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Pathways to Leadership: Analyzing Career Trajectories of Asian American Leaders in the Construction Industry

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ABSTRACT: With the growing focus on fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce, understanding the barriers and opportunities for underrepresented groups in leadership roles has become increasingly important. This study examines the career trajectories of Asian American professionals in the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry, highlighting the factors influencing their advancement into leadership positions. Utilizing a scraped dataset of over 21,000 LinkedIn profiles from Engineering News Record's (ENR's) Top 400 construction firms, the research investigates how educational attainment, professional experience, geographic distribution, and professional skills affect career progression. To explore these patterns, the study uses two analytical approaches: comparative analysis to identify differences in career trajectories, and regression analysis to quantify the impact of key variables on leadership attainment. The results indicate that, despite high levels of education and a broad range of professional skills, Asian Americans encounter barriers that limit their progression into leadership roles. The logistic regression analysis further reveals that while advanced degrees and extensive work experience provide some advantages, they also are not enough to counteract the stereotypes and biases ingrained in workplace norms. Additionally, the regression analysis suggests that career progression is also strongly influenced by frequent job changes, underscoring the critical role of career mobility in professional advancement. Based on the results, this research highlights the need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable leadership development within the AEC industry. Organizations must go beyond surface-level diversity initiatives, committing to impactful strategies that cultivate inclusive organizational cultures and embrace diverse leadership styles.

1. INTRODUCTION

The construction industry serves as a cornerstone of economic development, generating a total gross output of $2 trillion and contributing 4.4% to the U.S. GDP in 2023 (Jones 2024). This sector employs a workforce notable for its diversity across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Karakhan et al. 2021). Despite this diversity, the career trajectories and professional development experiences of certain minority groups, such as Asians, remain insufficiently studied. Asians represent one of the fastest-growing ethnic minorities in the U.S., making up 7% of the national population as of 2022 (Beshay 2024). Despite having the highest education levels, Asians face some of the lowest representation within executive leadership. Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that despite making up 13% of professional positions at large employers, Asian Americans only hold around 6% of senior management positions (Hunt and Gauthier-Loiselle 2010). This disparity has left few role models for career growth within the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry. In fact, a poll of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) employees revealed that Asians were much less likely than White, Black, or Latino/Hispanic workers to feel

represented in leadership positions by people like themselves (Gutierrez 2023). This persistent underrepresentation in leadership, indeed, harms organizational performance and collaboration within the workspace. Recent studies have shown that organizations with diversity are up to 70% likelier to capture new market, because varying perspectives within the team can drive innovative solutions and increased engagement, preventing a singular mindset from dominating (Aperian 2021).

While there are some pre-existing studies on Asian American challenges within the workforce, there is a lack of research specifically examining their careers within the construction industry. Compared to their counterparts from other racial backgrounds, there is a significant lack of representation of Asian Americans in leading the AEC fields. This study seeks to explore the career paths of Asian Americans in the construction industry, concentrating on how Asian Americans' educational background, professional experience, and career choices are differentiated from other ethnicities. This research utilizes LinkedIn, a professional networking platform, to compile a comprehensive dataset of career histories, educational backgrounds, and job transitions, creating detailed professional development paths in the AEC industry. Analyzing LinkedIn profile data, this research employs statistical and regression methods to find patterns of career mobility, leadership tenure, and advancement. The findings are expected to highlight structural barriers and opportunities within the AEC sector, offering insights to guide diversity and inclusion strategies and promote a more equitable environment for Asian professionals in the industry.

This study addresses three research questions about Asian American representation in AEC leadership roles. First, it analyzes the factors influencing their progression into leadership positions, including education, experience, job mobility, and professional networks, while addressing systemic barriers such as cultural stereotypes and workplace biases. Second, it compares the career trajectories of Asian Americans with non-Asians, focusing on differences in career mobility, promotion timelines, and role types to identify disparities in advancement opportunities. Lastly, the research investigates the geospatial distribution of Asian American leaders, exploring how regional differences in population density, cultural diversity, and industry practices affect their leadership representation. By addressing these dimensions, the study provides insights into the structural and geographic factors shaping career advancement for Asian Americans in the AEC sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Workforce Diversity

