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Lessons on Ethnic Data Disaggregation from the “Count Me In” Campaign

Jude Paul Matias Dizon

This article supports the need to re-evaluate current models of racial/ethnic data collection in order to accurately assess and improve efforts of inclusion for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students. Through highlighting the efforts of students in the 2007 “Count Me In” campaign at the University of California, I argue that the campaign serves as an exemplar of AAPIs’ desire to disaggregate. Contrary to the often-referenced depiction of being a monolithic “model minority,” this article discusses the diverse experiences of the various AAPI sub-communities and the ways in which the larger label masks inequalities between AAPI sub-groups and across other communities of color. Additionally, it suggests how more precise data collection may improve recruitment efforts and how universities may be able to enhance and create new student services to address the needs of emergent AAPI ethnic communities.

In November 2007, the University of California (UC) revised its data collection systems, including admissions applications and institutional research functions, effectively disaggregating the “Asian American and Pacific Islander” category. University data forms now include 23 options for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students to select for self-identification.¹ Extending upon the work of recent scholarship, highlighting the urgency to acknowledge the diverse array of experiences lived by AAPI students in higher education (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007; McEuwien, Kodama, Alvarez, Lee, & Liang, 2002;

¹ *AAPIs represent a multitude of cultures and ethnic groups. No uniform category has existed to describe AAPIs. Rather, history shows multiple ways AAPIs have been described by others and how they have described themselves. For the purposes of this article, I use “AAPI” as it was used in the “Count Me In” campaign to be inclusive of the various ethnic identities students advocated on behalf of.*

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Museum, 2009; Teranishi, 2010), this article demonstrates the significance of ethnic data disaggregation for AAPI sub-groups through a student-led political organizing project: the 2007 “Count Me In” (CMI) campaign for disaggregation. Given the persistence of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding AAPI communities, such as the model minority myth, I argue that the “Count Me In” campaign serves as an exemplar of AAPIs’ desire to disaggregate and respond to the prevailing racialization of AAPIs as a homogenous group.

Why Disaggregate?

The classification of racial and ethnic groups in the United States has long been arbitrary and inconsistent. Examination of the historical categorization of AAPIs clearly demonstrates a shifting pattern of imposed racial identity on this diverse community. How various AAPI sub-groups have been identified—or subsumed into a vague “Other” category—varies at all levels of government. The linkages between these multiple levels are significant to understand the context for CMI and the conditions under which ethnic and pan-ethnic goals became complementary.

At the federal level, the US Census Bureau has enacted multiple changes in the categorization of AAPIs over the last five census counts. The 1980 Census reflected an increase from five to nine listed AAPI ethnicities. The 1990 Census kept the nine groups with two significant changes. First, the summary category “Asian or Pacific Islander” was introduced, and second, “Other API” also appeared on the census for the first time. Previously, AAPIs not specifically listed shared “Other” with all other racial and ethnic identities not specified on the census (Espiritu, 1992). Wright and Spickard (2002) point to US racial logic for providing the grounds upon which to include Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders together. As a group that “did not fit the system neatly”, Pacific Islanders “got to be Asians” (Wright & Spickard, 2002, p. 106). In 1997, due in part to action by Pacific Islander community organizations, the Office of Management and Budget passed Directive 15, which resulted in the separate categories “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” on the 2000 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Not surprisingly, reporting on AAPIs is largely done in the aggregate. Such homogenization means ignoring the ways in which AAPI sub-groups are distinct. Equally problematic is the difficulty for researchers seeking data on specific AAPI sub-groups. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding and awareness of the many unique AAPI sub-populations. The diversity within the AAPI community has been repeatedly documented (College Board, 2008; Hune, 2002; Nakanishi, 1995). Examination of factors such as ethnicity, languages spoken at home, immigration histories, and economic and social capital reveals that there are stark differences between AAPI subpopulations as there are commonly perceived similarities.

Alongside the historical trajectory of AAPI data classification has been the emergence and persistence of the model minority myth. Defined as the belief that AAPIs experience “universal and unparalleled academic and occupational success,” this stereotype works in tandem with simple data collection to homogenize the AAPI community (Museus & Kiang, 2009, p. 6). Notions such as “AAPI students are taking over US higher education” pervade popular images of communities that are anything but uniform, especially in regards to educational attainment (College Board, 2008). According to the 2000 Census, about 80% of Asian Americans have high school diplomas, which roughly match the nation as a whole. In higher education, 44% of Asian Americans have a bachelor’s degree or more compared to only 24% of the nation. Reported in the aggregate, these figures are misleading. A 2010 report by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) presents current statistics of educational attainment. Hidden by aggregate data reporting are the 65% of Cambodians and Laotians with a high school education or less, which also holds true for about 50% of Vietnamese. Among Pacific Islanders, close to 55% of Samoans and Tongans have a high school education or less. Beyond high school, almost 70% of Asian Indians, 55% of Pakistanis, about 52% of Chinese, and a little under 50% of Filipinos have a bachelor’s degree or higher. In contrast, higher education attainment is about 12% for Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong. Fewer than 10% of Samoans have a bachelor’s degree compared to around 15% for Guamanians and native Hawaiians.

