Asian Americans and Student Organizations: Attitudes and Participation

Yuh-Yin Wang   Department of Measurement, Statistics and Evaluation, University of Maryland, College Park

William E. Sedlacek   Counseling Center, University of Maryland, College Park

Franklin D. Westbrook   Counseling Center, University of Maryland, College Park

Respondents avoided groups made up of either Asian Americans in general or of a subgroup of Asian Americans. Vietnamese Americans felt more isolated than other groups.

Over the last 20 years, the racial makeup of students in higher education has changed significantly (Fleming, 1984). Yet, according to Olivas (1982), minority students in traditionally White colleges still find it difficult to adjust academically and socially to campus life. Many students from minority groups have reported that they have not felt welcome and have been treated like uninvited guests in a strange land (Parker & Scott, 1985). The opportunities for them to participate in student organizations and campus life in general have not often appeared available.

Some research has focused on the needs of minority students, primarily Black students, on majority campuses (Sedlacek, 1987). Minatoya and Sedlacek (1983) found, however, that the aspirations and expectations with which students enter a university may differ significantly by racial-ethnic group; therefore, problems related to Black students may not be consistent with those experienced by Asian American students.

Tracey, Leong, and Glidden (1986) found that unlike Caucasian students, who were more likely to endorse emotional-social issues than academic and career issues as their presenting mental health problems, Asian American students rarely endorsed these concerns. They seemed to be more concerned with academic and career issues, because these problem areas are more role-salient for Asian American students.

The tendency of Asian American students to emphasize academic issues in contrast to social issues was further demonstrated in Mordkowitz and Ginsburg's (1986) case study. They concluded that Asian parents tended to motivate achievement in their youth by various methods of strictly controlling homework, excusing the child from daily household chores, indicating high expectations and encouraging perseverance, whereas the parents tended to de-emphasize verbal expression and socialization. Mordkowitz and Ginsburg's participants reported believing they would have had a less positive image of academic achievement, but more developed social skills, if they had grown up in a White family.

Westbrook, Miyares, and Roberts (1978) found that ethnic identity was a more serious problem for Black students than for White students. Phinney and Alipuria (1987) showed that Blacks scored highest in the search for ethnic identity, followed by Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and Whites. The result is consistent with Minatoya and Sedlacek's (1981) conclusion that although Asian American students are less concerned with race than are Blacks,

they are concerned in a less overt and direct manner. Leong (1986) concluded that Asian American students have experienced social discomfort, for they are struggling between the informal and spontaneous nature of relationships in the U.S. culture and their own formal and traditional culture values. Atkinson, Maruyama, and Matsui (1978) indicated that among Asian American university students, Japanese American students seem more acculturated than other Asian groups.

Sue and Sue (1987) noted that within-group differences (such as Korea-born Korean Americans vs. United States-born Korean Americans) on acculturation variables and characteristics may be as great or greater than between-group differences (such as Asian Americans vs. Caucasians). The variations within and among ethnic groups of Asian Americans suggest that each group may have different issues and needs. Making generalizations about Asian Americans without considering subcultural differences can lead to faulty conclusions. Sue (1982) found that published studies tended to focus mainly on Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans with minimal attention paid to the Indo-Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Pacific Island Americans, and Philippine Americans.

Loo and Rolison (1986) found that the lack of participation in campus organizations usually causes minority students to feel social-cultural alienation, which may adversely affect their social-emotional well-being and retention. Carr and Chittum (1979) also pointed out that students of all racial or ethnic backgrounds feel isolated when they have no organization of their own and when there is little encouragement to participate in campus life. Therefore, minority student organizations need to exist as an alternative to involvement in nonminority groups.

Fuertes, Sedlacek, and Westbrook (1989) found that it was particularly difficult for Hispanic students to choose between general student organizations and those focused on Hispanic students. Student affairs professionals need more information on the ways Asian American students relate to student groups and whether there are differences among Asian subgroups that are relevant.

The purpose of the study was to assess the attitudes of Asian American students toward involvement in student organizations, particularly preprofessional groups because of their academic focus. An additional purpose was to determine if any differences existed among Asian groups on attitudes toward, and involvement in, student groups.

METHOD

Sample and Instrument

A random sample of 189 undergraduate Asian American students from a large eastern university was mailed a 30-item questionnaire. A total of 430 Asian American students were enrolled at the university. A sample of 200 was drawn from the central records office by a random sampling computer program. Eleven students were excluded as inappropriate for the sample. Students received a follow-up postcard 3 days after receiving the initial mailing, a letter 2 weeks later, and a maximum of two phone calls. Follow-up letters and phone calls resulted in an 80% return rate (n =152).

