Voices of Asian American Students

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Asian American students will confront issues of their identity; racial, ethnic, and individual identity is learned outside of the classroom. Interestingly enough, this education that students desire attempts to undo some of the subtle oppression that was freely provided to them by elementary, middle, and high schools. The concept of an Asian American identity did not exist in the minds of Asian American high school students due to the lack of text and study on Asian Americans and their contributions to the creation of America. [Bao]

When an undergraduate representative was needed, I went. I sat on committees, review boards, and various meetings while juggling a full course load and a job. In addition, the AASU [Asian American Student Union] was spearheading initiatives that promoted greater awareness of our community. Though I chose to partake in each of these activities, it was a double-edged sword. I soon came to realize that the burden of responsibility, in terms of promoting change, was on the student. [Angela]

Damn this inequality. Damn the stupid people in positions of power who could make at least a penmark of a difference in how the institutional structures could be more conducive to Asian American students’ total experience. Damn them for not even caring to ask what they can do to help us. Damn those who ask, who seem concerned, and don’t lift a finger to apply what they just heard from us. Damn those whose definition of happy students is so narrow that they don’t even consider that our requests are valid just because [they don’t] fit into their box of what a happy student should want and need. Who has a say in our happiness? Who has the most impact? Who has the positions to make a difference? How would you work with a student like me?
What sort of steps would you take to understand my experience on top of the hundreds of other students of color here? [Sophia]

These are the voices of three Asian American college students. In introducing this issue of *New Directions for Student Services*, we wanted to hear directly from today’s students about some of their issues, insights, and struggles to remind us of the students who are the motivation for much of our work and to set the context for the following chapters of theory, research, and commentary. We asked Angela, Bao, and Sophia to share their thoughts regarding their experiences in college as Asian American students. We asked them to write freely and honestly, and in selecting excerpts, we have tried to be true to the essence of their original essays.

Their writing illustrates themes of marginalization, inadequate resources and lack of diversity among staff, institutionalized privilege, racism, and the need for a safe space on campus; the students also offer suggestions and insights to higher education professionals. In reading their thoughts, consider how these students’ concerns may be similar to or different from those of the Asian American students on your campus.

**Feeling Marginalized, Misunderstood, andDisconnected from the College Campus**

One of my professors told me that Asian American students are apathetic and they are here just to study and get their degree and get out. Students are disconnected due to the fact that they cannot relate to the people who are making the decisions that affect them. It is difficult for students to accept and take ownership of an institution when they feel that they are not a part of the institution. The university needs to change its routine and enact creative methods to recruit quality Asian American administrators—chancellors, vice chancellors, and directors. The university lacks the diversity in leadership that has manifested itself to a campus that too many say lacks spirit and pride. [Bao]

Countless students of color are still accepting that less than equal and best treatments are commonplace occurrences in school. There is no system of appeals or checks to realize the unfair experiences for the students of color compared to their white counterparts. There just doesn’t seem to be any room in the large agenda of the student affairs practitioners to try to accommodate all of the student population. So devastating experiences continue to happen to students of color. [Sophia]

As a junior, I do not feel foolish to ask where the adequate resources for APAs [Asian Pacific Americans] are. I continue to search for outreach from the administration, faculty, and staff. However, the APA community has just begun to be understood; misconceptions still plague the APA community. I want to arrive at the point where freshmen feel welcomed and understood
when they enter any office on campus or are greeted by any staff member. I want to be assured that each faculty member or administrator is well versed on the issues pertaining to APAs even before APAs address them. [Angela]

**Inadequate Resources and Diversity Among Staff**

Many students go about college without having a role model to be able to acknowledge that they are capable of achieving high goals. The university campus is visibly diverse among the student population, yet the leadership in administration does not reflect the demographics of the students. This is an important issue that needs to be addressed when there is only one Asian American administrator for a campus that is almost 60 percent Asian American. The result of the lack of a diverse administration leads these students to [feel] detached from the university. [Bao]

In terms of adequate support, there was only one part-time graduate student whose job description was specific to working with the APA population. I quickly learned that I had to operate under a limited budget and limited personal resources. If I needed to talk to someone who would understand me entirely—culturally and personally—other than my peers, who would I turn to? I was aware of the many faculty, staff, and administrative positions and offices that were offering their facilities and time, yet they were not as well versed on APA issues. I now realize how essential it is for APAs to be able to relate to someone of the same or similar cultural background. It is key for APAs to have the option of learning from someone who has personal experience coupled with book knowledge to make sense of and to validate what they are feeling. [Angela]

