

Review

The Asian American Dilemma in DEI: Finding Space in the Diversity Debates

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Abstract: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, better known as DEI, has transformed higher education. Since its inception in the 1960s, DEI has experienced a series of highs and lows. In response to racial justice activism that emerged in 2020, DEI initiatives started to gain more traction. However, several new challenges threaten the future of DEI. The 2023 Supreme Court ruling striking down the use of affirmative action in admissions, the conservative backlash against Critical Race Theory, and the increase in racially targeted violence have slowed the momentum of DEI initiatives across the country. In addition, certain groups, like Asian Americans, face a unique dilemma in the diversity debates as racial and ethnic minorities that are considered overrepresented in higher education. This essay examines where Asian Americans fit in the diversity debates today and explores what the situation looks like for Asian Americans in higher education when DEI is under attack. It concludes by offering suggestions for making Asian Americans more visible and what institutions should be doing to enhance wellness for minorities on campus.

Keywords: affirmative action; Asian Americans; DEI; race; workload

1. Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, better known as DEI, has transformed higher education. The three values represented in DEI are about enhancing an institution's diversity by having different people in the room; creating equity by giving people fair treatment, access, and opportunity; and building inclusion to ensure that individuals and their perspectives are incorporated such that they can make meaningful contributions. This concept of DEI is not new, and it has experienced both highs and lows over the years. Its resurgence at a time of increasing political polarization in the United States is also creating a new set of challenges that threaten its future.

The origins of DEI date back to the 1960s, when civil rights activists demanded a more inclusive curriculum and racial diversity in the student body. The Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) coalition led by students at San Francisco State College and the University of California Berkley was instrumental in establishing Ethnic Studies programs, advocating for more faculty of color hires, and increasing access for underrepresented student groups in higher education. The TWLF organized strikes and protests to demand acknowledgment of the "histories of communities of color as vital scholarship" and included a critical examination of the "underemphasized histories of African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos/Chicanas and Native Americans". (See the Third World Liberation Front Research Initiative (twlf) at the Berkley Center for Race and Gender for resources on the history of the movement: <https://crg.berkeley.edu/third-world-liberation-front-research-initiative-twlf> (accessed on 20 December 2023)). While the TWLF coalition helped establish the importance of DEI initiatives in California schools, they were slow to be taken up in other institutions across the country. As a result, there has been considerable variation across institutions, with DEI ranging from being an established part of a university's mission, vision, and values in some cases and being a relatively new addition in others.

In 2020, DEI efforts experienced a resurgence across the United States [1,2]. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism that turned the national spotlight on racial injustice, police



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brutality, and hate crimes targeting minorities helped universities see the need to either establish or reaffirm their commitment to DEI initiatives and to take race seriously. More universities began creating DEI offices or Offices of Inclusion in their bureaucracy, as well as creating Chief Inclusion Officers and Diversity Advocate positions at all levels of university administration [3]. (The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) was established in 2006, with diversity officers and advocates in existence at some institutions even prior to the establishment of this organization. In 2014, the NADOHE already had a published set of standards for Chief Diversity Officers, which were then updated in 2020. See <https://www.nadohe.org/> (accessed on 28 February 2024). While some institutions like the University of Michigan, Ohio State, and others were early adopters of DEI and diversity offices, many others were sparked by the post-2020 BLM activism.) Admissions offices also enhanced their student recruitment programs with more outreach to underserved communities, later highlighting the increased diversity of the student body as a result of these efforts [4]. In addition, institutions across the country have worked to actively recruit more faculty of color and have added measures like requiring diversity statements for job applicants to signal their overall commitment to DEI [5]. Finally, DEI is being introduced into core curriculum requirements as an essential competency to help institutionalize its importance [6,7].

Despite all this positive momentum, DEI efforts have now begun to stall in light of recent legal challenges to the incorporation of race in education. Conservative political agendas have targeted the study of race and historical oppression for removal from all levels of education and have placed Critical Race Theory (CRT) and DEI under attack throughout the United States. One of the problems is that CRT, which originated as a field of study in the 1970s with the scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Alan Freeman, and others who examined how race was a social construct entrenched in our legal system, is mistakenly identified as advocating “discriminating against white people in order to achieve equity” [8] (p. 1). This characterization is misleading and ignores both its intellectual origins in postmodernist thought and the basic tenets which question essentialist notions of identity, objective knowledge, and universal values. CRT asks us to deconstruct how race is embedded in society and our institutions, to examine how interest convergence perpetuates inequality, and to promote storytelling and listening to the lived experiences of individuals to better understand racism and inequality [9]. It is not a form of reverse racism, it does not promote white shame, and it is not corrupting our education system. The narrative surrounding the dangers of CRT, especially with regard to its impact on curricula, is also misguided when one distinguishes between K-12 and higher education. Much of the CRT literature is more academic and not readily accessible or applicable to K-12 education [8]. Nevertheless, Republican-led state legislatures have made CRT a political flashpoint, with 44 states introducing bills or taking steps to restrict CRT or limit the discussion of racism and sexism in schools. (For a detailed assessment of which states have pending legislation on Critical Race Theory, see Schwartz [10]). The emphasis has primarily focused on K-12 education, with fears that white students are being harmed by learning about the oppression and victimization of non-whites that are embedded in the study of American history [8]. Because CRT and DEI have been lumped together as a root of the “problem of race in education”, state legislatures are also banning public universities from funding DEI offices and prohibiting the use of diversity statements in hiring [5,10,11]. Lastly, notable reversals of race-conscious admissions programs in the Supreme Court are sparking new debates nationwide on the future of DEI. Local school boards, state boards of education, and public and private institutions alike are being forced to revisit what role race can and should play in our education system.