Questionnaires were anonymous and participants were asked to return a postcard containing their name, separately, at the same time they returned the anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed from pilot study interviews with a sample of 20 Asian American students at the same university who were not included in the study. From these interviews and the literature, 30 items were selected. Twenty-nine of the items were in Likert format, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The validity of the questionnaire is content validity. Test-retest reliability over 2 weeks for an independent sample of 23 Asian American students was estimated to be .78.

The sample consisted of 55% male students and 45% female students. The mean age was 20.5 years. Sixty-nine percent lived off-campus with their family, 18% lived on-campus, 13% lived off-campus with others, and 10% lived alone off-campus. Of the respondents, 20% were freshmen, 26% were sophomores, 25% were juniors, and 29% were seniors. Of the participants, 60% majored in engineering, physical sciences, life science. or mathematics; 20% majored in arts, social sciences, or humanities; and 17% majored in business. Twenty-six percent were born in the United States (18% first generation, 7% second generation). The foreign-born students had been in the United States a mean of 11.2 years (ranging from 2 to 22 years). The students indicated ethnic identities as fol-

TABLE 1

TABLE 1

**Means and Standard Deviations of 29 Likert Items and Percentage
Distribution of 1 Item**

Items	M	S D
1. It is important to be a member of an ethnic organization such as an Asian American student group.	3.14	0.95
2. The university fosters respect for differences in cultural heritage.	3.40	0.90
3. I feel that I have more problems socializing than majority students do.	2.45	1.12
4. I feel comfortable making contributions to my ethnic student organization.	3.46	0.79
5. It does not matter if there are any Asian American faculty in my major at the university.	3.08	1.19
6. Most of my close friends are members of my racial group.	3.04	1.34
7. I would prefer that people think of me as a Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, and so forth, rather than as an Asian American.	3.27	1.25
8. I am interested in belonging to an organization that is made up of students in my major.	3.76	0.89
9. For such a group mentioned in Statement 8, I prefer that it be made up exclusively of Asian American students.	2.16	0.98
10. For such a group mentioned in Statement 8, I prefer that it be made up exclusively of members of my racial group, such as Chinese American students or Korean American students.	2.04	1.01
11. I feel isolated among majority students.	2.26	1.02
12. I cannot find any reason to participate in a minority student group.	2.62	1.06
13. The good thing about being involved in a student organization of my ethnic group is associating with those of a familiar background and culture.	3.79	0.92
14. I am more confident of my academic ability than of my social ability.	3.67	0.97
15. I usually don't have time for student organizations.	3.36	1.08
16. Ethnic-racial groups tend to segregate and isolate minority students.	3.30	1.09
17. I don't think I am a minority.	2.74	1.18
18. To join a student organization can enhance my problem-solving ability.	3.14	0.85
19. The university is supportive of minority students.	3.35	0.86
20. I prefer not to mix socially with White students.	1.59	0.74
21. I feel left out of things while attending the university because of race.	1.95	0.97
22. I don't like the idea of joining groups.	2.20	0.94
23. It is more important to join a majority student organization than a minority student organization.	2.39	0.84
24. I often take advantage of the services provided by the Office of Minority Student Education.	2.12	0.97
25. I don't know whether there is a Career Development Center on campus.	2.22	1.33
26. I feel more secure when I am with students of my racial group than with majority students.	2.65	1.15
27. The interracial climate on campus is hostile.	2.42	1.00
28. I enjoy participating in ethnic-racial programs and activities on campus.	3.33	0.88
29. I feel I am a part of campus life.	3.37	1.00

30. Please indicate, in your opinion, what is the main function of a minority student group? (Please check one only)

Promote political awareness	1%
Promote cultural awareness	29%
Maintain ethnic identity	25%
Provide group support	22%
Provide social activities	16%
Provide academic support	7%

Note. The 29 Likert items based on a 5-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

lows: 23% Korean American, 20% Chinese American, 20% Asian American, 14% Vietnamese American, 7% Philippine American, and 5% American, with the rest choosing other designations. Return rates were near 80% for all groups, hence sampling errors can be expected to be similar for each one.

