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## Are Asian Americans POC? Examining Impact of Higher Education Identity-Based Policies and Practices

Janelle Raymundo

*Asian Americans may not be considered “people of color” (POC) in higher education because of stereotypes of Asian Americans such as the model minority myth. White supremacy creates a racial hierarchy that creates a misperception that Asian Americans are not marginalized compared to other POC in order to cause strife among all racial minority groups. In higher education, this racial hierarchy manifests through exclusionary practices in diversity programming, recruitment, and admissions that can lead to the disconnection of Asian Americans from the rest of the POC community. Issues regarding affirmative action and the recent Harvard lawsuit are salient examples that are indicative of Asian Americans’ separation from “typical” POC groups in society and higher education. The exploration of this topic through scholarship and the author’s personal narrative as an Asian American in higher education will lead to recommendations for creating connections to the POC community for and with Asian American students while highlighting inequitable practices and policies.*

*Keywords:* Asian American student belongingness, affirmative action, students of color, people of color

Recent events, especially related to affirmative action, put Asian Americans into greater focus within higher education. A common narrative in higher education and in the media is the “overrepresentation” of Asian (both Asian American and international) students in elite institutions and higher education in general. This narrative promotes the misconception that all Asian students are entering higher education in vast numbers, yet aggregated data reveals South and East Asian ethnic groups to be the primary beneficiaries of higher education (Yoo et al., 2010). Taking a more critical lens reveals issues of exclusion of Asian American students from other racially minoritized groups rather than simple overrepresentation. How higher education administrators and policy-makers view and treat Asian Americans informs how other students, especially students of color, perceive Asian Americans, further excluding them. Through higher education policies and practices, Asian Americans are purposefully separated from other people of color as a “racial wedge”

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between the dominant white group and oppressed racial groups, thus leaving them as outsiders of the POC community to uphold white power.

As a self-identifying Asian American and Filipinx, my identities influence how I navigate higher education as a student and emerging student affairs professional. By writing this article, I reflect on how my experiences of exclusion impact my ability to connect and identify with other people of color in the field, questioning my (and the Asian American community's) place within student affairs and higher education. Using my lived experiences as guideposts, I explore how and why experiences like mine exist and the impact on students, staff, and administration. In the end, I suggest ways in which to restore our connections to the POC community and reclaim my (our) identity as an Asian American, person of color in student affairs and higher education.

### **Background**

Within the United States, the dominant white group has historically “othered” Asian Americans from other people of color. This othering can be explained through the purposefully imposed racial hierarchy that places Asian Americans in direct conflict with the Black community in order to uphold white dominance in society. The hierarchy is perpetuated in part through the model minority myth. The model minority myth is traditionally defined as the belief that Asian Americans are higher achieving and work harder compared to other people of color (Yoo et al., 2010). This belief leads to a different standard of success in which Asian Americans “are more successful than other racial minority groups” (Yoo et al., 2010, p. 114-115).

The seemingly “positive” view of Asian Americans through the model minority myth began during the Civil Rights movement, but Asians were not always viewed this way. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricted Chinese immigration to the United States in response to fear of Chinese laborers “taking away” jobs from white Americans, despite Chinese workers’ vital role in economic growth at the time (Asia Society Center for Global Education, n.d.). The government issued more restrictive immigration policies against Asians across the West Coast to limit immigration from Japan, Korea, and India. The Japanese Internment in World War II and segregation of Asian students in California schools also fed widespread anti-Asian hostility across the country. In general, the U.S. stereotyped and labeled Asian immigrants and Asian Americans as “‘filthy,’ ‘inferior race,’ ‘pollutants,’ ‘deviants,’ and ‘yellow perils’” (Yoo et al., 2010, p. 114).