DEI is further plagued by the question of *who* is minoritized or considered a marginalized and persecuted group as a result of systemic oppression. It is here that Asian Americans create a conundrum for diversity debates. Racial triangulation theory is a useful lens through which to examine some of these challenges, where stereotypes have helped create an artificial hierarchy of racial groups which can divide rather than unite minority

groups [12]. Kim [12] has shown us that when Asians are portrayed as “model minorities” who more readily overcome the obstacles facing all minorities, they can be unfairly deminoritized by other groups. Moreover, even though Asians are racial minorities in the American population and are considered persons of color, they are often misrepresented as a monolithic group and not classified as “underrepresented” in higher education today [2,13–19]. This disconnect between being a minority in society versus being minoritized in higher education as a subgroup also creates problems for Asian Americans. Therefore, despite momentous gains and challenges to DEI in higher education, Asian Americans struggle to find an appropriate space in the diversity debates and “be seen”.

This essay addresses some of these challenges facing Asian Americans in higher education while DEI is under attack. The problem starts with the misrepresentation of Asian American populations as monolithic and includes a closer examination of how Asian Americans have been deminoritized in higher education. Drawing from personal and professional experiences at the University of Michigan and Texas Christian University, I examine two institutions that have responded to student activism and pursued efforts to institutionalize DEI but have still not adequately incorporated Asian Americans in their diversity initiatives. I begin with a description of the two institutions and their histories with DEI, providing an overview of issues that may apply to similar institutions. Next, I explore how Asian Americans fit in the minority debates, how they are treated differently from other racial and ethnic groups, how they have been overlooked in DEI initiatives, and what new challenges face them with an increase in anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. Finally, I conclude with some suggestions for institutions to prioritize wellness for Asian Americans in higher education in this time of crisis.

2. The DEI Scene from North to South

Two institutions I have been a part of, the University of Michigan and Texas Christian University, offer distinct approaches to institutionalizing DEI and exemplify some of the challenges institutions are experiencing in the current DEI debates. In many ways, they could not be more different. The University of Michigan is a large public university in the North and has been generally considered ideologically more liberal. In comparison, Texas Christian University is a small private liberal arts institution in the South, that is a predominantly white institution (PWI) and is generally perceived to be ideologically conservative. Although the institutions, as I describe them below, have elements that are unique to them, they can also be used to highlight trends seen at similar institutions across the United States.

The University of Michigan serves as an example for how DEI efforts can transform an institution, and it also sits at the center of the current debate regarding its future, playing “a pivotal role in the decades-long debate over race and college access” [11] (p. 1). In 1968, student activists at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor staged a takeover of the administration building and fought to add Black Studies to the curriculum as well as demanding more funding for both African American students and African American faculty hires. In the 1970s, the Black Action Movement forced a 12-day campus shut down, and by the 1980s the university had made a strategic commitment in a proposal known as the “Michigan Mandate” to enhance the campus’s racial and ethnic diversity among students and faculty. At that time, the university had already begun using affirmative action in its admissions process, a policy that would become controversial decades later with both *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003). With the ability to use race as a consideration in admissions protected by the Supreme Court, the university doubled its recruitment of students of color and achieved a 10% increase in African American student enrollment. (See Mangan [11] for a detailed assessment of the University of Michigan’s history of dealing with racism and the birth of its DEI programming).

By 1992, minority enrollment reached an all-time high, with underrepresented racial groups comprising 21.4% of the student body (data are provided by the University of Michigan [20]). The impact of Michigan’s early DEI efforts on campus could be seen in

both the demographics of the student body and in the curriculum. For instance, students pursuing a major in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences were required to take one three-credit Race and Ethnicity (R&E) course. This graduation requirement effectively brought DEI into the mainstream for many students and ensured more widespread exposure to race and ethnic studies. This requirement has stood the test of time as an established part of the curriculum for more than thirty years, while other institutions (my own included) have yet to successfully implement similar requirements. Even today, with DEI under attack nationally, Michigan has been held up as an exemplar for other universities to emulate. Instead of trimming back on DEI, Michigan has doubled down on its DEI efforts, with more than USD 85 million invested, and the DEI office is “considered among the most ambitious and well-funded offices in the nation” [11] (p. 1). This has allowed it to serve as a model for other institutions, especially those that are late adopters of DEI initiatives.

While DEI’s early inclusion at larger and more liberal institutions in the northern United States might have been expected, those at more conservative institutions in the South have not been as fortunate. Historically, there is no denying that views on racial injustice differ in the southern versus the northern United States, with their different histories regarding slavery and racial segregation. My own experiences as an Asian American undergraduate at the University of Michigan and later as a tenured professor at a conservative private liberal arts institution in the South, have given me an opportunity to see these differences regarding racial inequality firsthand. While my experiences are not universal, there are generalizable elements that offer insight into how location and demographics matter when race and ethnicity enter national discussions in higher education.

In contrast to my experiences at the University of Michigan, my current institution of Texas Christian University (TCU) began its work in DEI rather late. When I arrived on campus twenty years ago, we did not have an Ethnic Studies program, we did not have DEI-related offices, and we had few students and faculty of color. According to the TCU Fact Book, American Indian students represented 0.5%, Asians 2.0%, Blacks 5.4%, and Hispanics 6.1% of the student body [21] (p. 21). The racial and ethnic composition of the campus was not very diverse and there was also a lack of diversity in the curriculum. With regard to the institutional components of DEI, it was not until 2016, when a group of TCU students pressured the administration to consider a variety of issues related to race on campus, that the Office of Diversity and Inclusion was created and the Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies department was formed [22] (p. 114). As a conservative, Christian PWI in the South, it is not surprising that attention to ethnic studies and issues of race on campus were slow to materialize and were even met with resistance from white (racial and ethnic majority) students and some faculty. TCU’s own path with DEI was enhanced somewhat after a high-profile civil rights lawsuit was filed against the university in 2020, leading eventually to the creation of a Race and Reconciliation Initiative to study the university’s history with slavery and racism [23]. Scholars have also documented additional challenges for Asian American faculty in Christian higher education [24]. While the administration was making good efforts to promote DEI from the top down, it simply could not negate resistance by some at the grassroots level. The pushback from white faculty across the university was palpable as I found myself listening to colleagues make comments like “maybe diversity means we should include alt-right approaches”. Majority students also demonstrated resistance by making inappropriate comments in class, creating what could be perceived as a hostile environment for our minority students.