Data were analyzed using chi square and multivariate analysis of variance at the .05 significance level. Differences on student group participation, of birth status, and among ethnic groups were examined. Percentages throughout this article may not add to 100% because of rounding.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations of the 29 Likert items and percentage responses to 1 additional item are shown in Table 1 in the order presented to students. In general, students tended to like to mix socially with White students and seldom felt isolated or out of things. They liked the idea of joining groups, yet usually they did not perceive themselves as having time for groups. They tended to agree with participating in minority student groups; however, they disagreed with a preprofessional society made up

of Asian Americans alone, and more strongly disagreed with one made up exclusively of their ethnic subgroup such as Korean Americans or Vietnamese Americans.

Asian American students reported seldom using the minority student office or career development office. Although 29% of them indicated that the main function of a minority student group was promoting cultural awareness, 25% indicated it was promoting ethnic identity, 22% indicated providing group support, 16% said providing social activities, 7% said providing academic support, and 1% indicated promoting political awareness.

Subgroup Differences

Men were more likely to agree that the university is supportive of minority students than were women, and seniors were less likely to feel this way than were underclass students. Birth status tended to differentiate items about socializing (see Table 2). The United States-born students were less inclined to like the idea of joining organizations made up exclusively of Asian Americans or exclusively of an ethnic subgroup, such as Chinese Americans or Vietnamese Americans. Also, United States-born students were more likely to have close friends of other

TABLE 2
Significant Differences in Attitudes by Birth Status

Items	Born in the U.S. (n=41)		Foreign-Born (n = 111)		Univariate
	M	S D	M	S D	F Value
6. Most of my close friends are members of my racial group.	2.37	1.26	3.30	1.28	15.39
9. For such a group mentioned in Statement 8, I prefer that it be made up exclusively of Asian American students.	1.83	0.89	2.28	0.99	6.33
10. For such a group mentioned in Statement 8, I prefer that it be made up exclusively of members of my racial group, such as Chinese American students or Korean American students.	1.71	0.90	2.16	1.02	5.94
11. I feel isolated among majority students.	1.90	0.95	2.32	1.03	4.98
14. I am more confident of my academic ability than of my social ability.	2.68	1.05	3.21	0.91	8.28
21. I feel left out of things while attending the university because of race.	1.61	0.83	2.07	0.99	9.70
29. I feel I am a part of campus life.	3.76	0.92	3.23	0.99	6.91

Note. Based on a 5-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). All items shown here are significant at .05 level using multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks's lambda = .68).

races and felt themselves to be more a part of campus life than did foreign-born students. There were no significant differences, however, between United States — and foreign-born students in their participation in Asian or general groups.

Table 3 shows the differences in attitudes by group participation. Students who joined one or more Asian ethnic groups felt it more important to be a member of an ethnic organization and felt more comfortable making contributions to these groups. They tended to agree that associating with those of a familiar background was the good thing about joining an ethnic group. They felt more secure when they were with students of the same racial group and, consequently, felt a part of campus life. Those who did not, however, participate in any ethnic groups were more inclined to report that they did not have time, did not like the idea, and could not find any reason to join an ethnic group. Significant differences emerged when the multivariate analysis

of variance was conducted to compare different ethnic subgroups. The biggest differences existed between those who called themselves Vietnamese Americans and those who called themselves Americans (Table 4). Vietnamese Americans felt isolated among majority students and felt left out while attending the university. Most of their close friends were from their racial group. Those who identified themselves as Americans, however, tended to feel the opposite of the Vietnamese Americans.

DISCUSSION

As noted by Carr and Chittum (1979), Asian American students' feelings of marginality are manifested through their participation in groups. Logically, birth status might be expected to be related to group participation and perceptions of social ability and university life. The United States-born students, however, were not sig-

TABLE 3
Significant Differences by Participation in Asian Groups

Items	No Groups (n = 110)		1 or More Groups (n = 42)		Univariate F Value
	M	SD	M	SD	
1. It is important to be a member of an ethnic organization such as an Asian American student group.	2.91	0.86	3.74	0.91	25.75
4. I feel comfortable making contributions to my ethnic student organization.	3.22	0.64	4.07	0.84	43.49
6. Most of my friends are members of my racial group.	2.80	1.27	3.67	1.32	14.16
8. I am interested in belonging to an organization that is made up of students in my major.	3.67	0.90	4.00	0.83	6.17
12. I cannot find any reason to participate in a minority student group.	2.86	0.91	1.95	1.14	23.74
13. The good thing about being involved in a student organization of my ethnic group is associating with those of a familiar background and culture.	3.57	0.88	4.36	0.79	24.45
15. I usually don't have time for student organizations.	3.63	0.98	2.67	1.03	23.92
22. I don't like the idea of joining groups.	2.44	0.90	1.57	0.70	28.13
26. I feel more secure when I am with students of my racial group than with majority students.	2.48	1.07	3.10	1.25	8.13
28. I enjoy participating in ethnic-racial programs and activities on campus.	3.07	0.69	4.02	0.95	42.15
29. I feel I am a part of campus life.	3.16	0.97	3.93	0.85	17.11