When looking at such data, it is impossible to think of AAPIs as a monolithic group. Disparities among AAPI sub-groups can be extremely wide as the above information shows. Although some AAPI communities do experience high levels of success in higher education attainment, there are those that do not and whose lack of access parallels that of other communities of color. Despite over two decades of research challenging the model minority image (Lee, 1996; Suzuki, 1977; Teranishi, 2010), the myth remains and educational institutions continue to “construct and assume monolithic, racialized images about Asian Americans” (Chang & Kiang, 2002, p. 138).

CMI student organizers sought to deconstruct the model minority image and other misconceptions through disaggregation. As I will later discuss, the policy developed by student organizers for the UC system was influenced by legislative action statewide. Before fully describing CMI, it is important to conceptually frame the relationship between AAPI sub-populations and the pan-ethnic AAPI identity. Because some scholars view pan-ethnic organizing within a racial formation paradigm (Omi & Winant, 1994), it is important to understand CMI as a means to challenge the dominant racial ideology through policy change.

Pan-ethnicity and Racial Formation

Scholar Yen Le Espiritu (2008) posed the question of how to build pan-ethnic solidarity among AAPIs given the increasing diversity of AAPI ethnic sub-groups in the US as the nation progresses further into the 21st century. CMI provides an example of pan-ethnic organizing for the present. Initially begun at UCLA, CMI was a project of the Asian Pacific Coalition (APC), a group consisting of 21 AAPI student organizations. Eventually becoming a statewide campaign, with UC Berkeley as a second focal point, CMI counted among its leaders and supporters students with different AAPI backgrounds and other racial/ethnic identities. The movement was characterized by a pan-AAPI front advocating for recognition of 15 sub-populations on the UC application.

Following other instances in which pan-AAPI organizing led to wider recognition of ethnic sub-groups, the campaign responded to an issue in which ethnic and pan-ethnic goals were complementary. Espiritu identified AAPI pan-ethnicity as a phenomenon strongly dependent on context. The call to disaggregate ethnic data arose in a situation in which conditions favored an inclusive AAPI identity under which to mobilize and promote common interests (Espiritu, 1992). Although the goals of CMI were to increase the number of sub-listed ethnicities included under “Asian” and “Pacific Islander” in the UC application, it should be noted that the campaign was a protest against the absence of sub-groups, not against the presence of a larger identity.

To understand CMI as a movement to redefine the meaning of AAPI and who is included in this term, Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of racial formation provides a useful framework. Racial formation refers to the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). In this paradigm, CMI was an effort to rearticulate the meaning of race for AAPIs and, based on this new meaning, change the relationship of AAPI students to UC. The campaign challenged the prevailing racialized view of AAPIs and through a policy recommendation provided an alternative perspective inclusive of the diverse identities and experiences of AAPI sub-groups.

The “Count Me In” Campaign

Students in APC at UCLA initiated and led the “Count Me In” campaign in Spring 2007. Following student protests over the lack of diversity on campus, CMI took off alongside the momentum of Assembly Bill (AB) 295. Authored by state legislator Ted Lieu, AB 295 was meant to disaggregate AAPI data for various state agencies (not including UC). CMI was seen as a complement to this bill. Although AB 295 passed the assembly and the senate, it was ultimately vetoed by then Governor Schwarzenegger. In some ways, CMI was a response

to the veto; despite the rejection of AB 295, students pursued an alternative plan to accomplish their goals.

CMI had a clear-cut mission of disaggregating “Asian American and Pacific Islander” on UC applications. The campaign was organized around three goals:

1. Enhance UC admission policy to include data collection on students of Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Hmong, Indonesian, Laotian, Malaysian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, and Thai backgrounds.
2. Separate Pacific Islander into a new racial category within admissions.
3. Provide financial support for outreach projects that specifically target AAPI groups facing severe educational inequity (Count Me In-Berkeley Facebook page).

