Asian American & Pacific Islander Students:

A Snapshot of the 2017 Matriculating Student Class

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Introduction

23

Subgroups within the "AAPI" term

Background

May has been designated as Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage month, as enacted by Congress in 1992.[1] This month-long celebration is designed to honor the rich culture, history, and identities of Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian peoples of America.[2] The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population is not a homogeneous racial and ethnic group. Despite the implied homogeneity of the common "AAPI" label, there are 23 subgroups[3] with diverse and varied cultures and lifestyles included under the "AAPI" umbrella term. Because of the differing cultural, immigrational, and socioeconomic characteristics[4] of these subgroups, the AAPI label represents a vast and richly complex mix of cultures and peoples. Yet, AAPIs do share commonalities, and for the sake of analysis of their experiences, we have grouped them together as one in this report.

This report compares demographic characteristics, pre-PA education financial history, and program attributes that factor into AAPI and non-AAPI PA program matriculants' decisions regarding which PA program to attend. By disaggregating data from the 2017 PAEA Matriculating Student Survey,[5] we can recognize differences and similarities between

racial and ethnic groups to provide a general snapshot of the AAPI matriculating student population in 2017, and to better understand the factors that may influence AAPI students' decisions to enroll in specific PA programs.

Methodology

The Matriculating Student Survey (MSS) collects information from entering PA students with the aim of improving education, recruitment, and retention. During 2017, the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) administered the MSS to 226 PAEA member programs at the beginning of the month that corresponded to when their program matriculated first-year students.[5] Following the identification of duplicate cases, the MSS gathered 4,050 unique responses from 163 programs. Based on program director-reported matriculating class data from the 2017 PAEA Annual Program Survey (N = 9,626 matriculating students),[6] the response rate was estimated at 42.1%.

Definition of Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI)

For the purpose of this report, students who self-identified as Asian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, whether alone or in combination with another race, were classified as "Asian American/ Pacific Islander" (AAPI). In line with the [Association of American Medical College's definition of "underrepresented in medicine](https://),]" non-AAPI students who self-identified as Hispanic, a single non-White race, or a non-White race in combination with White race were classified as "non-AAPI underrepresented minority (URM)." Students who identified as non-Hispanic and single-race White or European American were classified as "non-Hispanic White (NHW)." The category of "All students" is not a summation of all racial and ethnic groups, but rather, refers to all respondents in the sample, including those who self-identified with a certain racial or ethnic group, those who chose not to report their race or ethnicity, and those who chose "Other, please specify" who were not recoded into an existing racial or ethnic category.

Data Editing and Reporting

In general, analyses of the data consisted of producing descriptive statistics on the variables of interest (i.e., percentage, arithmetic mean (*M*), median (*Mdn*), standard deviation (*SD*), range, and percentiles). Data were not reported when there were fewer than five values in a category for sensitive data fields (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, or finance-related questions). For some tables and figures, percentages will not equal 100% due to rounding or when multiple responses were allowed.

Results

Student Demographics

AAPI and non-AAPI URMs represented roughly similar proportions of the 2017 matriculating class.

FIGURE 1. STUDENTS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

11.1%
AAPI

11.8%
NON-AAPI URM

74.6%
NHW
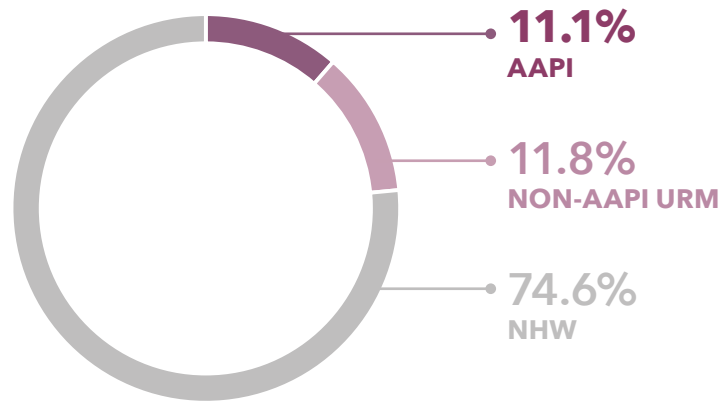
Note: Percentages will not total to 100% because not all students chose to report their race or ethnicity.