Part of the challenge in these settings is that the university’s majority students may not be taking into account racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, or other diversity factors because they simply do not have to. Meanwhile, our minority students do not have the luxury of navigating university life without attention to these differences that leave them often feeling isolated and alone. True institutional change takes time, and many institutions are still working through how to integrate DEI into their campus cultures and enhance its exposure to all students. Curricular changes do not happen overnight. Even implementing something as simple as an R&E requirement needs to have the infrastructure in place to vet

courses for inclusion, to assess learning outcomes, as well as to ensure that the university can offer sufficient courses to ensure graduation [11]. Without a DEI curricular requirement, students will have less exposure to these issues. Only those students who are already interested in courses in Ethnic Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies will enroll in them, impacting a small subset of the student body.

In contrast, faculty and staff can be required to do more with DEI as a necessary condition of employment more readily than at the student level. Administrators have tied DEI training to things like merit and job searches, all of which effectively force faculty and staff to complete the necessary training or certifications as part of their jobs or to gain more resources. Therefore, faculty and staff receive a wider range of opportunities to become better informed on racial injustice, with DEI offices acting as consultants in job searches as well as offering workshops that address mitigating unconscious bias, interrupting microaggressions, and how to recruit and retain faculty of color. Each of these are things that Texas Christian University has implemented to enhance the university's DEI efforts.

Even though scholars [2] have noted that universities ramped up their DEI efforts in the aftermath of the racial justice activism that emerged nationally in 2020, the current political climate has placed DEI under attack. Nationally, a more conservative agenda has taken root, and key states like Florida and Texas have passed laws restricting Critical Race Theory in schools or abolishing and defunding DEI offices. All of this is creating a new culture war that threatens the future of DEI. For an institution like Texas Christian University, the challenges from the surrounding political environment actively work against the initiatives taken at the institution to enhance DEI, although TCU is also protected from being forced to roll back its DEI efforts since it is a private institution that does not receive state funding. In addition, the 2023 Supreme Court rulings declaring the use of race in college admissions unconstitutional have drawn attention to even divides across racial and ethnic groups. The lawsuits by the conservative group Students for Fair Admission against both Harvard (2023) and the University of North Carolina (2023) alleging discrimination against Asian American applicants in favor of using affirmative action to assist African American and Latino students have effectively reversed affirmative action in higher education. The negative consequences of the Supreme Court's decision will be felt throughout higher education for some time, serving yet another difficult blow to DEI. Although DEI and affirmative action address slightly different issues, with DEI focused on campus diversity and affirmative action more narrowly concentrated on reversing systemic discrimination, they are related in how they highlight another racial and ethnic controversy, namely, who is considered a minority within the context of higher education.

3. Who Counts as an Underrepresented Group?

Race is a social and political construct that has been manipulated over time to create included and excluded groups. Determining who constitutes a racial minority is not a simple quantitative exercise, wherein one can easily discern who counts and who does not. This is even more complex when we consider how identity is constructed for those of multiple races. For Asian Americans, the question of minority status is context-dependent, and the marginalized discourse on them can even "contribute to the disregard and denigration of the group in American society" [19]. Despite historical forces that have excluded them in American society and have negatively impacted them, Asian Americans have not been given some of the same considerations that other racial minorities have had in higher education today. (Among the ways Asians have been historically discriminated against in the United States are policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and Executive Order 9066, which led to the establishment of Japanese internment camps.)

While DEI and affirmative action have dominated the discourse involving the racial minorities of African Americans and Latinos in higher education, it is important to note the distinction between "minorities" and "underrepresented minorities". Although affirmative action may have originally been intended to remedy historical discrimination against marginalized groups, which can include giving preferences to minorities, it has not had

the desired effect across groups. Affirmative action's application in the context of higher education has already been challenged on numerous occasions through the courts. For example, remedying historical discrimination alone is not a sufficient or compelling reason to use racial quotas for the purpose of admissions, as determined in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). However, the Supreme Court determined that student body diversity is a compelling interest that justifies the use of race-based admissions. This ruling was further reinforced in the University of Michigan's Supreme Court cases *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003).

The challenge for Asian Americans with respect to affirmative action and race-based admissions is in the erroneous way Asians are captured as a monolithic group in statistics, which makes them appear artificially overrepresented. Treating them as a unified entity disguises the unique historical and structural challenges they face and, by extension, their pursuit of higher education. Therefore, Asians are identified as a racial minority group, yet when aggregated they do not constitute an "underrepresented" minority group and they are not broadly targeted under affirmative action today to enhance the diversity of the student body. This is not to deny that there are subgroups, notably Southeast Asians, who *have* historically benefitted from race-conscious affirmative action programs. However, it can be argued that, today, "virtually no Asian Americans are regarded as viable candidates for student affirmative action programs" [25] (p. 117).