Note. Based on a 5-point scale, ranging from strongly *disagree* (1) to strongly agree (5). All items shown here are significant at .05 level using multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks's lambda = .44).

TABLE 4
Significant Differences in Attitudes by Asian Groups

Items	Americans (n = 8)		Asian Americans (n = 31)		Chinese Americans (n = 31)		Korean Americans (n = 35)		Philippine Americans (n = 11)		Vietnamese Americans (n = 22)		Univariate F Value
	M	S D	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
6	1.50	0.53	2.48	1.18	3.04	1.26	3.60	1.29	3.00	1.48	3.77	0.97	7.37
7	2.88	1.72	2.48	1.21	3.44	0.89	3.94	1.16	3.40	1.35	3.36	1.22	5.27
11	1.62	0.92	2.00	0.82	2.48	0.98	2.06	1.03	1.64	0.81	2.71	1.15	3.20
19	3.00	0.54	3.74	0.68	3.19	0.88	3.14	0.85	3.73	0.91	3.59	0.67	3.53
20	1.12	0.35	1.32	0.54	1.67	0.68	1.60	0.60	1.81	1.30	1.82	0.79	3.20
21	1.25	0.46	1.71	0.82	1.93	1.36	1.94	0.84	1.70	0.67	2.54	0.80	5.28

Note. Based on a 5-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). All items are significant at .05 level using multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks's lambda = .13).

nificantly more enthusiastic about joining groups. Regardless of the fact that they were significantly more confident of their social ability, they did not seem to seek social achievement through participation in either ethnic or general groups more than foreign-born students.

Asian American students, in general, liked the idea of joining groups, and they believed there were important reasons for participating in minority student groups. They were, however, highly ambivalent about joining an ethnic preprofessional society regardless of whether they were born in the United States. Several explanations are plausible. First, they may not have considered an ethnic preprofessional society to be helpful academically, but they may have appreciated an ethnic group that provides opportunities for cultural awareness and group support. It is also possible that they did not trust an ethnic preprofessional society to teach them how to succeed in a career, and they might prefer to join a general one to become better informed about the profession. Another possible explanation is that students believed that separate Asian groups isolated them from the larger community. Emotionally they valued their culture. To better adjust to the U.S. society, however, they preferred to mix socially with the majority. The ambivalence of Asian American students toward ethnic preprofessional societies may partially explain these feelings of marginality.

Differences existed among ethnic subgroups regarding how they perceived issues. This is particularly true for Americans and Vietnamese Americans. Offices dealing with minority students may need to consider Vietnamese Americans separately from other Asian groups. Vietnamese Americans have been in the United States for a shorter time and have had to survive without help from those who have been in the United States longer. Generally, they were more likely to seek help from minority student services than were other Asian groups. Nevertheless, Vietnamese Americans liked to maintain their independence as much as possible. Research indicates that Asian students prefer a more directive approach in counseling. Vietnamese Americans might prefer counseling focused on their group needs. Because United States – and foreign-born Asian Americans differed on socializing but not on group participation rate, it might be good to promote activities that mix Asian American students of different birth status to provide them with a chance to learn from each other, while sharing common socializing values.

More Asian American students were interested in business than was reported by Minatoya and Sedlacek (1981). This indicates that Asian American students may be moving away from previous occupational choices and into new fields.

Limitations

This study was conducted at one campus, so the results may not generalize to all other institutions. Nevertheless, there was diversity in the Asian American population at the university studied, and other studies have indicated the campus environment to be similar at other large universities. Also, some of the Asian subgroups studied were quite small and should be examined in further research. Additionally, further research should explore issues not covered in this study.

Overall, Asian American students are a diverse group, sharing some common attitudes and perceptions but differing on others. Continuing research on their needs and interests can help us plan and execute optimal student service programs for them.

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