TABLE 1. STUDENTS' RACE AND ETHNICITY

AAPI		Non-AAPI URM		NHW		All Students	
n (S)	%	*n* (S)	%	*n* (S)	%	*n* (S)	%
451	11.1	478	11.8	3,021	74.6	4,050	100

TABLE 2. STUDENTS' RACE AND ETHNICITY BY GENDER

	Male		Female	
	n	%	*n*	%
AAPI	108	24.0	342	76.0
Non-AAPI URM	131	27.5	345	72.5
NHW	732	24.3	2,284	75.7
All Students	998	24.8	3,023	75.2

Note: Respondents reporting "Transgender," "Non-binary: Do not exclusively identify as male or female," or "I prefer not to answer" gender-identifying categories are not reported because *n* < 5.

TABLE 3. STUDENT AGES BY RACE

	n	*M*	*SD*	P10	P25	P50 (*Mdn*)	P75	P90
AAPI	443	25.9	4.4	22.0	23.0	25.0	27.0	31.0
Non-AAPI URM	465	27.0	5.3	22.0	24.0	26.0	29.0	34.0
NHW	2,985	25.4	4.8	22.0	23.0	24.0	26.0	31.0
All Students	3,975	25.7	4.9	22.0	23.0	24.0	27.0	31.0

Note: Respondents reported their age at entrance into the professional phase of their PA program.

Figure 1 displays the racial and ethnic distribution of matriculants. Non-Hispanic White students make up approximately three-quarters of the total population, of which a majority identified as female. As illustrated in **Table 2**, although there do not appear to be striking gender differences across groups, non-AAPI URM students have a slightly greater male representation. The average age at matriculation of AAPI students and NHW students is comparable to the average age at matriculation reported by all first-year PA students (see **Table 3**). On average, non-AAPI URMs reported to be a year or more older than all of the other racial groups.

Graphic Distribution of AAPI Students

TABLE 4. DISTRIBUTION OF RACIAL GROUPS ACROSS U.S. CENSUS REGIONS

	AAPI		Non-AAPI URM		NHW		All Students	
	n (S)	%	n (S)	%	n (S)	%	n (S)	%
Northeast Region								
New England Division	39	8.7	31	6.5	281	9.3	364	9.0
Middle Atlantic Division	93	20.7	85	17.8	629	20.9	833	20.6
Subtotal	132	29.3	116	24.3	910	30.2	1,197	29.6
Midwest Region								
East North Central Division	53	11.8	40	8.4	501	16.6	608	15.0
West North Central Division	16	3.6	20	4.2	206	6.8	247	6.1
Subtotal	69	15.3	60	12.6	707	23.4	855	21.2
South Region								
South Atlantic Division	107	23.8	127	26.6	689	22.8	934	23.1
East South Central Division	25	5.6	12	2.5	180	6.0	219	5.4
West South Central Division	27	6.0	70	14.7	214	7.1	323	8.0
Subtotal	159	35.3	209	43.8	1,083	35.9	1,476	36.5
West Region								
Mountain Division	25	5.6	49	10.3	176	5.8	259	6.4
Pacific Division	65	14.4	43	9.0	140	4.6	254	6.3
Subtotal	90	20.0	92	19.3	316	10.5	513	12.7
Total	**450**	**100.0**	**477**	**100.0**	**3,016**	**100.0**	**4,041**	**100.0**

FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF RACIAL GROUPS ACROSS U.S. CENSUS REGIONS

AAPI — HIGHEST % / LOWEST %
West 20.0%, Midwest 15.3%, Northeast 29.3%, South 35.3%