At the heart of problem is the question of representation. Asian Americans are mischaracterized as overrepresented in higher education more generally, even though the overrepresentation is most prevalent in elite universities and in certain geographical locations. Scholars examining why Asian Americans are not treated as underrepresented in the same way as African Americans or Latinos turn to the narrow scope offered by the National Science Foundation (NSF), where Asians are identified as an "overrepresented majority among science and engineering degree recipients" [2] (p. 132). This categorization is problematic because it lumps together all "Asians" as a monolithic group; it aggregates the STEM fields, in which there is considerable variation across individual disciplines; and it occasionally uses data that include international students, thereby artificially inflating the number of Asian students and misrepresenting the population. (Examining data from my home institution of TCU from 2011 to 2022, the percentage of full-time faculty identifying as Asian varied from 0% in the College of Communication to as high as 7.7% in the College of Sciences and Engineering in 2011 and from 3.3% in Education to 13% in Business. However, in most colleges, the corresponding figure was 4–7% during that same timeframe [26]. Data at the department level would likely show many departments, like my home department of Political Science, with none or just one Asian American faculty member during that same timeframe.) Unfortunately, the NSF classification is a standard that other academic programs have adopted to exclude Asian Americans from special consideration as minorities in other areas of higher education, effectively excluding Asians from university funding opportunities and fellowships [16,27–29].

The classification of Asian Americans as an under- or overrepresented group is also problematized when we try to determine who "counts" as Asian. Although Asians comprise sixty percent of the world's total population, within the United States they represent a mere seven percent and are clearly a racial minority. (For more data on the demographic breakdown in the United States, see Ruiz & Shah [30]). Yet even these numbers should be viewed with skepticism in higher education because the distinction between Asians versus Asian Americans can sometimes be blurred. While most schools do not include international students in diversity statistics, they have been known to be folded into data to artificially make the numbers of minority students look higher than they are [31]. Since we cannot always determine definitively where or when international students are included and studies have shown that administrators "frequently" but not definitively distinguish them from domestic students, we must add an extra layer of scrutiny to aggregated statistics on race and ethnicity [4].

Asians should further be disaggregated because there is enormous diversity within the population, which is comprised of 48 different ethnic groups with origins in more than twenty different countries [32]. When the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act lifted restrictions on immigrants from Asian countries, the Asian immigrant population grew rapidly and began transforming the demographics of American society. With quotas removed, it opened the door for those who were classified as “Asian” by virtue of national origin. However, the new group of immigrants was diverse and from a wide range of countries. It is here that we can often see differences within subpopulations in terms of how affirmative action has helped some groups of Asians, notably Southeast Asians, more than others. Within this context of who is classified as Asian, an additional challenge exists for those with South Asian origins because Americans are less likely to consider South Asians as “Asians,” leading to racial assignment incongruity [33]. Thus, the basic premise of who “counts” as Asian is sometimes unclear.

The educational attainment of that large and diverse group identified just as “Asian” varies tremendously. Although research shows that 51% of the broad category of “Asians” aged 25 or older have a bachelor’s degree or a higher qualification, compared to only 30% of all Americans in this age group, delving deeper into the data shows that there are still stark and meaningful differences [32]. For instance, Southeast Asian groups obtain degrees at significantly below the national average, lower than other racial or ethnic groups in the United States [15]. This situation also can vary widely when comparing the generational status of Asian Americans [34]. As each of these examples shows, “Asian” is a problematized categorization that generically treats the population as a monolithic group, whereas the disaggregation of the data would reveal many differences based on field of study, socioeconomic status, national origin, and geographical location.

For many of the reasons listed above, affirmative action has been a divisive and controversial issue involving Asian Americans in higher education. For instance, Edward J. Blum is a conservative who founded the Project for Fair Representation in 2005 and is the president of Students for Fair Admissions, which actively challenge race-based preferences in education. Critics of affirmative action, like Blum, have used Asian Americans as a scapegoat to highlight its failures, going as far as claiming that Asian Americans are against the policy [35]. In part, the 2023 Students for Fair Admissions cases were based on the argument that Asian Americans have been harmed by the use of race-based admissions and may be subjected to *more restrictions* in higher education rather than given preferential consideration. (The two Students for Fair Admissions cases effectively overruled *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), an admissions discrimination case against the University of Michigan, and the affirmative action in admissions precedent-setting case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978).) At the heart of this myth is the manipulation of the monolithic category of Asian Americans and the use of racial triangulation to pit Asian Americans against other minority groups. Thus, it appears that Asian Americans are unfairly excluded as an underrepresented racial minority in higher education based on the aggregation of the group. The problem lies not in affirmative action itself but in the misrepresentation of Asians. While there is little doubt that Asians are minorities who have historically been discriminated against, the bigger question is how do these misrepresentations impact Asians in minority debates regarding higher education.

The aggregation of Asians into a monolithic category has negative spillover effects in the areas of recruitment, retention, and a sense of belonging in higher education. With Asian faculty, we see the same trends that plague other racial and ethnic minorities. Asian Americans are underrepresented in higher administration, at the rank of full professor, and in many disciplines outside of STEM [15,27,28,36–38]. They suffer the same problems with recruitment, hiring, and retention as other historically underrepresented minority groups both within and outside of academia. For example, studies have shown that having an ethnic or foreign name on a job application can decrease a candidate’s likelihood of obtaining an interview [39,40]. With Asian applicants, an ethnic name also generates concerns regarding language competency and accents, where colleagues argue that students will have

trouble understanding lectures and exclude candidates based on “cultural fit” to veil hiring discrimination [27]. Asian American faculty also face the minority tax, a term used to refer to the extra service obligations placed on minority faculty that involve mentoring minority students as well as serving on committees to ensure that the composition is diverse [41,42]. While DEI is beneficial to the university as a whole, it has also created higher demands on minority faculty to fulfill an increasing number of committee slots. Quite simply, the less diverse the campus is, the greater the time obligations for minority faculty, which has an impact on the wellness of both faculty and students.

