

# Asians are an invisible minority on campus

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This article is the first in a series regarding the culture, politics, and current affairs concerning the Asian/Asian American community. It aims to discuss what it means to be Asian, a problematic label and identity, and to engage the University community in open and critical discussion in this regard. More discussion about these issues can be found at [take-out.blogspot.com](http://take-out.blogspot.com).

It has been over a year since the University finally recognized Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) as a racial minority group. However, recognition of our minority status has remained at the level of discourse and has yet to manifest itself in any tangible form for graduate and professional students. While we appreciate the university including us under the umbrella Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA), there are three major areas in which we as graduate and professional students would like to see material change. These are: treating APAs as minorities in the admissions and funding processes, recruiting and retaining APA faculty, and the timely opening of a new and expanded Amandla/"Diversity" Center.

First, APAs are not uniformly considered minorities for the purposes of graduate and professional admissions and funding. We believe that they should be. Contrary to the popular stereotype of APAs as affluent, overachieving nerds or "model minorities," the category APA encompasses a broad diversity of people from a range of nations, classes, and socio-economic backgrounds. The University fails to recognize this diversity in its admissions and funding policies, forcing immigrant, refugee, first-generation in college, and/or working-class and poor APAs to compete with whites for limited numbers of entry slots and scarce financial resources. It is our understanding that Asians and whites compete in one admissions and funding pool while blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans compete in another for entry and funding.

This system is inherently unfair to all prospective students because it conflates race and class in the admissions and funding processes. For APA applicants, this structure becomes doubly problematic. The APA applicants who are children of working-class immigrants and refugees often do not have the same educational backgrounds or access to the kinds of opportunities that are heavily favored in the admissions process. Furthermore, APAs are excluded from consideration for awards from important minority funding resources such as the Trustee Fellowships. This policy stands in unattractive contrast with that of our peer institution, Princeton. For example, at Princeton "minority status" is considered at the level of departments and divisions, so that APAs are eligible for minority recruitment and funding in a number of departments. Using "model minority" logic to refuse APAs consideration as minorities in the admissions and funding process denies many deserving applicants the opportunity for a Chicago education, renders invisible the racial and socio-economic status of APAs, and, in short, is simply racist.

Second, we believe the university needs to make a concerted effort to recruit and retain faculty of color, including faculty who are of Asian/Pacific descent. With the anger and concern sparked by the comments made by the president of Harvard University, the necessity of attracting and retaining a diverse faculty is clear. Not only is it essential for underrepresented students to see themselves reflected in their teachers, but the lack of representation in higher education can lead to negative assumptions about suitability for

academic careers, or possibly even positions of authority. For all students, a diverse faculty can help keep the rarefied air of the ivory tower from smothering the conditions and experiences of the world outside it.

For APA students specifically, opportunities to be mentored by someone of a similar racial and cultural background are priceless in an academic setting where so much hinges on unwritten rules and institutional knowledge. In some departments and schools, there are literally no faculty members of Asian descent. In others where an Asian Pacific American professor or professors can be found, they are often overburdened by unending calls from graduate, professional, and undergraduate students to serve as academic advisors as well as informal mentors and consultants for Registered Student Organizations (RSOs). Faculty members who specialize in research and teaching on Asian Pacific Americans - an extreme rarity at the University of Chicago - are in even higher demand as a resource by students, faculty, and staff.

A case in point is that one particular professor in the Social Sciences currently serves as the dissertation chair for five APA graduate students in her department working on APA-related projects and has served as the official faculty adviser for our group, the Asian Pacific American Graduate Student Collective, since its inception in the 1999-2000 school year. In addition, this particular professor is presently the sole APA faculty member on the steering committee of the Provost's Initiative on Minority Issues, the administrative body charged with formulating strategies for the University to enhance racial diversity at this institution. Without her presence at this University - particularly in the years before APAs were included under the OMSA mandate - where would we have turned for intellectual and institutional guidance?

Third, we would like to endorse the administration's resolve to open a new Amandla/"Diversity" Center. We urge the school to go forward with the plans as soon as possible. A centralized physical space to be used and shared by a range of students is of utmost importance in building a campus climate and community that will attract and retain students of color, one of the major concerns of the University administration with regard to race. We hasten to add that the restructured Amandla/"Diversity" Center is sorely needed, and will be widely used by graduate and professional students as well as undergraduate students. The school's current facilities are not equipped to accommodate the on-going, round-the-clock demands of student life and activity in a welcoming, accessible environment.

Again, while we commend the University for conceding, finally, that Asian/Pacific Americans are indeed a bonafide racial minority group, we strongly encourage the administration to take further steps to address the specific needs of APAs and all minority graduate and professional students in concrete, material ways. No less than the future of our institution is at stake.

The Asian Pacific American Graduate Student Collective has been a Registered Student Organization since 2000. The APAGSC aims to address issues concerning APA and minority graduate and professional student life, facilitate campus programming to broaden understandings of APA experiences, and contribute to Chicago's greater APA community through educational and social outreach.

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