Non-AAPI URM
West 19.3%, Midwest 12.6%, Northeast 24.3%, South 43.8%

NHW
West 10.5%, Midwest 23.4%, Northeast 30.2%, South 35.9%

All Students
West 12.7%, Midwest 21.2%, Northeast 29.6%, South 36.5%
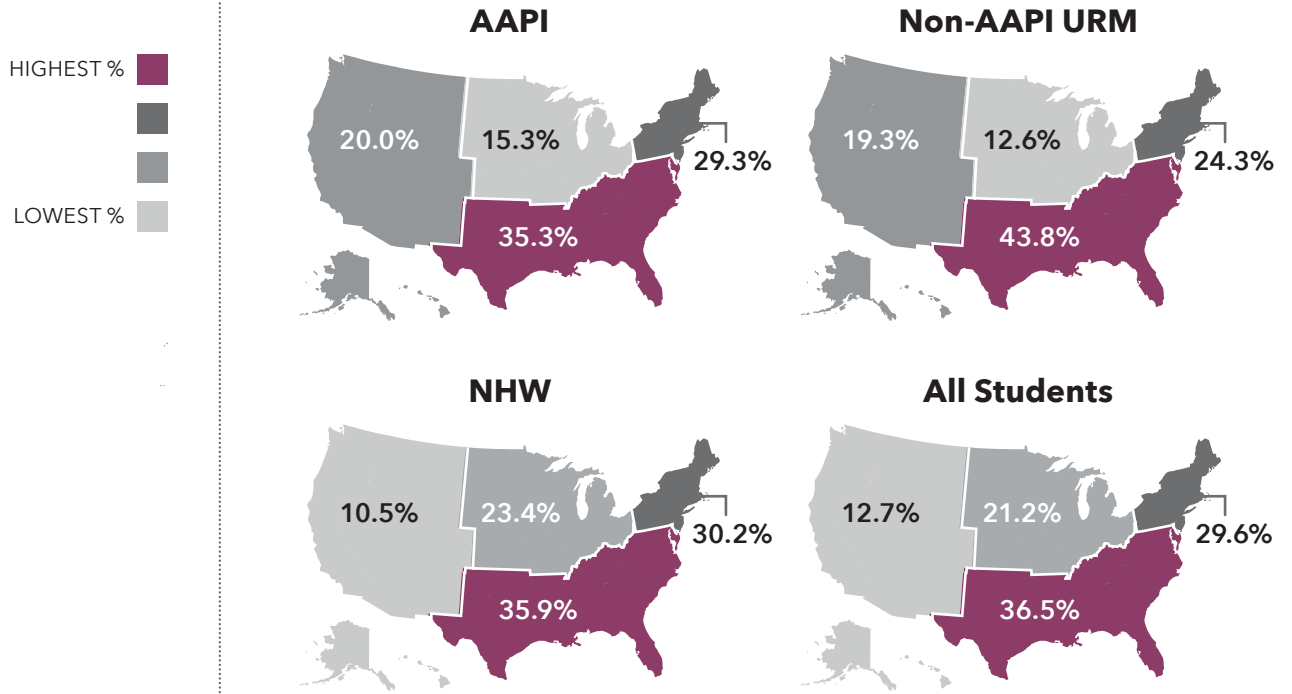
TABLE 5. REPRESENTATION OF ETHNIC AND RACIAL GROUPS WITHIN U.S. CENSUS REGIONS AND DIVISIONS

	West Region						Northeast Region						South Region								Midwest Region					
	Mountain Division		Pacific Division		Total Region		New England Division		Middle Atlantic Division		Total Region		South Atlantic Division		E South Central Division		W South Central Division		Total Region		E North Central Division		W North Central Division		Total Region	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
AAPI	25	9.7	65	25.6	90	17.5	39	10.7	93	11.2	132	11.0	107	11.5	25	11.4	27	8.4	159	49.2	53	8.7	16	6.5	69	8.1
Non-AAPI URM	49	18.9	43	16.9	92	17.9	31	8.5	85	10.2	116	9.7	127	13.6	12	5.5	70	21.7	209	64.7	40	6.6	20	8.1	60	7.0
NHW	176	68.0	140	55.1	316	61.6	281	77.2	629	75.5	910	76.0	689	73.8	180	82.2	214	66.3	1,083	335.3	501	82.4	206	83.4	707	82.7

