

Telling Our Story: The Impact of Community on Leadership among AANHPI Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth

SUMMARY:

There is minimal research exploring identity and leadership, particularly for girls and gender-expansive youth of color. *Why We Lead: Understanding and Supporting the Leadership of AANHPI Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth*, a Girls Leadership National Study, is the first study of its kind to explore the experiences and relationships between identity, community, and leadership of Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) girls and gender-expansive youth in the United States. Over the past 1.5 years, members of the Youth Research Council—a group of 17 AANHPI youth from across the U.S.—were facilitated by Girls Leadership and Evaluation Studio¹ to conduct the qualitative component of *Why We Lead*. Our Youth Participatory Action Research study captured in-depth insights into how AANHPI youth understand leadership through interviews and a photovoice project. This policy brief outlines key recommendations and actions that educators and policymakers can take to support and cultivate leadership potential within AANHPI youth based on our findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Disaggregate AANHPI data to better understand specific community needs.
2. Improve curricula to accurately reflect AANHPI history and communities.
3. Establish ethnic studies and modern world history requirements for graduation.
4. Ensure teachers are trained on AANHPI histories, cultures, and experiences.
5. Increase AANHPI educators and staff.
6. Increase AANHPI-centered spaces.

BACKGROUND:

“Not always feeling like you belong in the room or not always feeling like you deserve to be in a space I think is something in a lot of different Asian American/Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander people, at least those who I've interacted with, feel and experience.”

- Participant 26

Research shows an underrepresentation of AANHPI individuals and women in leadership positions in government and corporate companies. As we heard from Participant 13, AANHPI women face combined systemic disadvantages due to both gender and race: “It’s not really a woman’s place to lead in the Samoan community, not in this way, not professionally or career-wise.” The intersectional interplay of additional identities, such as ethnicity, immigration status, age, health, income, and sexual orientation, also shape AANHPI women’s experiences in the context of leadership. The impacts of these intersections on leadership can be especially complicated for AANHPI gender-expansive folks, such as agender and transgender youth. There is an even greater need for research for gender-expansive youth, so we expanded our research to include their experiences.

As a starting point to understand the experiences of AANHPI girls’ and gender-expansive youth in the United States, a national survey was distributed online, asking respondents a variety of questions to better understand their lives, experiences with leadership, and racial identities. Using the survey data, we invited participants to submit photovoice entries and interviews to empower participants to tell their own stories and create a fuller perspective of their experiences.

¹ In January 2024, Evaluation Studio integrated with Alliance for Girls to expand on research opportunities.

Our study included AANHPI girls and gender-expansive youth from ages 14-22 years old from urban, suburban, and rural communities ranging across immigrant generations and the United States.

FINDINGS:

Participants' views on leadership ultimately coalesced into two areas that overlap: leadership as a more individual, initiative-based quality, and leadership as a collectivist, community-minded quality. Our researchers noted six overall themes of Collectivism, Unity/Uplifting of the Community, Initiative, Humility/Listening, Inspiring, and Self-Empowerment. Participants identified individual competence and determination as factors of leadership but emphasized that leadership is rooted in community and involves having a responsibility to the community they represent rather than having a responsibility to themselves. A community-minded leader supports their people without overshadowing them, not speaking for others but on behalf of others.

One of our participants articulated that community is “a home where you feel like you can be yourself.” To some, this community is a physical place, like a school or an ethnic enclave such as Chinatown, but most agree that community, whether a physical place or a figurative space, is where you feel safe, cared for, and supported. We found that communities are made by people who relate to each other by virtue of growing up in the same place, having common interests, and developing the same values; and thus can be spoken to openly, depended on, and trusted.

Ultimately, leadership is rooted in community, and community can grow through leadership. In contrast to traditional or presumed definitions of leadership, participants' definition is that leadership is not prescribed for one type of person, but can be held by anyone with effort, empathy, and dedication to the people they lead.

Communities are both support systems to foster leadership and spaces that can thrive with the leaders who nurture them. Leaders and the community have a symbiotic relationship, in which leaders are shaped by their community, and give back to their community in return.

RECOMMENDATIONS EXPLAINED:

To cultivate communities where AANHPI girls and gender-expansive youth can be leaders, we need to address structural barriers and make resources and support accessible, especially for youth from low-income and immigrant backgrounds. This can be accomplished by addressing falsehoods like the model minority myth and the self-sufficiency stereotype with education and storytelling; creating opportunities for youth to participate in leadership spaces such as conferences and advisory boards; recognizing the individual expertise of youth; and identifying and leveraging existing work on AANHPI education.

Empowering AANHPI youth as leaders ensures their voices are heard and fosters future generations of advocates for their communities. We outline specific actions that educational institutions can take to achieve this.

1. Disaggregate AANHPI Data:

- Mandate the disaggregation² of AANHPI (Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander) data in all relevant surveys, censuses, and research efforts to better understand the unique needs and challenges of different AANHPI communities.
- Allocate resources to support data collection efforts that capture the diversity within the AANHPI population, including language, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and other relevant factors.