Existing literature on the diversity within the construction industry reveal that there are labor shortages and struggles to attract and retain workers from underrepresented groups (e.g., racial minorities, LGBTQ+, first generation college students) (Choi et al. 2022). Such challenges stem from systemic issues like discrimination, inequity, and non-inclusive workplace cultures. Minorities continue to be underrepresented in manager positions, with studies finding that only 16 percent of leaders on executive teams belong to underrepresented ethnicities (Hunt 2023). The research also highlights the significant disparity in wage and career progression. Specifically, minority groups, in particular, were found to be less likely to be promoted to management positions (Shrestha et al. 2020). Despite the apparent issues, studies show that many diversity and inclusion programs fail due to superficial implementation. It was noted that most leaders implement the bare necessities, focusing on meeting compliance standards rather than investing in deep structural inequalities (Baker et al. 2021). Such practice severely limits the impact of ethnic diversity initiatives.

2.2 Barriers to Advancement for Asian Americans

Since 2020, hate crimes against Asian Americans have spiked by 164% in the first quarter of 2021 compared to 2020 (CSUSB 2021). Of the many motivators behind this, a major factor is their perceived wealth and career success. However, this perception is misleading because the reality is that Asian Americans are heavily impeded at work through what has been termed the "bamboo ceiling." The term refers to the existing invisible barriers that prevent Asian Americans from advancing the corporate ladder despite their enviable educational achievement and technical capabilities (Hyun 2006). These barriers stem

from stereotypes such as the “model minority” which portrays Asian Americans as skilled but lacking in leadership and the “perpetual foreigner,” that frames them as outsiders regardless of merits and contributions.

Often stereotyped as “model minorities,” Asians in the U.S. are frequently perceived as individuals who place exceedingly high expectations on themselves, pursuing academic and career success in their careers (Lee 2015). Despite seemingly positive, the title overlooks the historical roots that extend beyond this label. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the internment of Japanese Americans in WWII, these effective restrictions framed such ethnic groups as outsiders to American society. The introduction of the “model minority” myth further reinforces this belief (Horsburgh 1999). In the 1900s, a sociology study highlighted the achievements of Japanese Americans during a period of discrimination and anti-Japanese sentiment resulting from World War II, attributing their success to a strong work ethic and deferential cultural values(Pettersen 1966). Beyond this, the ramifications of the study have resulted in a stereotype that is oblivious to the myriad of barriers faced by Asian Americans in their path of climbing the workforce ladder and obtaining leadership positions. The model minority stereotype has created a pervasive image that while Asians are quietly diligent and technically skilled, they are outsiders in leadership roles.

2.3 Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) denotes how racial biases are not individual acts of prejudice but rather enshrined in systems, policies, and culture(Sawchuk 2021). Emerging in the late 1970s, CRT has repeatedly been drawn upon in social contexts, emphasizing how certain policies perpetuate racial inequality. Critics of CRT believe that it encourages divisiveness and racism, dividing people into either the “oppressed” or the “oppressor” group (Sawchuk 2021). Nevertheless, CRT is important as it gives insight into understanding and addressing systemic racism by analyzing its roots. The theory delves into policy biases that affect marginalized races, prompting immediate action to reform policies and create a more inclusive environment. From the perspective of the CRT, the bamboo ceiling reflects how biases are cemented within workplace norms and traditional leadership expectations. To address these challenges, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity has been at the forefront of breaking down discriminatory practices when hiring and within the workspace. Notable achievements include the settlement of over 40,000 charges of race and nationality discrimination in 2014, filing lawsuits against employers and recovering $106 million on behalf of those claims (EEOC 2015). In addition, companies can utilize cross-cultural training which provides employees with tools and strategies to bridge cultural differences, addressing implicit biases and misunderstandings arising from cultural upbringings (leadership and communication) (Chui 2022). This alongside educational programs to raise awareness on diversity issues and teach employees how to deal with discrimination will create a more inclusive environment.

While these efforts by the federal government remain important, action by private businesses also remains necessary. Disparities in mentorship and coaching also play a vital role in the workspace. When asked whether their company provides employees with adequate mentorship and coaching to succeed, only 27% of the East Asian employees and 32% of the Southeast Asian employees agreed, compared to 44% of White employees(Chui 2022). This gap indicates the lack of support Asian American professionals receive.

