

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

THAI-HUY NGUYEN

By Pearl Lo



Thai-Huy Nguyen emanates an infectious enthusiasm about higher education, more specifically Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Thai is a Southern California native who has published a great deal of work about promoting equity in higher education through MSIs. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and was recently working as a tenured associate professor at Seattle University. Currently, he works with the Rand Corporation as a policy researcher.

Even though Nguyen has accomplished much in the field of higher education research, he did not always know that he wanted to pursue research in higher education. Thai started off working as a consultant for a financial firm. He did not find that work to be fulfilling and moved on to work at the business school of his alma mater where he found that he enjoyed learning more about higher education, while also posing critical questions about why certain things in higher ed. are the way they are. Thus, Thai decided to pursue his Ph.D. in Higher Education, earning tenure at Seattle University, to eventually become a professor and then a policy researcher.

Thai's transition into higher education seems straightforward, but like a fairytale, it was guided along the way by key stakeholders like Marybeth Gasman, Thai's doctoral advisor while at Penn. Thai credits Marybeth with exposing him to a lot of information about MSIs. He recalls only vaguely knowing about HBCUs when he came to Penn and that he was not initially interested in them. Instead, he had academic pursuits of researching Asian American history within higher education. But the more he was exposed to MSIs, he realized that they were ultimately places where students with marginalized communities could foster a sense of belonging. Nguyen greatly resonated with that notion as someone who struggled to fit in when he was an undergraduate. He grew to see MSIs as a pillar of providing learning at an institution where students feel as though they belong and are represented. Thai wonders what a college would look like if higher education could be reimagined based on the relationship between MSIs and racial inequality.

While Thai acknowledges the many benefits of MSIs, he is aware of the challenges they face as well. There are many different designations a school can have to be considered an MSI, and he asks out loud what those designations actually mean for the students. If a school is designated as an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI), what does that mean for the rest of their students who do not fall within this community? Thai asks if the mission of the school then changes, what changes overall can a student expect to encounter.

The identities of schools get even more complex when schools are designated as multiple MSIs. Thai explains how having multiple designations usually results in the school only getting funding for one designation, which can have an adverse effect on the student whose identity group is not represented in funding. Thai believes that this creates political tensions between these racial groups, but also that it can make certain students feel further marginalized. To combat some of these struggles, Thai emphasizes that institutions need to figure out their organizational identity

<https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/content/msi-oral-history-project>

and really advance their mission to prioritize their students when they know what that is.

Despite some challenges that MSIs face, Thai believes they are integral in what they offer to students. He expresses that MSIs engage upward social mobility in under-resourced student populations because students feel like they belong, which instigates their success. Thai gives examples where students of color are often discouraged at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) because their standards of success are based on White cultural norms. Yet MSIs exist to break that detrimental stratification in higher education and serves to promote achievement for minoritized student populations. He believes that students will succeed when they are learning in spaces that promote their growth by creating this sense of belonging.

From the way Thai puts it, MSIs sound like profound institutions of learning. Yet he notes that there is always work to be done within the institutions to continue to best serve their students. A possible solution to get more students enrolled at MSIs, Thai proposes, is for administrators to listen to the different departments that are successfully implementing this inclusive environment. Even if a school is considered to be inclusive, there are certainly spaces that are more supportive than others, and Thai stresses the importance of learning from divisions within one's own institution. This creates a common goal of identity and unification for the achievements of their students. Additionally, this sets the stage for potential collaborations between different divisions on campus so that students can feel an encompassing sense of belonging in all aspects of student culture and life.

From his own personal experiences, Thai expresses the struggles he faced because of certain misconceptions that people had about him, especially in terms of him being an Asian American student. Nguyen works tirelessly to dispel the "model minority myth" that enforced a harmful and detrimental learning environment for him in college. His family members were refugees from the Vietnam War and he grew up very poor. His family did not speak English and practitioners at his undergraduate institution did not understand why he could not just fit in with everyone else and succeed. Through his research, Thai understands the importance of student affairs practitioners having more inclusive mindsets so all students are adequately supported.

Because of his college experiences, Thai finds it very rewarding to meet with different people involved with MSIs. Despite his negative experience in college, he really appreciates seeing that administrators, faculty, and practitioners at schools are trying to change for the better. Thai notes that people are getting more intentional and sensitive to racism and homophobia. Students' identities are being affirmed on campuses, which is a rewarding experience for him as a researcher.

Additionally, Thai urges the roles that institutions must take on for their students. In the case of community colleges, Thai mentions how Amazon's presence in Seattle has resulted in a series of actions that have been detrimental for under-resourced students. While some of these changes may be out of the institution's control, he still urges the need for colleges to have stronger relationships with nearby agencies because these institutions are the places where students can receive an education that every individual in the country should have access to.

However, Thai is by no means saying that all students of color need to go to MSIs. That would defeat the purpose by re-segregating institutions of higher learning. Rather, Thai emphasizes the need to get PWIs to implement what MSIs are doing to better support their own minoritized student populations.

On a concluding note, Thai shares his views on the role of Asian Americans in the country and in higher education. Asian Americans currently fall into a gray area where they face oppression on a daily basis, yet are still much more privileged as a demographic than their Black and brown peers. However, we all know how detrimental this can be to Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, particularly those of Southeast Asian descent, who do not fall under the standard metrics of success.

Supporting these students, and all students, is integral to promoting equity in higher education. Thai recommends teaching others about the history of Asian Americans in this country and why it is harmful to perpetuate these false beliefs. He extends further by adding that only educating others will help to eradicate this tool that dominant groups have used to maintain control and create divisive environments for people of color.

Thai-Huy Nguyen is a fiery scholar who strives to improve educational equity. His work on researching Minority Serving Institutions has been integral in providing recommendations on how all institutions can alter their practices to better support student populations of color. He draws from his personal experiences to spark his passion for selflessly creating more inclusive spaces for students. Nguyen is an exemplary model of a scholar in academia who is using their resources to initiate change in the world.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.