The last factor to consider regarding where Asian Americans fit in the minority debates on campus is the model minority stereotype. The differential treatment of Asian Americans in higher education is rooted in this model minority myth, suggesting that they work harder than other minority groups, have *overcome* discrimination, and are the group to emulate. The model minority stereotype has its origins in the work of William Petersen (1966), a sociologist who argued that Japanese Americans after World War II were able to reverse their fortunes quickly with hard work and investment in education. Petersen compared Japanese Americans interned during World War II and African Americans who were enslaved for decades, both suffering racial injustice and discrimination in the United States but with different levels of success after incarceration [43]. Based on this research, the model minority myth was born. Asian Americans were seen as better than other minority groups, with higher educational achievement, employment prospects, and income, all of which was taken to demonstrate that it is possible for minorities to overcome adversity and reverse the effects of discrimination. Scholars would later see the model minority stereotype as a means to create racial hierarchy, pitting different groups against each other. Poon et al. [44] argue that the intent and result of the model minority myth was to support white supremacy with the relative valorization of race. Applying Kim’s [12] racial triangulation theory, when whites valorize Asians, they effectively use Asians to further depress African Americans, thereby reinforcing the superior position of whites and creating a racial hierarchy. Thus, the idea of being a *model* minority may seem appealing, but it is based on racist and unfair stereotypes that pit different groups against each other. Scholars [17,45–47] further note that these stereotypes also do harm to Asian Americans by establishing an ideal that can be difficult to uphold. The model minority stereotype does not deny that Asian Americans are minorities, but it does reinforce that they should not be treated in the same way as other minorities in the context of higher education.

Each of these examples demonstrates the need to broaden our understanding of who “counts” as a minority in higher education. One way to do this is to revisit the question of who is historically underrepresented and disaggregate the data to obtain a clearer picture of the Asian American population. When we further dissect the category of who is Asian, break down the data by discipline, and consider the full institutional context, we can see how Asian Americans have been unfairly “deminoritized” in higher education [14].

4. Growing Anti-Asian Sentiment

Although DEI addresses a variety of marginalized groups, Asian Americans have been largely overlooked in these discussions. This is despite disturbing national trends that are placing Asian Americans increasingly at risk of violence and discrimination. As previously noted, the United States has a history of discrimination against Asian Americans, with the Page Exclusion Act (1875), the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the National Origins Act (1924), and the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II as just a few examples of how Asians have been singled out for differential treatment. In recent years, we have also seen Chinese Americans targeted more specifically as China has been treated as a political enemy of the United States. The widespread xenophobia that stemmed from the U.S. Department of Justice’s China Initiative (2018), designed to track down researchers and scholars with suspected ties to the Chinese government under the guise of national security, has had lasting impacts on the Asian American community [48]. The result was a modern-day witch hunt of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants [49]. Investigations and arrests of Chinese

American scientists, engineers, and academics accused of industrial espionage reinforced xenophobia and placed Asian Americans under attack. It was at this time that Confucian Institutes were also put under the microscope and targeted for elimination. Confucian Institutes are educational programs organized in part by the Chinese government to bring greater awareness of Chinese culture and language abroad, and they began appearing in the United States in 2004. In the educational setting, these programs were initially deemed desirable because they came with teachers and resources for budding Chinese language and culture programs. While the controversies surrounding them began much earlier, in 2018, Congress restricted federal funding to schools with these institutes out of concern for their ties to the Chinese government. Since then, the number of Confucian Institutes has declined from more than 100 to less than 5 remaining in the United States [50]. In each of these cases, we see anti-Asian sentiment rooted in xenophobia and escalating in its relevance to the national narrative of today.

In 2020, before the Black Lives Matter movement sought racial justice for George Floyd, the world was already thrown into turmoil with COVID-19. The virus's mysterious origins, highly infectious nature, and disturbing fatality rate were enough to cause panic across the world. When it was determined that China lay at the epicenter of the virus's origins, President Trump soon started referring to it as the "China virus". Politicians perpetuated this idea throughout the media and suggested that COVID-19 was a deliberate effort by the Chinese to manufacture a biological weapon. China quickly became public enemy number one and Americans started blaming Asian Americans indiscriminately for their misfortunes. In the months that followed, there was a surge in anti-Asian hate crimes across the country, with reports of such crimes increasing by 76% to 800% in 2020 [51,52]. Areas with concentrated Asian populations like California and New York saw some of the largest increases in anti-Asian violence. Mass shootings in Atlanta (2021) and Texas (2022 and 2023) targeting Asian Americans also drew national attention, with fear quickly spreading throughout Asian communities. Scholars and Asian American activists argue that both the media and conservative politicians have played a role in shaping collective biases against Asian Americans during the pandemic, fueling xenophobia and racism in ways that present a physical danger to Asian American communities [53].

Asian Americans are also under attack in society today, as noted in the previous section, for their perceived role in ending affirmative action in college admissions. The 2023 Supreme Court rulings on the Students for Fair Admissions lawsuits have effectively reversed 45 years of legal precedent established with the landmark case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) and reaffirmed in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016). Among Asian Americans, there are mixed views on affirmative action, but it would be misleading to suggest that Asian Americans are anti affirmative action [54]. Even though Asian Americans outpace other minority groups in educational attainment, these advantages have not necessarily translated into the workplace. Nevertheless, Asian Americans are once again seen as an enemy, creating difficult spaces for them in higher education. With anti-Asian sentiment growing in recent years, it is taking a toll on the mental and physical well-being of Asian Americans.

