

Notes on Campus Climate from The Asian American Studies Program, Cornell University

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The issues and suggestions addressed in this report emerged from our conversations with Asian American graduate and undergraduate students (on an individual and group basis) and Wai-Kwong Wong, a new counselor at CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services), Gannett, and are also based on the 1998 COFHE (Consortium on Financing Higher Education) survey of Cornell graduating seniors, secondary literature on Asian Americans and higher education and our own experiences at Cornell as core faculty of the Asian American Studies Program with joint appointments in English and Anthropology.

The label "Asian American" (which the U.S. census records as "Asian Pacific American") encompasses individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds. While this is true for any identity label, the relative newness of this identity label "Asian American" (late 1960s) and the specific history of its development combined with the diversity introduced by the post-1965 wave of immigrants from "Asia" have, we believe, made it impossible to treat "Asian American" as a singular identity. As such to present an "Asian American" voice or concern, as we have been asked to do for this report, is an almost impossible task. On the one hand while we believe it is politically important for "Asian Americans" to have representation as a "discriminated" group, on the other hand, it is vital that we always keep in mind the heterogeneity of interests, experiences, cultures and class polarities characterizing this group.

The Hidden Injuries of Race

The Cornell campus environment is clearly conditioned by the articulations of race and ethnicity in the wider society. As a minority group, Asian Americans are symbolically and structurally positioned differently from other minority groups. One significant difference is that as a racially marked group "Asian Americans" tend to be "invisible." For example, the "1998 Audit of Violence Against Asian Pacific Americans" reports,

Despite the heightened national awareness of hate crimes generally, the media continues to overlook bias incidents against APAs. The national media ignored the hate murder of Naoki Kamijima in Illinois despite the fact the local police immediately and publicly identified it as a hate crime. The national media also failed to consistently identify the murder of Joseph Ito as a racially motivated hate crime, generally identifying him only as a letter carrier and inadequately covering the concerns of the Asian Pacific American community. As a result, community leaders, government officials and law enforcement regularly fail to recognize an anti-Asian incident as a hate crime, underestimate the problem of anti-Asian violence and fail to direct adequate resources to addressing it (National Asian Pacific American legal Consortium [NAPALC] 1998: 4).

The continued negative stereotyping of Asian Americans in the media, if and when they are included at all (NAPALC 1998: 4), also fosters the conceptual invisibility to which Asian Americans are subject. While, on the one hand, Asian Americans can be said to have been rendered conceptually invisible, they nonetheless continue to suffer the consequences of being racially marked. In our conversations with Asian American students at Cornell over the years, we have often heard students recount instances of their subjection to racial denigration both inside and outside the classroom, in the form of hostile comments or offensive jokes from both faculty and students—including other students of color. Below we sketch out how the societal ascription of invisibility to Asian Americans translates into campus life at the level of the

socio-economic, the psychological and the academic.

The conceptual invisibility of Asian Americans is both reflected in and a function of nomenclature. As with other minority groups Asian Americans also face the problematic consequences of classification. However, there are two ambiguities to do with classification that are specific to Asian Americans. The first has to do with the frequent conflation of Asian American with Asian by non-Asian American groups. While we cannot go into the details of the material and symbolic implications of this conflation, it is imperative that the wider community recognizes this distinction because Asian American students as opposed to foreign students from Asia have very different psychological and social needs. Second, it is important to note that while Asian Americans are classified as "minorities" at Cornell they are **not** classified as an "**underrepresented minority**." One of the negative consequences of this distinction is that often Asian American students are forced to bear the stigma and burdens of being a "minority" without having access to resources and support allocated to "underrepresented Minorities." Even more troublesome is that Asian American students who do not fit the "model-minority" profile (of which there are many) are categorically denied financial and social resources that they would otherwise qualify for given their combined status of being a minority from a low income group. The educational attainment of different Asian American groups, for example, vary widely—in 1990 almost 66% of Asian Indian men and 49% of Asian Indian women had at least a bachelor's degree in comparison to the 7% of Hmong men and 3% of Hmong women. The Southeast Asian population has the highest percentage with less than a high school degree (64%), the highest rate of unemployment (amongst Asian American groups) and the highest welfare dependency rates of any ethnic or racial group in the United States. As Espiritu observes, "these statistics call attention to the danger of lumping all Asian groups together because Southeast Asians—and other disadvantaged groups—do not share in the relatively favorable socioeconomic outcomes attributed to the "average" Asian American."