3. METHODS

3.1 Data collection

In this study, data were collected from LinkedIn profiles. Over the last two decades, LinkedIn has grown to be the largest professional networking and career development platform globally. By June 2024, LinkedIn surpasses 1 billion users in more than 200 countries, demonstrating its extensive reach and popularity among professionals worldwide. To construct a representative dataset, we began by identifying the top U.S. construction companies listed in the ENR Top 400 report. This process yielded a curated list of LinkedIn URLs for over 21,000 employees from the top 400 U.S. construction firms, ensuring a robust dataset representing the industry’s most prominent workers. To extract meaningful insights, the study leveraged both the web scrapping tool and the LinkedIn API to collect profile data—encompassing photos,

educational background, professional experience, certifications, and skills—in a structured format. The collected information was then compiled into table format for subsequent processing and analysis, ensuring data integrity and reducing the need for conventional web scraping techniques.

After the raw data collection, extensive data cleaning and information extraction are conducted to ensure the study's accuracy and consistency. Incomplete records, such as profiles lacking essential details like job history or education, were removed, and duplicate entries were eliminated. Gender and ethnicity were inferred using machine learning prediction tools, based on names and profile photos. In addition, key career metrics were calculated to analyze career trajectories, including the total number of positions held, unique companies worked for, the start and duration of key roles, etc. These metrics provided a structured basis for examining professional progress and patterns within the dataset. Detailed data descriptions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: LinkedIn profile data description.

Column	Description
ID	Unique identifier for each LinkedIn profile.
Linkedin URL	Direct link to the individual's LinkedIn profile.
Full Name	Full name of the individual as listed on LinkedIn.
Bio	Summary or biography provided by the individual on their profile.
Follower Count	Number of followers the individual has on LinkedIn.
Professional Position X	The Xth job title of the individual.
Headline	Professional headline from their LinkedIn profile.
Job Location X	City of the person's Xth job location.
Certificates	Certifications acquired by the individual.
Skills	Skills listed by the individual on their LinkedIn profile.
Number of Positions	Total number of roles held throughout the individual's career.
Number of Unique Companies	Total number of distinct companies where the individual has worked.
Start Date of Most Recent Position	The date when the individual began their current role.
Start Date of First Job	The date marks the beginning of the individual's career.
Total Years in Career	The total duration of the individual's career from their first job to the most recent data point.
Total Years to Current Role	The time taken by the individual to progress from their first job to their current position.
Highest Education Level	The highest academic qualification is achieved by the individual.

3.2 Analytic Frameworks

This study utilizes two complementary analytic frameworks, comparative analysis and regression analysis, to investigate the career trajectories of professionals in the AEC industry between Asians and non-Asians.

The comparative analysis focuses more on identifying differences in career trajectories between Asians and non-Asians. By comparing key metrics such as the number of positions held, the number of companies worked for, and the duration to reach senior roles, this analysis aims to uncover disparities in career progression and opportunities. Additionally, the comparative analysis explores potential systemic barriers or advantages faced by Asians in the industry, providing critical insights into equity and representation.

In addition to comparative analysis, this study leverage regression analysis to explore the most important factor in leadership roles among Asians and non-Asians, we developed two regression models: a logistic regression and a linear regression model. Logistic regression was chosen to analyze the likelihood of individuals attaining leadership roles, a binary outcome, allowing for the assessment of how factors such

as ethnicity, gender, education, and career duration influence this probability. Linear regression, in contrast, was used to examine continuous outcomes, such as the time taken to achieve leadership roles and total career duration, quantifying the relationships between higher education, demographic characteristics, and professional advancement. Together, these models offer a comprehensive framework to explore both the probability and progression dynamics of career trajectories.

3.3 Logistic Regression Model

To explore the factors that influence leadership attainment, we employed a logistic regression model, which is appropriate given the binary nature of the outcome variable. This approach enables us to quantify the relationship between an individual's background characteristics and their likelihood of holding a leadership position. By incorporating variables such as education, ethnicity, and career history, the model helps identify which factors significantly contribute to leadership outcomes while controlling for potential confounders. The logistic regression model examines the probability of an individual holding a leadership position based on their highest education level, ethnicity (Asian or non-Asian), and other career-related factors. To formulate the model, Let Y_i be a binary dependent variable representing whether individual i holds a leadership role ($Y_i = 1$) or not ($Y_i = 0$). The model is specified as follows:

$$[1]\ Logit(P(Y_i = 1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot EduLevel_i + \beta_2 \cdot Asian_i + \beta_3 \cdot (EduLevel_i \times Asian_i) + \beta_4 \cdot CareerYears_i + \beta_5 \cdot NumPositions_i + \beta_6 \cdot NumCompanies_i + \beta_7 \cdot SkillsCount_i + \beta_8 \cdot CertCount_i + \beta_9 \cdot ln(FollowerCount_i) + \epsilon_i$$