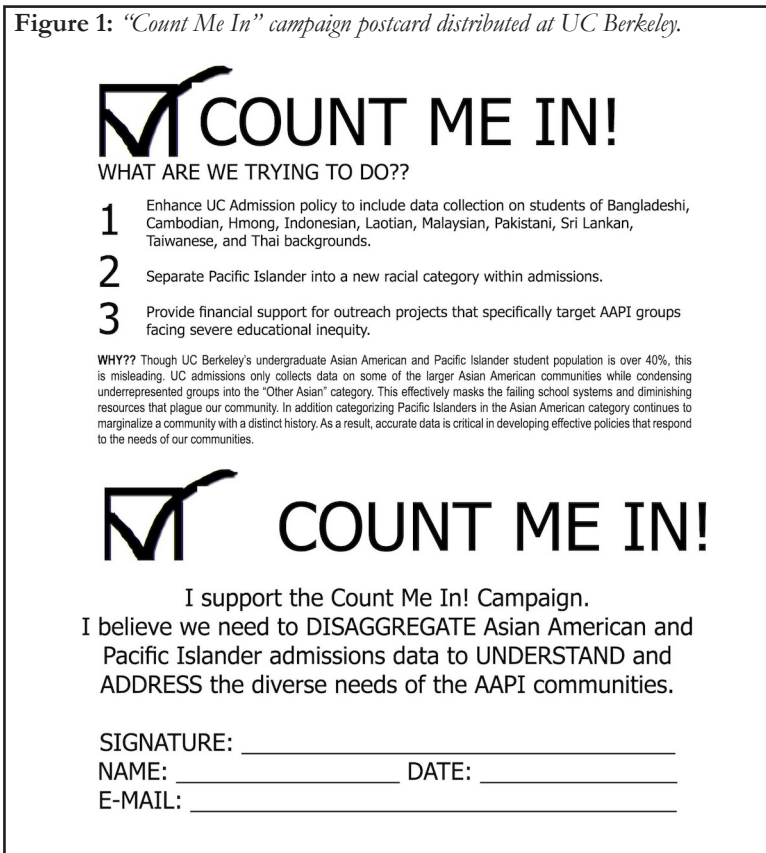
Through press releases, students shared their experiences with lack of data. A member of the Association of Hmong Students stated that there were only 26 Hmong students at UCLA, a number estimated by the organization due to the absence of official data. For leaders in the Pacific Islander Student Association, conducting their outreach programs had been difficult without being able to identify Pacific Islander students. One student expressed having to “resort to guessing through last names” (Truong, 2007, para. 18). A Guamanian student was frustrated when she applied and had to check “Other Asian.” “But we aren’t even Asian. We are not being heard in the higher education system. They don’t even know our identity” (Brown, 2007, para.13).

In order to achieve the campaign goals, targets and tactics had to be identified and formed. The target of the campaign shifted throughout 2007. Originally, the Board of Regents was the main focus, but that changed following the appointment of Judy Sakaki as Vice President of Student Affairs at the UC Office of the President (UCOP). Receiving advice from university staff members, including a liaison at UCOP, CMI organizers shifted their target to Sakaki and avoided having to convince the Regents of their proposed data change. A push for regential action would most likely have resulted in a politically and emotionally charged public campaign. With Sakaki as the target, the process was more expedient as disaggregation became an issue of internal administrative change rather than an act of the Regents.

Campaign tactics were primarily educational. Beginning at UCLA in Spring 2007, student organizers talked to their peers about the campaign goals with the intent of having them sign a postcard supporting CMI. Over the summer, contact was made with students from other UC campuses. CMI spread to UC Irvine, UC San Diego, and UC Berkeley, which became the focal point for student organizing in the northern half of the state. All campuses participated in getting postcards signed (Figure 1). At UC Berkeley, student organizers also held a week of teach-

ins about disaggregation and held a rally in November 2007. That same month, UCLA hosted the “Out of the Margins” Conference organized by the newly established UC AAPI Policy Multi-campus Research Program—a coalition of more than 50 UC faculty whose research addressed questions of policy and AAPIs. Judy Sakaki attended this event and there made the announcement on November 16th that the following year’s application would include 23 ethnicities for AAPI students to choose from. “Pacific Islander” became its own racial category and was further disaggregated to Native Hawaiian, Guamanian/Chamorro, Samoan, Tongan, Fijian and Other Pacific Islander (Vazquez, 2007).

Figure 1: “Count Me In” campaign postcard distributed at UC Berkeley.