AAPI
Non-AAPI URM
NHW
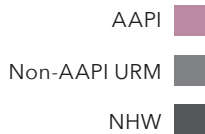
Table 4 shows the distribution of racial groups across U.S. census regions and divisions,[7] while **Figure 2** serves as a graphic depiction of racial distribution across U.S. regions. Of all census divisions, the South Atlantic Division of the South Region has the largest percentage and highest total number of AAPI students.

Table 5 depicts the representation of AAPI, non-AAPI URM, and NHW students within each region and division.[7] Out of all students attending school in the most populated census division, the South Atlantic Division, AAPI students make up slightly more than 10% of the student population. While significantly fewer students attend PA school in the Pacific Division than in the South Atlantic Division, the Pacific Division holds the largest percentage of AAPI students out of all U.S. Census divisions.

Educational Loans

TABLE 6. OUTSTANDING EDUCATIONAL LOANS FOR COLLEGE/PRE-PA EDUCATION

	n	%
Yes, educational loans		
AAPI	160	38.3
Non-AAPI URM	243	55.2
NHW	1,368	48.0
All Students	1,811	47.9
No		
AAPI	258	61.7
Non-AAPI URM	197	44.8
NHW	1,483	52.0
All Students	1,967	52.1
Total	3,778	100.00

TABLE 7. OUTSTANDING EDUCATIONAL LOANS FOR COLLEGE/PRE-PA EDUCATION

	n	*M*	*M* (T)	*SD*	P10	P25	P50 (*Mdn*)	P75	P90
AAPI	110	27,340	27,094	24,503	5,500	10,750	20,000	30,000	60,000
Non-AAPI URM	157	32,073	32,073	27,917	5,000	10,150	28,000	40,000	65,000
NHW	1,004	30,939	30,817	27,907	6,600	14,000	25,000	38,000	60,000
All Students	1,299	31,534	27,919	34,912	6,000	14,000	25,000	38,000	60,000

Note: "M (T)" refers to the trimmed mean, or the mean when the top and bottom 10% of values are removed.

TABLE 8. AMOUNT OF OUTSTANDING EDUCATIONAL LOANS FOR COLLEGE/PRE-PA EDUCATION (RANGES)

	AAPI			Non-AAPI URM			NHW			All Students		
	n	%	% (Cum.)	*n*	%	% (Cum.)	n	%	% (Cum.)	n	%	% (Cum.)
$1 – $24,999	78	49.4	49.4	95	39.7	39.7	608	45.1	45.1	797	44.7	44.7
$25,000 – $49,999	46	29.1	78.5	91	38.1	77.8	481	35.7	80.8	632	35.5	80.2
$50,000 – $74,999	21	13.3	91.8	24	10.0	87.9	154	11.4	92.3	204	11.4	91.6
$75,000 – $99,999	6	3.8	95.6	11	4.6	92.5	54	4.0	96.3	73	4.1	95.7
$100,000 – $124,999	5	3.2	98.7	8	3.3	95.8	31	2.3	98.6	45	2.5	98.3
$125,000 – $149,999	NR	NR	99.4	8	3.3	99.2	5	0.4	99.0	14	0.8	99.0
$150,000 – $174,999	NR	NR	100.0	NR	NR	99.6	8	0.6	99.6	10	0.6	99.6
$175,000 or more	NR	NR	100.0	NR	NR	100.0	6	0.5	100.0	7	0.4	100.0
Total	158	100.0	100.0	239	100.0	100.0	1,347	100.0	100.0	1,782	100.0	100

Note: "% (Cum.)" refers to the cumulative percentage of respondents.