Where: $logit\big(P(Y_i = 1)\big) = ln\left(\frac{P(Y_i=1)}{1-P(Y_i=1)}\right)$ is the natural logarithm of the odds of individual i being in a leadership role; β_0 is the intercept term; $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_9$ are the coefficients of the independent variables; $EduLevel_i$ is the highest education level of individual i, numerically encoded (1 = High School Degree, 2 = Undergraduate Degree, 3 = Graduate Degree); $Asian_i$ is a binary variable indicating ethnicity (1 if Asian, 0 if non-Asian); $Edulevel_i \times Asian_i$ is the interaction term between education level and ethnicity; $CareerYears_i$ represents the total years in the career of individual i; $NumPositions_i$ is the number of positions held by individual i; $NumCompanies_i$ is the number of unique companies where individual i has worked; $SkillsCount_i$ is the count of skills listed on individual i 's LinkedIn profile; $CertCount_i$ is the number of certifications acquired by individual i; $ln\,(FollowerCount_i)$ is the natural logarithm of the follower count to normalize skewed distribution; and ϵ_i is the error term.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Comparative Analysis Results

The comparative analysis of leadership metrics between Asian and Non-Asian individuals reveals similarities and differences in career trajectories. The average number of positions held and the number of unique companies worked for are nearly identical between the groups, with Asians averaging 4.53 positions and 3.6 companies compared to 4.51 positions and 3.5 companies for Non-Asians. However, Non-Asians exhibit slightly longer career spans, with an average total career length of 20.5 years and 12.5 years in their current roles, compared to 18.3 years and 11.5 years, respectively, for Asians. This is potentially because of the higher education desire for Asian groups and the corresponding delay in starting their careers. These trends are reflected in Figure 1, where career duration metrics show modest but consistent differences, suggesting that while career progression and mobility are similar, Non-Asians tend to have longer career tenures. These differences suggest that while Asian Americans follow similar career trajectories in terms of job transitions, they may face barriers in reaching and sustaining leadership positions, potentially due to biases in promotion practices, lack of mentorship, or structural challenges within the industry.