Then, as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s amplified and unrest grew among the Black community and other people of color, the negative perception of Asian Americans shifted to one of success and the model minority (Suzuki, 1989). Media and news articles increasingly lauded Asian Americans as “a ‘model minority’

who had overcome racism and ‘made it’ in American society through hard work, uncomplaining perseverance, and quiet accommodation” (Suzuki, 1989, p. 14). Civil rights activists at the time argued that the sudden change in white Americans’ view of Asian Americans was being used to discredit their demands for civil rights and social justice for racial minorities (Suzuki, 1989). To counter this, supporters of the model minority myth used data from the 1970 U.S. Census to show how Asian Americans had higher rates of schooling and income compared to the rest of the U.S. population (Suzuki, 1989). These events began the model minority myth, which originally applied to East Asian groups specifically. “Asian American” is a monolithic, pan-ethnic categorization of diverse communities, and when paired with the model minority myth it leads to the harmful perception of a singular narrative for Asian American identity. The influence of history is present in the current issues plaguing Asian Americans now, particularly in higher education.

### **Conceptual Framework**

My conceptual framework utilizes the knowledge shared by Yosso (2005) and Poon, et al. (2016) on critical race theory (CRT) and its application to Asian Americans and the model minority myth. Using a CRT perspective provides a more complete narrative of the model minority myth, thereby focusing on the myth’s main purpose in driving a racial wedge between Asian Americans and other people of color (particularly the Black community) to benefit white racial dominance. At the same time, this racial wedge alienates Asian Americans from the POC community.

CRT centers race and racism in the analysis of societal structures, policies, practices, and beliefs to reveal the oppressive systems surrounding minoritized racial groups (Yosso, 2005). Centering the lived experiences of POC is one of the main tenets of CRT for the field of education, validating experiential knowledge as legitimate and necessary. Poon et al. (2016) use CRT to redefine the model minority myth as a “racial stereotype [that] generally defines AAPIs [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders], especially Asian Americans, as a monolithically hardworking racial group whose high achievement undercuts claims of systemic racism made by other racially minoritized populations, especially African Americans” (p. 469). The authors use the concept of the “middleman minority” to describe Asians in relation to white and Black groups. To be more inclusive, I choose to refer to middleman minority as “middleperson minority” instead, borrowing from Poon et al.’s terminology. The dominant white group uses Asian Americans as the middleperson to serve as a buffer between white and Black people to maintain white supremacy while inciting conflict between Asian and Black communities as well as other POC (Poon et al., 2016).

The middleperson minority contributes to the racial triangulation of Asian Americans in which a hierarchy is imposed among racial minorities in the United

States that causes further animosity and conflict among POC (Kim, 1999). The dominant white group pits Asian Americans against Black people (another racially subordinated group) through valorization via the model minority myth while still not allowing Asian Americans the same privileges as white people. As a result, Asian Americans are racially triangulated between white and Black groups (Kim, 1999). This separates Asian Americans from other POC (i.e. Black people) as well as whites in order to maintain a racial hierarchy that serves white dominance and superiority.

## **Asian American Exclusion in Policy and Practice**

### **Affirmative Action**

Applying for college was a stressful time for me, as it can be for many high school students. At the time, people often told me not to indicate my race on any standardized test (SAT, ACT) or application because of my race. I heard “they don’t want Asian students, you won’t get in” from family, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, neighbors; seemingly everyone I came into contact with believed that being Asian would hinder my ability to get accepted into any college, especially elite institutions. My understanding of affirmative action was still limited as a senior in high school, and I listened to those around me. After receiving rejections from several top-tier schools, I went into my undergraduate institution with deep feelings of bitterness at the college admissions process and society as a whole, and regret for being Asian instead of another “more marginalized” racial identity that I thought would increase my likelihood of admission. These misguided beliefs are common among Asian American college applicants (Kang, 2019). The lack of critical understanding of affirmative action coupled with recent affirmative action lawsuits can further cloud the true intentions of the policy’s opponents to promote a racial hierarchy that pits Asian Americans against other POC.