5. Breaking down the Asian Experience in DEI

As the previous sections have shown, race has a complicated history in higher education, and Asian Americans have been overlooked in many DEI efforts. This deminoritization of Asian Americans has become normalized to the point that it is unnoticed by other racial minorities. While anecdotal, my personal interaction with a colleague, described below, serves as a reminder of how racial triangulation theory works in the real world.

In 2020, while attending a luncheon for faculty and staff of color at TCU, I was seated next to an African American colleague in another department who leaned over and asked, "Are Asians considered people of color?" This question was not posed in jest, but it was a serious inquiry as to whether I belonged at the table. I remember thinking, do I really need to justify my minority status to other minorities? This interaction with my well-intentioned

colleague reinforced Kim's [12] "field of racial positions" among minority groups, which artificially triangulates and ranks groups by pitting them against each other based on stereotypes. The model minority stereotype and the suggestion that Asian Americans are overrepresented in higher education create a wedge between Asian Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. (While Kim's [12] research focuses primarily on the comparison between Asian Americans and African Americans, she does argue that Latinos may also be triangulated vis-à-vis African Americans and Whites in ways similar to Asian Americans (p. 131).) As a result, being "seen" as a minority is not based on relative ethnic representation in the overall American population, regarding which the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) reports that Hispanics or Latinos constitute 19.1%, Black or African Americans 13.6%, and Asians 6.3% [55]. Instead, it is clouded with overgeneralizations and value judgments based on which group is doing worse. This racial hierarchy perpetuates myths about the relative well-being of different groups, justifies the exclusion of Asians from opportunities afforded to other minorities, and effectively deminoritizes Asians. This is how Asians have become less visible in DEI initiatives in higher education.

The racism and discrimination that Asian Americans encounter in academia at large are not unlike those faced by other people of color. The biggest difference is that higher education often fails to see or treat Asian Americans in the same way as other marginalized groups. DEI initiatives predominately focus on African American, Latino, and Native American minorities and gloss over the challenges impacting Asian Americans. Institutionally, it does not help that May is Asian Heritage Month, a time when schools are focused on finals and wrapping up the semester rather than on programming and awareness events. However, that does not mean we should dismiss Asian Americans as a lesser minority or minimize their experiences in diversity debates. Nor should we use them as a model minority to reinforce racial hierarchies.

When we examine the issues affecting Asian Americans in teaching, research, and service, it is clear that more work needs to be done to ensure that Asian Americans are truly included in the DEI fold and are supported by their institutions. It is even more important to do so as we navigate new spaces that have generated more Asian hate. Each of these three areas will be examined briefly, beginning with teaching. In the classroom, Asian faculty have frequently reported problems such as being openly challenged by students and evaluated more harshly than their peers [56]. For those that teach controversial topics, the confrontations can be worse. They encounter the difficult task of trying to maintain a sense of order in the classroom that facilitates dialogue but also commands a sense of respect for their authority. Scholars [27,57–62] note that Asian Americans are further stereotyped as passive and weak, with Asian men seen as effeminate, while Asian women are often sexualized. These stereotypes cause students to challenge Asian American faculty more readily, creating racial battle fatigue such that faculty are worn down by the constant stereotyping and microaggressions [63–66].

The emotional burden of racial battle fatigue does not stop with in-class interactions. Students also take out their frustrations on Asian faculty in course evaluations, especially when unconscious biases operate in their determinations as to whether they have been treated appropriately [27]. In my own course evaluations, I have seen this play out for over 20 years. I consistently score high on the measures that should objectively matter—Are students learning? Is there high intellectual engagement? Do the students have opportunities for active participation? Is the professor accessible? Yet I routinely score the lowest in my department on the question of whether students are treated with "civility and respect". Courses taught by Asian faculty also routinely fill more slowly due to student biases and perceptions about their language skills, competence, and viewpoints.

Asian faculty also serve as role models in the classroom to other minority students and engage in various forms of care work outside of class, especially at PWIs, where there are fewer minority faculty on campus [67]. A wide variety of minority students seek us out for more than just help with their classes but also for mentoring. We essentially become life coaches in addition to professors. All these issues take a large toll on both faculty and

students and affect one's physical and emotional well-being [68–70]. It is one of the reasons why saying “no” to this work is difficult and why the weight of these interactions extends beyond the classroom [71].

The second area of academic life to examine regarding Asian Americans and DEI is research. Epistemic exclusion, where the scholarship of faculty of color is marginalized and devalued, is already well documented in the literature through the work of Dotson [72,73], Settles et al. [74,75], and Museus and Chang [28]. This theory details how the research credibility of minority faculty is questioned in every respect based on stereotypes related to their identity, the topics studied, and the types of methodologies utilized [74] (pp. 494–495). Specifically, the scholarship produced by Asian faculty has been deemed “lesser” at times based on their perception as foreigners [76,77] and on preconceived notions regarding the fields they are expected to produce in [27]. Asian faculty have had to justify the relevance of their publication outlets and research agendas, especially when conducting research on race and ethnic studies [28] (p. 97). For those studying Asian American populations, there is also a high likelihood that their discipline's premier journals have limited space for such topics. These problems related to research are exacerbated when one considers how tenure and promotion hinge on producing scholarship in top-tier journals. All of these research issues are part of the hidden curriculum that DEI has brought to light over the past few years and have helped us begin the process of rethinking how we measure and reward time and effort.