A press release from UC Berkeley CMI organizers quotes a Cambodian American student who aptly summarizes the campaign’s significance for all communities of color:

When I talk about diversity, I mean beyond race, ethnicity, and culture. I mean experiences, immigration history, refugee-hood, language—this list of what constitutes diversity could go on forever. This campaign

exists beyond just yellow, brown, black, and white. It exists in the issues and experiences of our communities, something that continues to be hidden and overlooked. (Count Me In-Berkeley, 2007)

Implications

Through simplified data collection, the complexity of AAPI student experiences has been hidden and vital services and resources have been diverted away from this demographic. In sharing the efforts of students in the “Count Me In” campaign, the connections between AAPI sub-communities and other communities of color become apparent. Understanding that AAPIs are underrepresented minorities, disaggregated data may improve recruitment and retention services.

The third objective of the “Count Me In” campaign was to use disaggregated data to provide financial support for outreach and retention projects that specifically target AAPI groups facing severe educational inequity. This is particularly promising in the student-initiated recruitment and retention sector. At UCLA, Pacific Islander students are currently served by the “Retention of American Indians Now” program due to lack of capacity for a program solely focused on Pacific Islander students. UC Berkeley has been home to five ethnic-specific student-initiated recruitment and retention centers since 1996. Currently, two centers have a Filipino-focus and a broader AAPI-focus, respectively. Disaggregated data may increase the amount of funding, which could be used to support a Pacific Islander retention program at UCLA or supplement the funds of an existing UC Berkeley Southeast Asian education and outreach organization.

In addition to funding recruitment and retention programs at UC, another promising initiative for AAPI students is the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution (AANAPISI) program. The newest among the minority-serving institutions (MSIs), funding for AANAPISIs was included in the 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act. Institutions with at least a 10% enrollment of AAPI students, a certain threshold of low-income students, and lower than average educational and general expenditures per student are eligible to participate in the yearly competitive grant process for funds that will contribute to the recruitment and retention of AAPI students, particularly communities of students who have been traditionally underserved by higher education (Park & Chang, 2008). Given the reality of the diverse experiences AAPI students face, which include encountering educational barriers, the AANAPISI program funds services to reach students who would be easily overlooked due to the misconceptions stemming from the model minority myth.

The 2010 report by CARE advocates for AAPI student success through AANA-PISIs. These institutions may use funding for

1. Curriculum development and academic instruction.
2. Purchase of educational materials, such as books and films.
3. Academic tutoring, counseling programs, and student support services.
4. Establishing community outreach programs.
5. Conducting research and data collection on AAPI communities.
6. Partnering with AAPI-serving community-based organizations.

The CARE report documents some of the creative and innovative programs higher education institutions have created with AANAPISI funding. For example, De Anza Community College has expanded its First Year Experience program to include students from targeted AAPI groups. The University of Maryland at College Park supports its Asian American Studies program with AANAPISI funding while the University of Hawaii at Hilo has established a speaker series to encourage participation in the Pacific Islander Studies certificate program.

Disaggregated AAPI data will only serve to increase the effectiveness of AANAPISIs. Documented research on specific ethnic groups will facilitate the use of funds to improve student retention through enhancing existing services and creating new programs that are inclusive of the diverse range of AAPI student experiences alongside the experiences of their peers. Additionally, disaggregated data may potentially be used by institutions without the 10% enrollment requirement but do serve underrepresented AAPI ethnic groups. For instance, universities in Wisconsin and Minnesota are in close proximity to large Hmong American populations, but fail to have 10% or higher of AAPI enrollments. Disaggregated data may be used to show that an institution is well positioned to serve an underrepresented AAPI group and apply for AANAPISI funding (Park & Chang, 2009). The AANAPISI program is an effective policy mechanism to help increase AAPI college participation and degree attainment.

CMI and the significance of disaggregated ethnic data re-position AAPIs in discussions surrounding the disparate impact of race in college access. Given the ways in which AAPIs have been pitted against other racial and ethnic minorities to overturn affirmative action as a “model minority,” the pan-AAPI coalition leading CMI truly stands out as an exemplar of how common interests may be met through an inclusive process bringing communities together in solidarity. CMI was a call against the continued absence of AAPI sub-group representation and not a rejection of overarching labels. Only by working as a coalition were the goals of the campaign achieved.

The disaggregation of the AAPI category and the current momentum of recognizing the needs of AAPIs in higher education may prove to be a shift in racial perspectives towards this demographic. Disaggregation disrupts the notion of a monolithic AAPI identity. The ability to identify marginalized ethnic sub-groups

and advocate for more resources on their behalf changes how these groups engage with larger social structures. By being seen as more than “Other,” AAPI students can now tell their stories and be counted among those in the movement for educational equity and access.

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