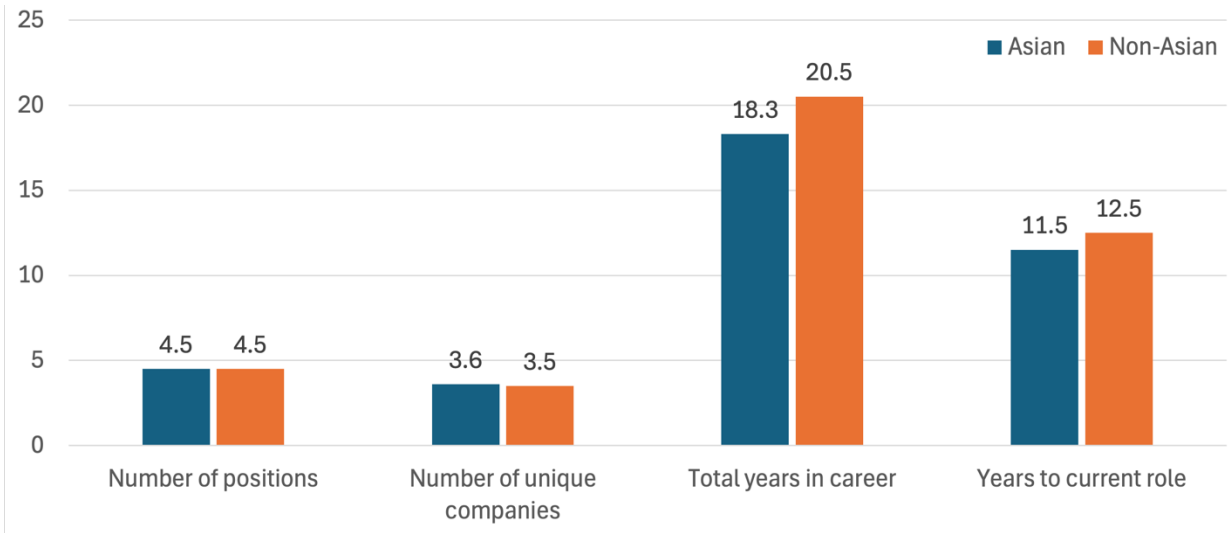

Figure 1: Career mobility metrics between Asians and Non-Asians

Geographically, the distribution of Asian American leadership roles (Figure 2) demonstrates significant concentrations in major metropolitan areas across the United States, particularly along the East and West Coasts. Notable clusters are observed in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, which are historically known for their diverse populations and economic opportunities. The clustering of leadership positions on the East and West Coasts, as well as in major cities, can be attributed to the concentration of large firms and key infrastructure projects in these areas. These regions are home to major urban centers that drive significant demand for construction and infrastructure development, providing more opportunities for leadership roles. For Asian Americans in the AEC industry, these areas also tend to have higher ethnic diversity and more inclusive environments, offering better access to professional networks, mentorship, and career development.

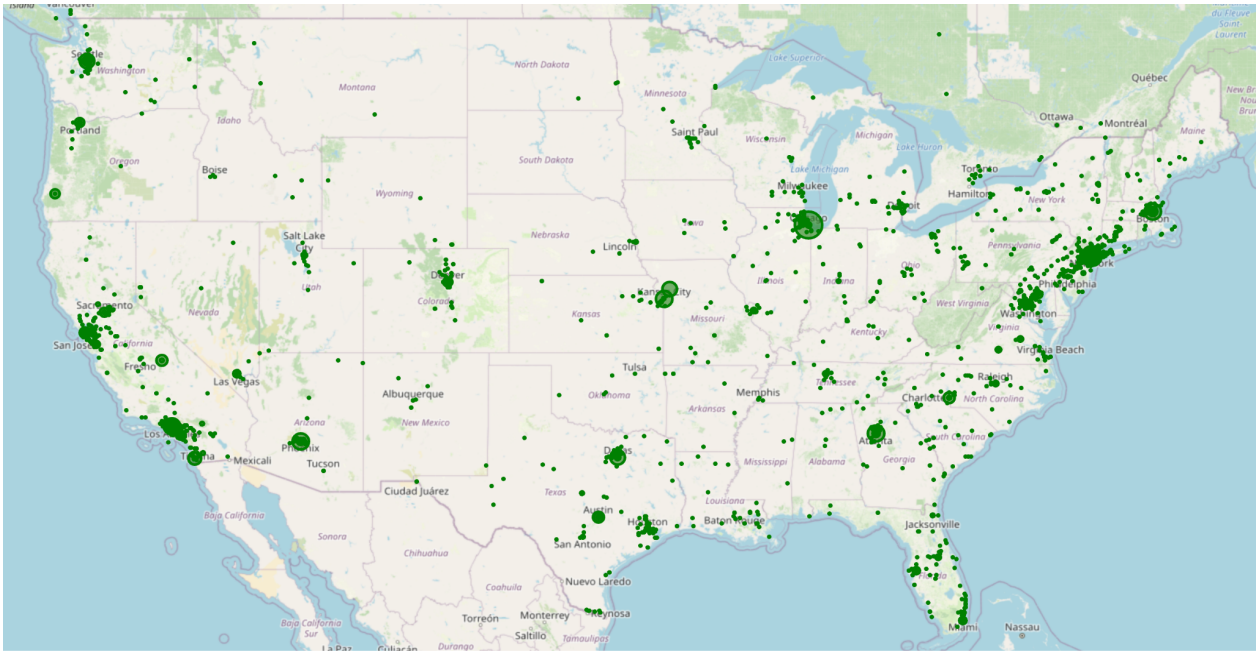

Figure 2: Spatial distribution of Asian Leadership Positions

4.2 Logistic regression results

Based on the logistic regression results, the dependent variable is the likelihood of an individual holding a leadership position. The model examines the influence of key predictors such as education level, ethnicity (Asian vs. non-Asian), interaction between education level and ethnicity, career years, number of positions held, unique companies worked for, skills listed, certifications obtained, and the logarithm of follower count. Overall, the model is statistically significant (p-value < 0.001) with a pseudo R-squared of 0.06746, indicating that the predictors explain about 6.75% of the variation in the outcome variable.

