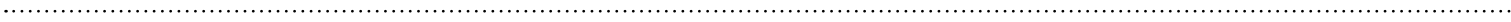


# Not a Monolith

Recognizing and Championing Asian-American Diversity





Alexander Zhang, a Harvard undergrad, was prepared to face bias in the college admission process. He had been told for years that colleges didn't want any more Asian-American students. His mom even encouraged him to hide his identity on his college applications.

His classmate, Julie Chung, similarly feared being judged against Asian-American stereotypes.

"On the forefront of my mind was escaping the national narrative that Asian-Americans are wealthier and have more resources or have parents who know how to navigate the educational system, which was totally not the case for me," said Chung, who identifies as a low-income, first-generation student.

"I do think I was constantly struggling with how I might not fit the particular mold or narrative that admission officers might perceive of me because of my Asian-American identity."

Bias—both perceived and real—dictates how Asian-Americans view the college admission process.

"Many of my students and their parents believe there is a bias against Asian-Americans or Asian students in the college process," said Alyson Tom, associate director of college counseling at the Castilleja School (CA), noting that many of her students have also been told to hide their Asian heritage on college applications.

"When my students express this concern, they've usually heard of the Harvard case at this point or they've heard something is happening or their parents have heard something is happening and they worry."

"The Harvard case" refers to a lawsuit brought by Students for Fair Admissions Inc. (SFFA). The group, led by conservative legal strategist Edward Blum, sued Harvard in 2014, claiming there was evidence proving bias against Asian-American students in the admission process. The US Department of Justice backed the lawsuit in early September and the case has a chance of making it to the US Supreme Court. If it does, it could be used as a vehicle to rewrite federal law on the use of race as one factor in the college admission process.

Nicole Gon Ochi, an attorney with Asian-Americans Advancing Justice, said it is important to note that the lawsuit against Harvard wouldn't actually address bias in the college admission process. She believes this is something that has been largely overlooked by supporters of the case.

"This case will not address implicit bias or discrimination against Asians. That is the framework of their brief, but the remedy that they're seeking is to eliminate any consideration of race," she said.

"Admission officers wouldn't know (a student's) race at all, they would have to strip it from their essays, and all that kind of thing. Whatever the facts show about implicit bias and Asians, this lawsuit will not remedy it. It will create bigger problems by decreasing diversity."

Zhang and Chung can't imagine having to remove their race from their applications. It would have changed everything.

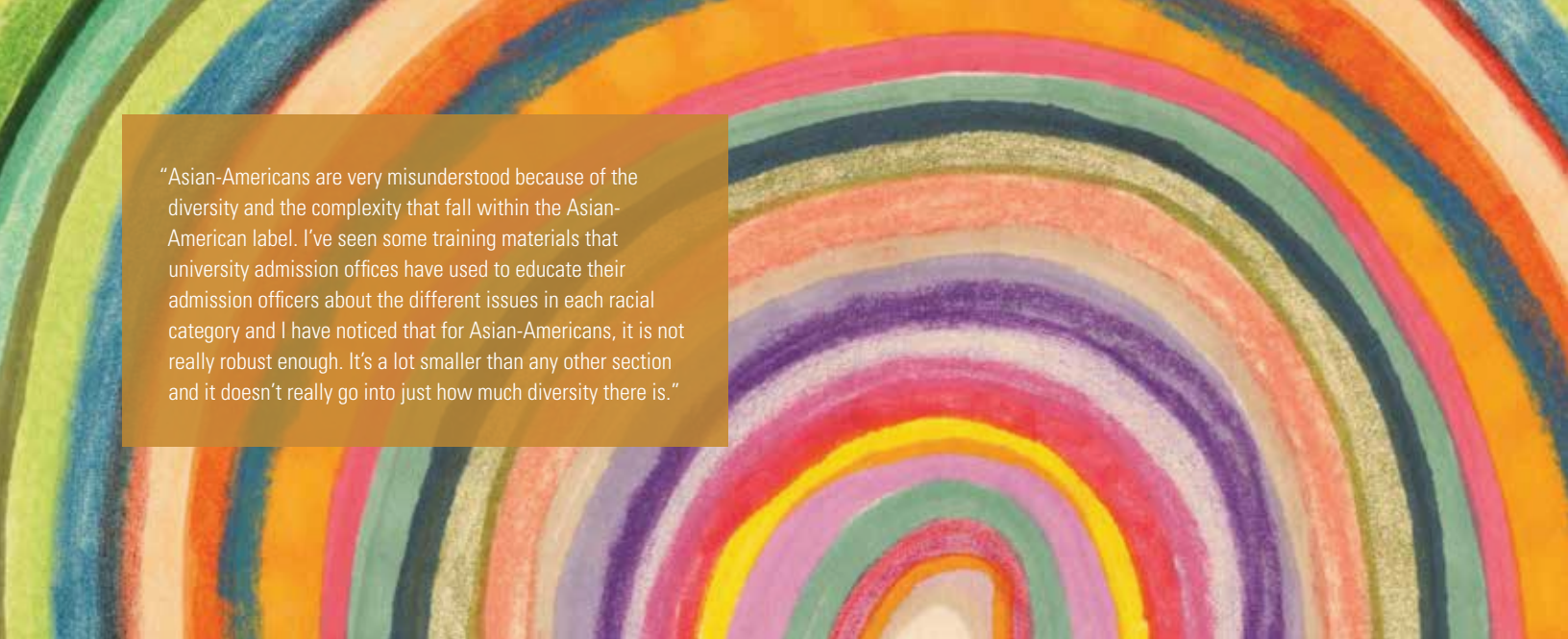
Zhang ultimately decided not to follow his mom's advice to hide his identity, even going above and beyond to make sure his Chinese-American heritage was known.