*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and *Fisher v. University of Texas* exemplify how higher education policy can create conflict between Asian Americans and other POC (Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Moses, et al., 2019). Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), an organization led by conservative white male Edward Blum, argued that Harvard discriminated against Asian American applicants by requiring higher standardized test scores compared to white applicants, and had a lower “personal score” compared to other racial minority groups despite their higher academic performance (Lombardo & Nadworny, 2019). SFFA also argued for the implementation of race-blind admissions at Harvard, explaining that Harvard could still get a diverse student population without considering race. Harvard denied these allegations and presented contrasting statistical analyses that showed that Asian American students’ race did not impact their probability of admission. In the end, the judge ruled in favor of Harvard, stating that there is no strong evidence of racial discrimination against Asian Americans.

In *Fisher v. University of Texas*, Abigail Fisher – a white student backed by Edward Blum’s organization – claimed she was denied entry into the University of Texas due to her race (Liptak, 2016). Edward Blum also supported several other affirmative action lawsuits all arguing that universities’ affirmative action policies discriminated against white applicants (Moses et al., 2019). Given this context, the Harvard and the University of Texas lawsuits present examples of Asian American racial wedge politics that benefit white dominance (Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Moses et al., 2019). After several failed attempts by white individuals and groups to end affirmative action policies that use race-conscious admissions, plaintiffs in the Harvard case used Asian Americans as “racial mascots” to show that affirmative action is harmful not to white students, but to a non-white group (Poon & Segoshi, 2018). The direct beneficiaries of the elimination of affirmative action, however, are white students, not Asian American students. The arguments presented in these lawsuits are based on meritocracy, an inherently white dominant ideology that fails to consider the intersectionality of identities and unearned privileges bestowed upon dominant groups. The focus on higher academic “merit” via test scores and grades of white and Asian American students shifts our attention away from the actual reason SFFA and others challenge affirmative action: to keep more spaces for white students in elite institutions and maintain the racial hierarchical order (Moses et al., 2019).

### **Targeting the Underrepresented Student**

Asian American students are not considered a minority group or people of color by many higher education institutions (Lee, 2008). This removal leads to our exclusion from participating in events, programs, and other contexts that include other POC. I experienced this exclusion as a tour guide for a recruitment event specifically for underrepresented racial minority students. At the time, the college was increasing recruitment efforts aimed at minority students. I had a lot of experience working at various recruitment, donor, and alumni tours in the past, and as a senior tour guide from a racial minority group, I expected to work at this recruitment event. However, the event staff told me that they did not select me to participate because I “don’t count” as a racial minority. I felt an initial jolt of shock, then quickly rationalized their decision and quietly accepted the story of overrepresentation and exclusion of Asian Americans from the POC who do “count.”

My experience highlights the exclusive language around diversity and inclusion in education, which often uses the term “underrepresented minority” (Mukherji, 2017). Underrepresented minorities typically include Black and Latinx or Hispanic groups, and occasionally Native Americans. For example, the State University of New York, one of the most diverse public institutions of higher education, only includes Black and Hispanic groups under their definition of underrepresented minorities (Mukherji et al., 2017). According to Lee (2008), Asian Americans

are not considered a minority due to our overrepresentation in higher education, combined with other factors such as aggregated data around socioeconomic attainment. Thus, institutional leaders and administrators believe Asian Americans are not disadvantaged and do not need the same support and resources as other minority groups.

My experience is not a singularity. The harmful impact of the de-minoritization of Asian Americans can also be seen in Chung (2014). The researcher analyzed the progression of a student-led multiracial coalition against racism on a college campus (referred to as “MU” by the author) that formed to protest racist incidents and the administration’s lack of response (Chung, 2014). The coalition leadership, who were majority Black, Latinx, and Native American students, noted the absence of Asian American students in the coalition and in activism around racial issues on campus in general. These students along with the few Asian American student protesters expressed frustration with this apparent lack of participation. Part of the issue, according to Chung, is the university’s decision regarding the classification of Asian American students as non-minorities. Therefore, Asian American student organizations fell under Student Affairs instead of the Minority Student department where Black, Latinx, and Native American student organizations resided (Chung, 2014).