Among the predictors, several variables demonstrate strong significance. The interaction term EduLevel × Asian has a positive and statistically significant coefficient (0.0733, p-value = 0.044), suggesting that the effect of education level on leadership likelihood is enhanced for Asian individuals. However, EduLevel alone is not significant (p-value = 0.124), indicating that education level may not directly influence leadership roles unless moderated by ethnicity. Similarly, being Asian (binary variable) has a negative and significant effect (-0.4659, p-value < 0.001), highlighting potential barriers for Asians in attaining leadership positions. The strong negative coefficient for the "Asian" variable emphasizes the persistent disadvantage Asians face when seeking leadership positions, even after controlling for education level, experience, and other professional attributes. This reveals that systemic discrimination, rather than merit or effort, plays into leadership selection, keeping with the broad notion of the "bamboo ceiling". The logarithm of follower count (ln_FollowerCount) is another strong positive predictor (coefficient = 0.3284, p-value < 0.001), suggesting that individuals with greater visibility or network influence are more likely to hold leadership roles.

Other variables, such as Total years in career (positive, p-value < 0.001), Number of positions held (positive, p-value < 0.001), and Number of Skills (positive, p-value < 0.001), also contribute significantly to leadership likelihood, aligning with the intuition that extensive experience, diverse roles, and skill sets are valued in leadership. Conversely, Number of Unique Companies shows a negative relationship (-0.2135, p-value < 0.001), which might indicate that stability within fewer companies correlates more strongly with leadership potential. The results suggest actionable insights for organizations aiming to foster equitable leadership development, particularly addressing barriers for Asian individuals and leveraging factors like career breadth and professional networks.

Table 2: Logistic regression results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)
Constant	-2.4847***	0.036	-69.99	0	-2.554	-2.415
EduLevel	-0.0178	0.012	-1.538	0.124	-0.04	0.005
Asian	-0.4659***	0.088	-5.283	0	-0.639	-0.293
EduLevel × Asian	0.0733**	0.036	2.015	0.044	0.002	0.145
Total years in career	0.0361***	0.001	55.892	0	0.035	0.037
Number of positions	0.1335***	0.004	32.7	0	0.125	0.141
Number of Unique Companies	-0.2135***	0.005	-44.169	0	-0.223	-0.204
Number of Skills	0.0016***	0.001	3.226	0.001	0.001	0.003
Number of Certificates	-0.0069***	0.001	-6.089	0	-0.009	-0.005
ln(FollowerCount)	0.3284***	0.005	63.594	0	0.318	0.338

*Significance levels: ***P<0.001; **P<0.01; *P<0.05

The regression results are further supported by previous studies, research on Asian American career development emphasizes the role of both structural and cultural factors in shaping career outcomes.

According to the Psychology of Working Theory, work and career development are not solely individual endeavors but are deeply influenced by structural forces such as access to resources, discrimination, and the labor market. In the case of Asian Americans, the negative coefficient for ethnicity in the regression model aligns with findings from previous studies who highlight the barriers posed by racial discrimination and stereotyping, particularly in leadership positions. Moreover, the interaction between education level and ethnicity reflects the notion that educational attainment alone does not guarantee success; rather, it is the combination of educational background with the systemic challenges posed by one's ethnic identity that shapes career outcomes (Tu and Okazaki 2021). Additionally, the importance of family influences and cultural expectations, as identified in qualitative studies, suggests that career decisions for Asian Americans are often constrained by familial obligations and cultural values, which can conflict with the pursuit of leadership roles (Fouad et al. 2008). These findings resonate with the notion of career development being a dynamic process shaped by both individual aspirations and broader socio-cultural contexts, particularly for marginalized groups like Asian Americans. The negative impact of being Asian on leadership likelihood, as observed in the regression model, points to the persistent barriers that must be addressed through inclusive practices and structural reforms aimed at fostering equitable career advancement.

In addition to identifying potential barriers faced by Asian professionals in attaining leadership positions, our analysis also revealed meaningful patterns related to educational attainment and gender. As shown in Figure 3 (left), individuals with a graduate degree are significantly more likely to hold leadership roles—26% of Asians and 14% of Non-Asians in leadership possess such qualifications, compared to those with only undergraduate or associate-level education. This emphasizes the positive correlation between higher education and access to leadership pathways, particularly among Asians. Meanwhile, Figure 3 (right) highlights a stark representation gap by gender. Although Asian males and females have comparable leadership proportions within their group—5% and 6%, respectively—their representation is overshadowed by Non-Asians, who comprise 65% of male leaders and 69% of female leaders. This suggests that, despite comparable leadership ratios within Asian subgroups, Asians overall remain underrepresented in leadership across the broader professional landscape. These disparities suggest a need for systemic strategies such as inclusive leadership development programs, mentorship pipelines, and data-driven diversity benchmarks. Further research controlling for factors like industry type, experience length, and organizational hierarchy will be crucial to uncovering the mechanisms behind these persistent gaps.

