of hate crimes, racial discrimination, or racially-motivated violence.

Post-Summit Survey Results

After the Summit, we conducted a survey to gain a further insight into actionable plans to create a MSU more inclusive of APIDA/A communities (See Appendix D for the list of questions). Although we do not detail every single response here, we list ideas that are repeatedly mentioned by respondents but are not necessarily highlighted in this White Paper so far:

1. There should be financial support for establishing a center or institute that specializes in the study of APIDA/A experiences.
2. MSU should make a better use of the existing APIDA/A faculty, staff, and students' knowledge when creating APIDA/A-related programming or strategic plans.
3. There should be more support for the APIDA/A community to come together more frequently and regularly to build a stronger coalition.
4. A summit like this in the future should involve MSU administrators, certain ethnic groups that appear to be underrepresented at this time (i.e. South Asians, West Asians, and Pacific Islanders), and more men.
5. There should be more space for not only faculty and staff, but also for students to voice their concerns.

An overwhelming majority (83%) of the respondents hope to see a summit like this occur once a year with about the same number of participants (60-70). Many also have voiced a strong desire to focus even more on actionable plans and policy changes, as well as a time dedicated to assessing how MSU has been responding to their suggestions. Respondents also wish to have a time to share APIDA initiatives going on across campus and how we might engage in a range of efforts more collectively.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Definitions

APA = Asian Pacific American
AAPI = Asian American Pacific Islander
AAPIA = Asian American, Pacific Islander American
APIA = Asian Pacific Islander American
APIDA = Asian Pacific Islander Desi American
AAPC = Asian American Panethnic Community
GCAC = Greater Chinese American Community
POC = Person/People of Color
BIPOC = Black Indigenous Person/People of Color
NBPOC = Non-Black Person/People of Color

Appendix B: Discussion Questions

In your small groups, discuss these questions. Your assigned facilitator will help facilitate this discussion. Please record responses/notes on the large Post-It note paper provided. Please also choose one member of your group to “report out” during the next part of the program.

1. Questions that prompt a discussion of systemic/institutional issues in higher education that are related to racism/xenophobia/climate and negatively affect APIDA/A students, staff, and faculty.

- What are some of the challenges that you experience at MSU which you feel are related to systemic problems of inequality? In other words, what are some of your experiences as an APIDA/international Asian faculty or student at MSU where you felt discriminated against or singled out based on your personal characteristics (e.g. foreign/international status, nationality, English language proficiency, linguistic difference, gender, race/ethnicity, and others)?
- What are the root causes of these problems?
- How are these problems related to racism, xenophobia, and hostile climate that APIDA/A people experience in US society (or elsewhere)?

2. Questions that prompt a discussion of what a fully inclusive and equitable MSU would be like for APIDA/A students, staff, and faculty.

- How would you describe an MSU free of the problems of inequality, racism, and xenophobia?
- What are the university’s characteristics in concrete terms if it were free of these problems?

- What impact(s) will it make if MSU is, indeed, free of these problems? Who benefits?

3. Questions that prompt a discussion of possible steps to change/action items for MSU.

- What needs to happen if MSU is to become an institution genuinely inclusive of APIDA/A people?
- Who is responsible for making that happen?
- What do we as individuals and APIDA/A community members need to do to make MSU inclusive of APIDA/As, and how should MSU leadership in different areas support these efforts?

Appendix C: Community Norms

- Be comfortable with being uncomfortable – conversations can be messy and can set off our defenses, but we trust that learning and growing can be a difficult process but the result is worth it. We agree to be open to pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zones.
- Remember to only share our own stories, using “I” statements, and not generalizing about others or speaking for others.
- Be open, supportive and encouraging of oneself and one another.
- Hold ourselves and one another accountable for our words, views and actions.
- Change happens in solidarity with and respect for all marginalized groups, not by reinforcing the marginalization of any groups or identities.
- Dialogue vs Debate; let us discuss for greater understanding instead of winning an argument.
- Be mindful of the space and time, let’s be mindful of the purpose of this event, our own use of space and time, and how we make space and time for others’ voices as well.
- Participants may be sharing personal stories. It is important to keep conversations confidential and respect the comfort levels of all participants.

Appendix D: Post-Summit Survey Questions

1. Among many challenges we discussed during the summit, which one or two struck you as the most urgent challenge(s) that APIDA/A communities at MSU face?
2. Among many solutions we discussed during the summit, which one or two struck you as the most effective solution(s) that APIDA/A communities at MSU should communicate to MSU leaders?
3. Was there anything you wished we spent more time for? Was there anything you wished we spent less time for?
4. Do you hope that a summit like this takes place again? If so, how frequently do you hope to meet?

- Once in a year
- Every other year
- Once in every three year
- Other frequency

5. If a summit like is to take place again, what would be a good size? FYI, the summit drew about 65 people at this time.

- Smaller size (20-30)
- About the same size (60-70)
- Bigger size (100-120)
- Other size

6. If a summit like this is to happen again, should it be invitation-only or open to everyone? FYI, the summit was invitation-only at this time to ensure a balanced representation of diverse identities within APIDA/A community.

- Invitation-only
- Open to any APIDA/A community members
- Open to any MSU members
- Other option

7. Were there any voices missing from or underrepresented in the summit?

8. If a summit like this happens again, should it feature student voices more prominently? Or should there be a student summit apart from a summit for faculty and staff?

- Feature student voices more prominently
- Organize a student summit apart from faculty & staff summit
- Organize a separate summit for each
- Other format

9. Do you have any suggestions for a future summit in terms of its purposes? Do you have anything else that you'd like the planning committee to know?

10. Is there is anything you'd like to get involved in if a summit like this takes place again—planning, participating, presenting, facilitating, and report-writing etc.?

Recent data:

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