In spite of this heterogeneity, Asian American students across a wide spectrum of Asian American groups have expressed a common dissatisfaction with their experiences at Cornell. Lack of interaction with faculty ranks high on the list of dissatisfactions. Assuming that the faculty are not reluctant to meet with Asian American students, what might be some of the reasons for this specific dissatisfaction?

Asian American students comprised 60.04% of minority undergraduates in 1999, and according to the COFHE survey of graduating seniors in 1998, Asian Americans at Cornell expressed the least satisfaction with their undergraduate Cornell experience (in comparison to other minority groups and whites). Among the areas of least satisfaction reported by students were "pre-major academic advising" and "climate for minorities," areas that directly implicate faculty. According to this report, among all ethnic groups, Asian American students were the least likely to find faculty accessible. This statistic seems to bear out Wai-Kwong Wong's observation that Asian American students are reluctant to approach a professor with their problems because of a heightened sense of "shame" over their perceived "failure" or because they have little sense of their own entitlement.

At the same time, however, Asian American students' apparent reluctance to approach faculty might not be a matter of reluctance at all but rather a matter of their use of different cultural codes for expressing their needs, codes that might often go unrecognized by faculty. Thus Asian American students' perceived reluctance to approach faculty may not be a consequence of shame or a lack of a sense of entitlement as much as a function of *misrecognition*. It can hardly be said that Asian American students are less inclined to attend to their own self-interest than any other students. How they express or pursue that self-interest, however, may involve complicated issues of cultural difference that, if unacknowledged by faculty, may disadvantage Asian American students in their efforts to advance their academic careers. Evidence from the COFHE report and discussions we had, especially with undergraduates who expressed a strong desire for more meaningful interactions with faculty, would support this explanation.

The model minority stereotype of the Asian American student has also contributed to the false assumption that Asian American students do not need either academic or psychological help. Contrary to this common assumption, the Counseling and Psychological Services' 1998-99 Annual Report notes that a substantial proportion of Asian American students seek help from CAPS. He also notes a specific pattern of behavior among Asian American students using CAPS services, the most striking being that many tend to wait until the last minute or until they feel totally trapped before seeking help. While the work of exploring this pattern of behavior falls outside the scope of a statement intended to be preliminary in its assessments, it is possible nonetheless to draw from Wong's observations the need to examine the specificity of both the nature of Asian American students' needs and their modes of expressing those needs as well as the faculty's ability to recognize those modes of expression.

The inability of the wider (campus) society to recognize the specific academic and psychological needs of Asian American students can hinder academic and career progress. For example, a study conducted by Judy Jenvold (1995), chief health professions advisor at Cornell, suggests that Asian American students who are commonly characterized as "introverted," "quiet" or "shy" may be perceived as poor candidates for medical school (despite high GPAs and MCAT scores) because the cultural bias of American society works to reward extroverts. Thus, despite the fact that an "introvert" personality type might better fit a positive profile of a physician, dominant society's cultural bias acting in concert with misrecognition can transform positive traits into negative ones and thereby limit life chances of Asian American students.

Faculty could work to alleviate these specific problems by helping students negotiate among these different cultural codes (that often lead to misrecognition) in their classrooms. Faculty could also actively support the efforts of Wai-Kwong Wong and Judy Jenvold at CAPS and the Career Center respectively, to explore the specific psychological and social needs of Asian American students.