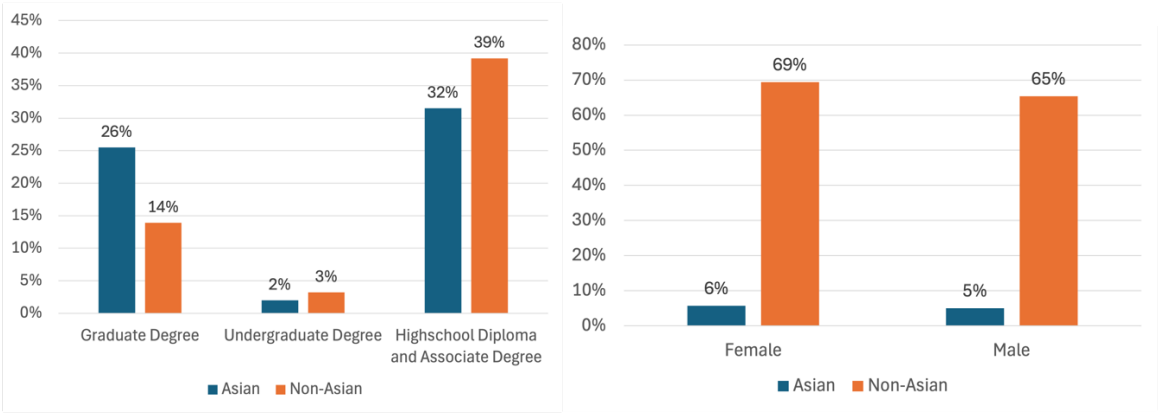

Figure 3: Leadership distribution by education level and gender

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the career trajectories of Asian American professionals in the AEC industry, using LinkedIn data to map out patterns in education, work experience, and promotion timelines. The study employed both comparative and regression analysis to identify factors that influence the likelihood of attaining leadership positions. The approach considered various characteristics, such as the highest education level, ethnicity, years in the profession, number of positions held, and online professional visibility. By focusing on individuals affiliated with leading AEC firms, the research revealed that despite

strong educational backgrounds and valuable skill sets, Asian Americans remain underrepresented in executive roles within the AEC sector. Regression models indicate that while advanced degrees can enhance the likelihood of assuming leadership positions, the positive effect is less pronounced for Asian Americans unless additional supportive factors are in place. Notably, environments characterized by inclusive organizational cultures and robust mentorship or sponsorship programs correlate with greater representation of Asian Americans in senior positions. These results highlight an enduring "bamboo ceiling," shaped by cultural stereotypes and systemic barriers, that continues to limit upward mobility. Scaling these results into action, AEC firms should implement DEI initiatives specifically aimed at closing the leadership gap for Asian American professionals. First, firms should expand mentorship and sponsorship programs with culturally responsive training so underrepresented professionals can receive the guidance and visibility required for leadership development. Second, firms should use structured, bias-conscious promotion processes that evaluate candidates not merely on traditional leadership traits but also on collaborative and intercultural skills. Third, leadership development programs should leverage diverse leadership style emphasis, moving beyond Western-centric and traditional perceptions of assertiveness and charisma. Incorporating DEI initiatives into leadership pipelines via performance trackers, accountability structures, and overt evaluation criteria can aid in dismantling structural barriers and facilitate a more inclusive leadership culture across the industry.

By examining the Asian American's barriers to leadership positions, this research underscores the importance of addressing deep-rooted inequalities and fostering workplace cultures that truly value and develop diverse talent. Efforts to support Asian Americans, and other underrepresented groups, should extend beyond basic diversity measures and include meaningful mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership development initiatives. Further qualitative work, such as interviews and case studies, may deepen the understanding of subtle organizational dynamics and hidden biases. By actively challenging stereotypes, refining promotion practices, and embracing a wider range of leadership styles, the AEC industry can create more equitable pathways that acknowledge and leverage the full spectrum of professional expertise.

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