Finally, service is the third piece of the equation, as the least important but often the most time-consuming aspect of the teaching–research–service division of labor in academia. For many institutions, “workload” has become the new buzzword around DEI, with new policies being created to acknowledge and value labor imbalances when carrying out DEI work [78]. The extra time Asian faculty spend on service and mentoring as part of the minority tax has essentially been treated as “free” labor. DEI work has significantly increased demands on Asian faculty, with university committees often mandated to have greater diversity in their composition [41,42]. The result is even more service work for Asian faculty than ever before because they identify as a minority even if DEI work does not actively target Asian experiences for inclusion in the same way it targets the experiences of other minority groups. Time spent on these activities does not only go unrewarded, but it also serves as a penalty when it comes to tenure and promotion [79]. Investment in service is the least valued and respected of the teaching–research–service triangle. Moreover, more time spent on service has consequences when the other two areas are evaluated. Unfortunately, one cannot divide workloads into chunks that equal more than 100 percent. In addition, Asian faculty cannot easily bear the emotional toll that comes with combatting social injustice when DEI, affirmative action, and CRT are all under attack in higher education. The service load for Asian American faculty, like other faculty of color, has unquestionably increased with DEI initiatives.

With each of the examples above, we are reminded of how Asian Americans experience many of the same difficulties impacting other minority groups in higher education yet have several additional challenges that are unique to their group. While DEI initiatives have more readily focused on the experiences of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in higher education, Asian Americans have played important roles supporting the DEI missions of their institutions. The misrepresentation of Asians in minority debates and the lack of visibility in university DEI efforts are important omissions in the study of diversity in higher education.

6. Looking Forward

One of the most important things administrators can do is to signal to faculty, staff, and students that their institution values their people. This starts by resisting pressures to conform to conservative agendas and reaffirming the university's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, even if they cannot label it as DEI. (See the statement signed by higher education leaders to resist anti-DEI legislation in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* [80].)

Higher education needs to challenge those at the national and state levels who are attacking DEI, Critical Race Theory, and other efforts to explore racial injustice. Universities are places where intellectual ideas are shared and where individuals are exposed to new perspectives, even those with which they disagree. While state and K-12 institutions have less flexibility due to funding concerns, we should not make it acceptable to roll back progress. Even though DEI was shaped in response to political crises, we cannot let it also fall victim to them.

Institutions of higher education must also consider their impact on the surrounding community. Not only are there opportunities for outreach and community engagement to help convey the values of an institution to the general population, one must also remember that university life is not restricted to the geographical confines of the campus when so many of its constituents live off-campus. Even the simple act of issuing an official university statement condemning anti-Asian racism can go a long way to creating a more welcoming environment [81].

The retrenchment of DEI at a time when Asian Americans are under attack promises to make the recruitment and retention of Asian Americans in higher education more difficult. This is especially true for geographical locations which have already passed anti-DEI legislation and where social justice issues have not traditionally been prioritized. Nevertheless, there are several things that institutions can do to be more supportive of Asian Americans impacted by the culture wars. In this final section, I offer suggestions for implementing institutional changes that address racism and social injustice as they relate to Asian Americans in higher education and for prioritizing wellness. These include disaggregating data on Asian Americans, making the Asian American experience visible, and creating physical and academic spaces to support higher education's Asian population more meaningfully. These suggestions can also be helpful for those interested in addressing the needs of other minority groups.

The first step is to require that data on the Asian American population be disaggregated to fully capture the diversity within the group [2,16,18]. Defining the multiple ethnicities that comprise being Asian is a good starting point to show how truly diverse the group is. For instance, the University of Texas published a report on their Asian American population that included a public statement on what constitutes being "Asian", referencing "Pacific Islander (Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia), Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, and East Asian cultures. . . over 48+ different ethnicities and 300+ languages and dialects" [82]. As part of the University of Texas website, the Asian/Asian American Faculty and Staff Association Group offers this definition as an important note regarding the identity group, preceding a formal statement affirming their Asian students and colleagues, acknowledging their concerns with the recent rise in anti-Asian discrimination and violence, and committing to additional resources to help them. This provides a useful base from which to show the wide range of identities that are encompassed under a single label. If these categories are used further, they will be able to help document the underrepresentation of certain subgroups and capture the full range of diversity within the Asian population more accurately. This degree of detail should be offered as standard practice and adopted more systematically by institutions. The data can then be analyzed across a wide range of areas, including by field of study, faculty rank, and student admissions, to ensure that we better capture exactly where Asians may be underrepresented [38,83]. By offering a more nuanced view of Asian identity, we can help dispel myths that Asians are overrepresented in academia and gain a better understanding of where they are situated within higher education. For instance, Teranishi [38] argues that we need to examine not only Asian faculty more closely but also staff and administrators to critically assess all leadership pipelines within institutions of higher education. In addition, we need to pay attention to differences across academic fields, as the sciences and humanities are likely to have different demographics when it comes to Asian representation [81]. Whereas one subgroup of Asians may be prominent in certain disciplines, others may be significantly lacking. These all represent missed opportunities for higher education institutions to do

more to recruit, hire, and retain a broad range of Asian faculty. Disaggregating the data also opens the door to restructuring funding opportunities in the form of scholarships and research grants to help more Asian students and faculty.

Data on Asians should not just be broken down into geographical and ethnic subgroups but should also differentiate between Asians in America and Asian Americans. International students and faculty have different experiences with racism, especially if they are not accustomed to being a minority. These problems have been exacerbated with the recent waves of anti-Asian hate. As previously discussed, Chinese students and faculty face a wide range of problems related to deteriorating U.S.–China ties and COVID-19 that impact their wellness, recruitment, and retention in higher education. Other subgroups of Asians have also experienced the growing skepticism regarding Chinese people, having been mistakenly identified as Chinese and victimized in the associated backlash. Higher education must continue to stay abreast of current events and how they negatively impact a wide range of Asian faculty and students. When an institution knows more about its Asian population on campus, it can offer better support to them. An international Asian population might also need more cultural support. Therefore, having staff trained in culturally responsive practices or having linguistically appropriate resources that are culturally aligned is necessary to ensure the well-being of an institution's Asian population [84]. Different family structures and obligations can also create unique mental health needs, and adequate attention should be given to how these may differ across Asian ethnic groups [81,84,85]. All of this starts with better information on who constitutes the Asian population at an institution.