As shown in **Table 6**, slightly fewer than half of all students reported having outstanding college/pre-PA educational loans. When disaggregated by racial/ethnic group, more than half of non-AAPI URM students reported outstanding college/pre-PA educational loans. Compared to the percentage of non-AAPI URM students and NHW students reporting outstanding college/pre-PA educational loans, the percentage of AAPI students reporting outstanding educational loans was much lower. Moreover, as shown in **Table 7**, AAPI students reported the smallest average amount of loans when compared to non-AAPI URM and NHW students.

Importance of Program Attributes Influencing AAPIs' Decision to Attend Current PA Program

FIGURE 3. TOP 5 MOST IMPORTANT PROGRAM ATTRIBUTES IN DECIDING TO ATTEND CURRENT PA PROGRAM, BY RACE
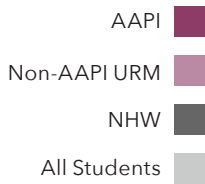
	AAPI	Non-AAPI URM		NHW	All Students
Most Important	High PANCE pass rates	Many opportunities to gain clinical experiences (e.g., rotations)	Good program reputation	Many opportunities to gain clinical experiences (e.g., rotations)	Many opportunities to gain clinical experiences (e.g., rotations)
	Good program reputation	High PANCE pass rates		High PANCE pass rates	High PANCE pass rates
	Many opportunities to gain clinical experiences (e.g., rotations)	Good faculty reputation		Good program reputation	Good program reputation
	Good faculty reputation	Program mission consistent with personal values		Good faculty reputation	Good faculty reputation
	Quality program facilities	Quality program facilities		Quality program facilities	Quality program facilities

Note: Respondents were asked to rate 16 attributes on a 5-point scale (1 = "Did not consider" to 5 = "Did consider: very important or essential") relating to their decision to attend their current PA program.

Non-AAPI URM students reported both "many opportunities to gain clinical experiences (e.g., rotations)" (85.0%) and "good program reputation" (85.0%) as the most important program attributes in deciding to attend their current PA program.

Figure 3 displays the top five attributes most frequently rated as "very important" or "essential" by each racial group. While the top five attributes determined by each group were similar, there were some minor differences by racial group. For example, AAPI students were the only group to identify "high PANCE pass rates" as their number one pick for "very important or essential" program attribute.

AAPI

Non-AAPI URM

NHW

All Students

FIGURE 4. IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT BODY DIVERSITY IN DECIDING WHICH PA PROGRAM TO ATTEND

Percentage of students (%)
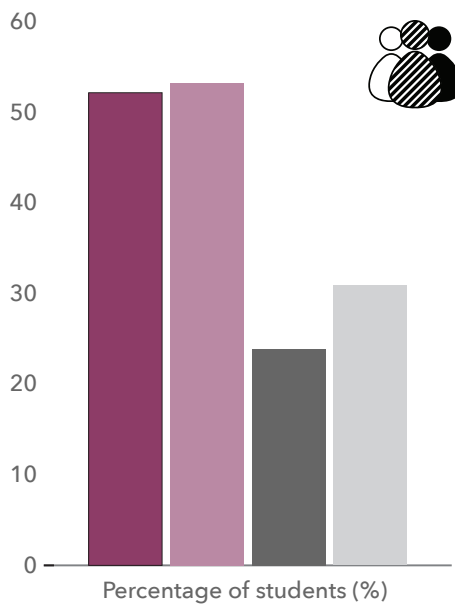
FIGURE 5. IMPORTANCE OF FACULTY DIVERSITY IN DECIDING WHICH PA PROGRAM TO ATTEND