The tension from the institutional de-minoritization of Asian Americans impeded upon Asian American students’ sense of belongingness to the multiracial coalition. Asian American student leaders in this coalition described the negative perceptions and exclusion they felt from other students of color in the group as well as in predominantly white leadership groups (Chung, 2014). One student shared that “while she was confident in her identity as a campus leader, she could not discount the very real sense and feeling that her opinions were ‘overlooked’ and ‘[counted] less’ because she is an Asian American woman” (Chung, 2014, p. 126). Coalition leadership further excluded Asian Americans in their written documents of demands. The leaders (again, none of whom were Asian American) only wanted to include Southeast Asians in their discussions of marginalized student groups, and did not include Asian American students in their demands for increased resources for minority students. Clearly, conflict between Asian Americans and other POC groups exists within higher education, fostering the ostracization of Asian Americans from all other racial groups.

## **Discussion**

The de-minoritization of Asian Americans and exclusion from the POC community has widespread impact on higher education policies and practices. In affirmative action policies, Asian Americans are used as a racial wedge or middleperson minority between white and other minoritized racial and ethnic groups, typically

Black, Latinx, and Native American communities. In *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, SFFA portrayed Asian Americans as victims of affirmative action to benefit white dominance (Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Moses et al., 2019). Popular arguments fail to consider the historical context in which white supremacy forces Asian Americans into conflict with Black and other POC groups and how that manifests in the affirmative action opposition. The essence of the problem is not affirmative action itself, but the misuse of population statistics and merit as a means to determine advantages and disadvantages among people of color. The effects of this racial wedge are also present in practice with the tension between Asian American and other minority student groups. The message of Asian Americans as a dominant rather than a marginalized group by white dominant systems influences our sense of belongingness to communities of color. This divide between Asian Americans and other minoritized racial groups leads to the exclusion of Asian Americans from the POC community.

A shift in language around diversity and inclusion is necessary, particularly “minority” and “underrepresented minority.” Instead, using terms such as POC, marginalized, or oppressed groups can call out white supremacy without entrenching POC in a false hierarchy. The current definitions of minority and underrepresented minority inherently rank some people of color over others in terms of deserving assistance and support (Mukherji et al., 2017). Diversity efforts are typically focused on those who qualify as underrepresented minorities (Black, Latinx, and Native American students) and exclude those who do not (Asian Americans) on the basis of aggregate data that does not allow for a nuanced understanding of all marginalized racial and ethnic groups. The attempt to quantify oppression strictly in a numerical sense prevents the critical understanding of the experiences of all POC, especially Asian Americans who are deemed “advantaged” and “successful” by such quantification. Therefore, in order to foster connection between Asian Americans and POC, present notions of diversity and inclusion must be transformed using critical theory that centers all POC in research, policy, and practice.

### **Conclusion**

The racism against Asian Americans is far more complex and nuanced than what society tends to believe. As seen in higher education policies and practices such as affirmative action, recruitment, and student activities, Asian Americans are purposefully used as a middleperson minority, garnering animosity from both dominant (white) and oppressed (Black, Latinx, and Native American) groups. This position also excludes us from the POC community, resulting in a lack of belongingness to any community. A transformation of the notions of “diversity” and “minority” are needed, as well as the dismantling of white-serving systems that pit people of color against one another. Words, in publishing and reading, have power. Through writing this piece, I work towards reclaiming my identity as a person of color and

reintegrating Asian Americans into the POC community. Through investigating the academic literature, I find sources of support and knowledge that allow me (and us) to be seen and heard. In sharing my lived experiences, I help our community to be seen and heard. Higher education practices must work towards the same goals. Acknowledging the exclusion of Asian Americans through the forced racial hierarchy can guide better practices and policies that include all people of color.

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