The second step is for institutions to make their Asian populations visible as marginalized groups [13,19,27] and make the university community more aware of the harmful stereotypes impacting these populations. Part of visibility includes educating others that stereotypes and comments that seem “positive” are actually damaging, and measures should be taken to correct them. For instance, it is not a compliment to Asian Americans when individuals comment favorably on their English fluency or lack of an accent; it is rooted in racialized stereotypes regarding language proficiency that treat them as perpetual outsiders [24,81]. Assuming that Asians will be quiet or passive is also damaging and can trigger microaggressions impacting work satisfaction as well as mental health for Asians [27,60,69,70,84]. Finally, the model minority myth as it relates to Asians is unhealthy and creates extra pressures and expectations that are damaging and can limit the career aspirations of Asian Americans [24] (p. 217).

In response to these problems, more effort needs to be put into ensuring that diversity training explicitly includes these and other issues that are relevant to combatting unconscious bias as it relates to the Asian population. Offering training modules that include more examples relevant to specific racial and ethnic groups can help broaden our understanding of the ways in which racism and social injustice affect different populations. Adding programs that are tailored to or highlight individual ethnic groups (e.g., Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.) can also signal Asian diversity and help people avoid stereotypes that homogenize the Asian population into a monolithic entity [81]. Too often, Asian Americans are overgeneralized or treated as invisible in discussions of diversity, and the opportunity to make the aforementioned changes is long overdue [24,84].

Finally, finding space for Asian Americans quite literally means ensuring that they have both a physical and academic place on campus. We need more channels for carving out a sense of community based on Asian identity [68,86] and to do a better job of making sure that there are enough seats at the table for Asian voices to be heard. The creation of special reading groups, mentoring groups, or faculty and staff associations that target Asian Americans, like those created for African American and Latino populations, can help bring legitimacy and visibility to the group as a whole. At smaller institutions, additional problems may exist because different racial and ethnic minority groups may simply be placed under the umbrella of “faculty of color” rather than given more individualized

attention. One solution is to advocate for an Asian advisory committee with representation that includes Asian faculty, staff, and graduate, undergraduate, and international students to help make administrators more aware of the challenges and campus needs of this diverse and growing population. In addition, having a physical place on campus dedicated to programming, socializing, and mentoring for Asians and Asian Americans can also signal the value the administration places on different minority groups. For instance, the University of Texas Asian/Asian American Faculty and Staff Association report called for having a dedicated space of this kind for its faculty, staff, and students [82]. Given the current state of anti-Asian violence, these spaces are important to enhance wellness and to offer support for programming that brings the “Chinese virus” and other yellow-peril myths to the table for further academic discussion.

Without a distinct space valuing Asian American identity, it is difficult to build institutional support for the academic space required to support scholarship and curricula that are centered on Asian history, culture, and the Asian American experience [81]. At my own institution of TCU, the Asian Studies program has morphed to become Asian/Asian American Studies and a place where Asian identity faculty can come together. These kinds of changes are a step backwards as opposed to a step forwards. Independent academic space is needed for teaching and research on the peoples and cultures of Asia (Asian Studies) and for studies that highlight the history and experiences of Asian Americans (Ethnic Studies). In the case of Ethnic Studies, this means more than having faculty carve out a small portion of their class on urban politics or immigration as it relates to Asian Americans [27,87]. It also means that Asian American history should be incorporated into the curriculum at all levels of education [88]. Universities should commit to a dedicated academic line for those who study Asian Americans as well as for any marginalized group. Arguing that we do not have enough of “x” students to warrant a full line dedicated to Asian American Studies or a series of courses dedicated to studying the group is just another version of the “cultural fit” argument [89]. For instance, in 2014, a campaign started by the Yale Asian American Studies Task Force brought national awareness of the lack of Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies in the curriculum. Students engaged in a photo social media campaign, holding signs that read “My university will not teach me. . .” followed by various aspects relevant to Asian American and Ethnic Studies [27]. These campaigns have been followed by more calls to increase Asian American Studies in courses and departments across the country, even those with small Asian American populations [90]. Students want these kinds of courses, as evidenced by the Yale Asian American Studies Task Force campaign that identified these curricular voids at Yale and spread to Penn, TCU, and other institutions [27]. It is our responsibility to ensure that our institutions offer them.

Lastly, epistemic exclusion needs to be exposed for its harmful effects [74,75], and research on Asian Americans should not have to be justified as a legitimate area of research by Asian American faculty [28]. This type of scholarship should “count” and be valued the same as other academic pursuits and should not be minimized as a labor of love. If these areas of research remain understudied and undervalued, Asian Americans will continue to feel like outsiders in academia, impacting hiring, retention, promotion, and mental health.

As argued above, inclusion is a key part of the diversity debates, and the deminoritization of Asian Americans in higher education has contributed to both their misrepresentation in the diversity debates and their invisibility within DEI. The responsibility for this work falls on majority populations as well as minority groups [89,91,92]. For systemic change to occur, there needs to be buy-in from all to create a greater sense of inclusivity. Rather than succumbing to political pressure and rolling back DEI initiatives, institutions should use this moment to take the lead and reaffirm their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. While these efforts require resources and long-term commitments, we cannot afford to move backwards at a time when race is so critical to the national narrative. Institutions should not miss out on this opportunity to do more to ensure that there is an intentional space for Asians and Asian Americans in higher education.

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