Percentage of students (%)
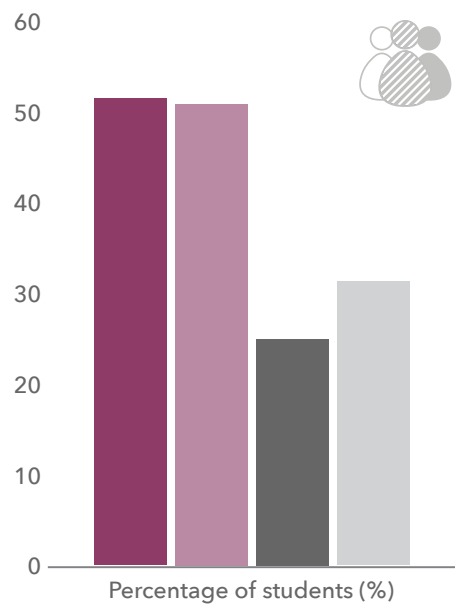
If we dig deeper into the rating patterns of attributes, we notice some interesting differences between racial groups. **Figures 4 and 5** display two of the most significant differences between student racial and ethnic groups. Compared to fewer than half of all students, a majority of AAPI and non-AAPI URM students selected a "diverse student body" and a "diverse faculty" as "very important or essential" to their choice of a current program. Meanwhile, just under a quarter of NHWs reported a similar response. This finding is compelling, as the data suggest that diversity and the recognition of a diverse student body play an important role in the decision to attend a PA program for both AAPI and non-AAPI URM students in a way that is incomparable to their NHW classmates.

Future Practice Environments

TABLE 9. LIKELIHOOD OF WORKING IN A MEDICALLY UNDERSERVED AREA (MUA) AFTER GRADUATION

	Very unlikely		Neither likely nor unlikely		Very likely	
	n	%	*n*	%	n	%
AAPI	31	7.2	116	26.9	284	65.9
Non-AAPI URM	28	6.3	76	17.0	342	76.7
NHW	276	9.5	839	28.8	1,802	61.8
All Students	338	8.7	1,046	27.0	2,483	64.2

TABLE 10. DESIRABILITY OF PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT AFTER GRADUATION (%)

	AAPI	Non-AAPI URM	NHW	All Students
Urban	81.0	73.0	69.8	71.5
Rural	39.4	45.9	49.3	48.0
Inner city	53.3	54.0	35.7	40.1
Military base	24.8	28.6	24.6	25.2
Federal/State prison	7.8	10.4	8.5	8.7
Native American/American Indian reservation	19.4	28.2	17.9	19.6
Veterans Affairs (VA)	32.5	39.9	30.4	31.7
Overseas	38.4	45.6	39.9	40.6
Suburban	79.9	76.5	80.1	79.5

Urban

AAPI most desirable practice environment
81.0%

Suburban

Non-AAPI URM most desirable practice environment
76.5%

Suburban

NHW most desirable practice environment
80.1%

Table 9 presents the results of PA program matriculants' ratings of the desirability of practicing in nine different environments after graduating from their PA program. In a follow-up question, they were asked about the likelihood of choosing to work in a medically underserved community. **Table 10** shows that almost two-thirds of all students reported that, upon graduation, they believe they would be "very likely" to choose to work in a medically underserved community.

Although nearly two-thirds of students reported that working in a medically underserved area after graduation was "very likely," a more complex picture emerges when we examine which environments students identified as the most desirable for future practice. For instance, the environments most frequently categorized as "desirable" by all racial groups were "suburban" and "urban" environments. Meanwhile, "inner city" was ranked as the fifth most desirable environment by all students, with a nearly 20% gap between the percentage of AAPIs and non-AAPI URMs versus NHW students who listed "inner city" as desirable. Additionally, fewer than half of all students reported that practicing in a rural environment after graduation would be desirable, compared to nearly 10% fewer AAPI students.

Conclusion

The disaggregated data presented in this report aim to take a closer look at the similarities and differences in experiences and backgrounds of the PA matriculant population through the lens of race and ethnicity, with a special focus on AAPI matriculants. This lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how PA students make their decision about which PA program to attend and where to practice in the future—factors critical to increasing PA student diversity and addressing health system needs and professional distribution. Although the intention of this report is to give narrative to the responses of AAPI matriculant students (the Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian populations), they should not simply be generalized as a singular race and ethnic population. Programs should consider these data on the key differences and similarities between racial and ethnic groups, among many other factors, when interpreting the experiences of their students and the decision-making processes of applicants in the swiftly changing and growing field of PA education.

References

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