While my organization of concerned students continued to arrange meetings and stressfully prepare an argument to ask the administration to take action, these boys practiced their skits that were homophobic, sexist, and just stupid. While our organization struggled to prove that students in power were racist enough to slash our budget by 84 percent, these boys used their funds to print offensive flyers depicting racially stereotypical images. [Sophia]

**Institutionalized Privilege and Racism**

I realized that institutionalized privilege, exemplified by a number of offices and staff, was rampant among historically white organizations. This is one structural example in which the ideological expression of privilege covertly haunts APAs and other communities. I feel that staff members and directors of prominent offices on campus need to be more acutely aware of the structures of their respective offices. In a prominent office on campus, there are three full-time staff members to work with the Greek community, versus only
one part-time graduate student each assigned to work with the APA, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Latino, and black communities. [Angela]

How can student leaders correctly voice the opinions of Asian American students if all the leaders are white students? . . . I raise two very basic questions: (1) How are students ever going to understand the differences in experiences between Asian Americans and others if even the negative and threatening issues are not allowed to be raised? (2) Why are student affairs practitioners not working to overcome [the] obvious disregard for so many of their students of color’s needs? You cannot possibly sell the diversity of the school to outsiders and comment about how wonderful programs and life on campus are if there is still discrimination. That sends a message to the students of color that they are not worth as much as the white students are. And that their voices are not to be heard because other students, white students, can speak for them and everything will be fine. [Sophia]

Having a Safe Space on Campus

I immediately found comfort in the Asian American Student Union. The AASU enabled me to be more aware of my identity as an Asian Pacific American woman and allowed me to foster my culture in a safe space. [Angela]

The most valuable asset that the university possesses is its cross-cultural center—its staff, leadership and opportunities for leadership development, physical space, and friendly atmosphere. The center gives students a physical space to celebrate their diversity. It provides leadership through qualified leaders who also happen to reflect more of the demographics of the student population. Students are then able to organize, be creative, and—most important—learn. The cross-cultural center offers students a comfortable environment to obtain everything needed that is missing in the classroom and lecture halls. [Bao]

The Asian American mentor program is a student-run organization to help first-year students transition into college life and also provide workshops to educate students on APA issues. After I went through training week as a mentor, the world changed tints and shades. I saw it in a different light, from a different perspective, and with a thirst to understand more of the societal structures we live in. I realized that I had a much bigger desire to achieve things not only for myself but also for my community on campus. I saw all these possibilities for just a small population of Asian American students on campus, and the thought of extending that sort of work beyond the college “bubble” was astounding to me. [Sophia]

Suggestions for Higher Education Professionals

I implore staff members to be more critical of the implications that come with every program that they advocate for. At a college level, it is impera-
tive for staff to be responsible for deconstructing stereotypes that are rampant among our communities. For Asian American students, who are perceived as the “silent, model minority,” it is extremely important to avoid programs that foster these stereotypes. [Angela]

This community can learn from itself and turn around to teach others, but it must be given the room to grow. Students [obtaining] firsthand experience in this is key to their growth in their ethnic and social identity. Student affairs practitioners, faculty, and administration should embrace these sorts of programs and use their positions to support and encourage growth in this area. [Sophia]

I recall wishing that the bulk of the outreach from faculty, staff, and administrators was more proactive than reactive; I wanted to witness them actively engaging with the APA community. I believe that it is necessary for the administrators to use their positions to create purposeful programs that would enhance the campus climate. . . . It is disheartening to attend “diversity” initiatives and a plethora of other similar committees when those who called for the meeting are not present; the administration is represented by graduate students. In addition, there are rarely public reports on the results of these initiatives. Thus students who have exhausted their efforts and compromised their class schedules to participate feel shortchanged. [Angela]

Angela’s, Bao’s, and Sophia’s are messages strong, insightful, and meaningful. They offer powerful imperatives to us in higher education not only to take notice of what they say but also, even more important, to hold ourselves and our profession accountable to developing practices, policies, and theories that promote the education and development of Asian American students. As you read the other chapters of this issue, we ask you to keep in mind these students’ thoughts, concerns, and passions and to consider what their messages mean for you in your work with Asian American college students.

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