²Data disaggregation is the collection and reporting of data by detailed [AANHPI] subgroups (Data Disaggregation Deconstructed: AANHPI Communities, Malloy & Minnis, 2022).

Why is this needed:

Many participants noted the negative impacts of having their individual identities and needs erased in leadership and school settings. Disaggregated data allows policymakers and educators to combat stereotypes and ensure policies and programs address the specific needs and experiences of different AANHPI communities.

2. Improve Curricula:

- Revise U.S. history, modern world history, and ethnic studies curricula to include comprehensive coverage of AANHPI history, contributions, and experiences.
- Incorporate local and state AANHPI history into K-12 public school curricula, ensuring that students learn about the specific histories and experiences of AANHPI communities in their region.

Why is this needed:

"I'm currently a student intern for this program called 'Yes Means Yes' on my campus, which is this program centered around positive sexuality...One of the main reasons...I decided to take that leadership role is because a lot of what we talk about is...fetishization of communities. That's pushed me to be this leader who can encourage other people to talk about it and can create that space where people feel comfortable to talk about it."

- Participant 7

A well-rounded education requires understanding the diverse contributions of AANHPI communities to American and global history. Many current curricula overlook the contributions and experiences of AANHPI communities. Improving curricula to be more inclusive would empower AANHPI students, help foster a sense of belonging, and increase cultural competency for all students.

3. Graduation Requirements:

- Establish requirements for the completion of ethnic studies and modern world history courses at both the high school and college levels to ensure students graduate with a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultures and histories, including those of AANHPI communities.

Why is this needed:

Requiring ethnic studies and modern world studies similar to requirements for global studies or European history ensures an education that reflects the diversity of the United States and develops students' cultural competency. Being erased from histories and having one's experiences minimized erodes students' sense of self. As Participant 8 shares, this also places the burden of education onto students themselves: "So many people in the States... have a very warped view of what Mongolia is... I have to take up that mantle to actually teach them for us... just speaking for my people and then also elevating other voices in our community...Mongolia has been through a lot historically, and ...shedding more light on that is so important." Students learning about their cultures and those of others will attain higher self-esteem and be engaged in the classroom learning these histories. Many students also spoke about their concerns about taking up space in environments where AANHPI students were minorities. Requiring these subjects, regardless of population, will automatically create this space.

4. Teacher Training:

- Implement mandatory training programs for teachers to deepen their understanding of AANHPI histories, cultures, and experiences.
- Provide ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure educators stay updated on best practices for teaching AANHPI content and fostering inclusive learning environments.

Why is this needed:

Through our research, youth often identified teachers and school staff as key figures in their leadership development both positively and negatively.

Culturally competent educators and training on AANHPI experiences generate more effective instruction, widespread knowledge of culturally relevant and inspiring role models, and an inclusive learning environment. Proper training combats stereotypes and misinformation, ensuring AANHPI history and culture are presented accurately and respectfully.

5. Recruitment and Retention:

- Develop initiatives to increase the recruitment and retention of AANHPI educators and staff in schools, colleges, and educational institutions.
- Offer scholarships, grants, mentorship programs, and other incentives to attract and support AANHPI individuals pursuing careers in education.

Why is this needed:

“As I progressed in my academic and professional career and started seeing more Asian American women in the fields that I was interested in and balancing family life and having a career, it inspired me to think there isn't just one pathway. I can be able to pursue what I want to do without having to give it up for a family. I can manage both and be happy and successful in both.”

- Participant 17

Our research found that AANHPI role models and mentors have a profound impact on AANHPI girls and gender-expansive youth's confidence and interest in becoming leaders themselves. Having educators and staff who share their students' backgrounds is incredibly impactful for AANHPI students by advancing identity development, boosting self-esteem, and inspiring them to pursue leadership.

6. AANHPI-Centered Spaces:

- Establish and promote AANHPI-centered spaces within schools, such as cultural clubs, organizations, and resource centers.

- Encourage collaboration between administrators, educators, and AANHPI student groups to co-create programs, policies, and events that celebrate and uplift AANHPI identities and cultures.
- Foster youth-led involvement in decision-making processes, ensuring AANHPI students have a voice in shaping their educational experiences and environments.

Why is this needed:

AANHPI-centered spaces within schools and cultural events grant AANHPI youth opportunities to lead in a safe and comfortable environment and are often their first experiences with leadership. These spaces provide resources and help build confidence in leadership; many participants otherwise struggle to command initiative in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) or environments with few AANHPI people. This step can be modeled after the efforts and work of Black student advocacy groups and events.

CONCLUSION:

While we found heavy structural barriers in our communities that hinder AANHPI girls and gender-expansive youth, we also found our participants overwhelmingly faced these barriers with strength, resilience, and hope. Through their discussions of community and leadership, they have lighted the path forward for institutions to support AANHPI youth. We ask educational institutions to address structural barriers starting with the outlined recommendations and to center AANHPI youth in their implementation.

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