What we have characterized as Asian American "invisibility" at the social and psychological levels translates into a question of intellectual legitimacy at the academic level. All too often Asian American Studies and other Ethnic Studies Programs are perceived as parochial exercises in identity politics. While there seems to be a commitment on the part of higher education institutions across the country to create ethnic studies programs, very few institutions have demonstrated the equally important commitment to "systematically and effectively address the larger issue of ethnic studies as a way of achieving a broad-based liberal education" (Final Report of the Asian American Studies Project Advisory Committee, Cornell University 1987: 5). More than a decade later, the 1998 College of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Report betrayed precisely such a troubling sentiment (that is, the inability to recognize the importance of ethnic studies in realizing a broad based liberal arts education). Referring to minority students and faculty, the report stated "...we must actively recruit more graduate and undergraduate students in these critical areas so that faculty feel that they are engaged in important pedagogic and mentoring relations" (Humanities Report 1998: 20). This notion that minority faculty and their courses primarily serve minority constituencies, once again reveals the misrecognition of the role of minority faculty and of the intellectual content of ethnic studies. To suggest that minority faculty feel engaged in important pedagogic and mentoring relations primarily when they are working with minority students is to unnecessarily limit the role(s) of minority faculty and to diminish their pedagogic capacity and mission. The climate facing minority students and ethnic studies programs—ghettoization, the not so subtle message of being merely tolerated, and the belief that minority faculty and the courses they offer are only of concern to a specific student constituency—reflects the symbolic (un)importance given to ethnic studies as a legitimate field of intellectual inquiry on this campus. To deal effectively with this problem we need to reevaluate the curriculum and how we conceptualize our courses. The African American writer James Baldwin makes this point by remarking that if you were to manage "to change the curriculum in all the schools so that [African Americans] learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only [African Americans], you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own

history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody's history, you must lie about it all. If you have to lie about my real role here, if you have to pretend that I hoed all that cotton just because I loved you, then you have done something to yourself. You are mad." The inclusion of the histories and cultures of historically marginalized groups is not meant to be a mere additive to the curriculum but, rather, a transformational force. The target audiences of such courses of study are not just members of the groups in question but all members of the campus community. We cannot stress this latter point enough.

The faculty of each department can make a significant contribution to improve the general climate of the Cornell environment for minority students by recognizing and engaging with Ethnic Studies Programs. It is clear from the COHFE report that it is those groups labeled as "mainstream" that need to do the most "work" to implement positive change since minority groups of necessity have had to develop the skills and sensitivity to deal with all groups—they often do not have the privilege of seclusion contrary to the opinions of some. For example, the 1997 AACU (Association of American Colleges and Universities) report stated, "Contrary to widespread reports of self-segregation among students of color on campuses, the research finds this pattern more common of white students. Students of color interact more with white students than the reverse" (in Statement by John Ford, Dean of Students from the Faculty Senate Meeting on February 10, 1999). The most efficient and practical medium through which to educate the mainstream lies in exactly what we as faculty are here to do—educate. We suggest that the issues/concerns/themes usually "ghettoized" in ethnic studies courses be incorporated into mainstream courses. Here the faculty could play an important role. As instructors of ethnic studies courses we are often frustrated at the ethnic composition of our classes—it seems that the people who most need to be made aware of these issues seldom take our classes, thus leaving us to primarily educate those who already have a certain sophisticated and mature attitude toward issues of diversity. We need to get away from this notion that ethnic studies courses are only for minorities. Faculty can facilitate this process in primarily two ways: first, in their capacity as advisors, by encouraging students, particularly those who are NOT minorities, to take ethnic studies courses and second, by making a concerted effort to incorporate minority issues into their courses. On this second point, given the absence of such initiatives on the part of the Arts college, the Asian American Studies Program has in the past made efforts on its own to provide advice, research and teaching materials, audio-visual resources and small research grants to faculty interested in incorporating Asian American material into their courses—either existing courses or new ones. However, given the very limited financial resources of such small academic units as the Asian American Studies Program, the active involvement and support of the university administration is crucial to the furtherance of such efforts. The sentiment that "mainstream" courses actively engage in issues that are normally relegated to "ethnic studies courses" is a pressing concern for students and we share their concern. As educators, it is appropriate that we look to the curriculum as a primary means of implementing change.

Ethnic Studies Programs such as Asian American Studies are constantly struggling to meet student needs, to have adequate courses on the books and to retain faculty. In short we need more resources. Students have complained that we had too few courses in terms of number and variation to make our concentration attractive. As a result many students who are interested don't bother pursuing this interest. Paradoxically, the facts of "too few concentrations" or "low enrolments" are used as a rationale for not providing resources to expand our programs. In some cases, faculty can ease this dilemma by cross-listing those of their courses with significant Asian American content with the Asian American Studies Program, thereby increasing the number and variety of courses offered toward the concentration. The faculty and administration can also simply support ethnic studies programs.

This statement has tried to bring to light some of the challenges posed by the record of Asian American students' dissatisfaction with their experiences at Cornell. The observations contained herein are meant to

initiate discussion over ways in which to improve the campus climate, not just for Asian American students, but for all students.

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