"It didn't make sense for me not to put it down," he said. "Toward the end of my high school career I developed this sense of pride in my heritage and I just felt like if a college was going to reject me for that, on such shallow terms, it wasn't worth going to that school."

Chung isn't sure how she could have hidden it, even if she wanted to.

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By Ashley Dobson



“Asian-Americans are very misunderstood because of the diversity and the complexity that fall within the Asian-American label. I’ve seen some training materials that university admission offices have used to educate their admission officers about the different issues in each racial category and I have noticed that for Asian-Americans, it is not really robust enough. It’s a lot smaller than any other section and it doesn’t really go into just how much diversity there is.”

“I can’t imagine not identifying as Asian-American because being Asian-American informed so many of the activities I did or even the essays I wrote,” she said. “Whether or not it was a box I checked, it was something that was very present in my application.”

Tom believes students need to be themselves in the admission process and their ethnic identity is big part of that.

“I think it is unethical for counselors or other people involved in the process to advise students to hide their identity, not tell people they are Asian or hide activities because it might tell people they are Asian,” Tom said. “Why would you tell a student to hide who they are? What lesson are we teaching students?”

The narrative about hiding your racial identity was born out of a discussion surrounding discrimination that has been permeated with misinformation, according to OiYan Poon, an assistant professor in higher education leadership at Colorado State University.

“I think the public is very misinformed about how selective college admission operates within in the context of case law as it stands today,” she said.

“Whether someone agrees or disagrees with affirmative action, that’s fine. That’s a personal decision. But I’d like the debate to be based on fact. What I’ve found is that arguments on all sides of the debate are not based on fact.”

The affirmative action of 1977 or 2002 is not the “affirmative action” of today. In fact, because they are both race-related, the terms affirmative action and race-conscious admission are often confused.

Affirmative action in the college admission context implies that an advantage has been given to a student solely because of the student’s race or ethnicity. This type of policy was typically reflected by either giving applicants “points” solely for being from a minority racial or ethnic group, or by establishing a quota. Even though many people still use the term “affirmative action,” it’s no longer in practice.

Race-conscious admission, the current law of the land, does not give an advantage due to race. Instead, it allows the institution to ensure it admits a class of qualified students that strikes an appropriate balance to ensure the educational benefits of diversity for all students.

It has really shifted “from something that was about historical wrongs to now being about advancing diversity and the educational goals that flow from diversity on campus,” Poon said.

She makes this distinction because it’s missing from many conversations on the case.

“... Race-conscious holistic review—which is being attacked right now—allows each of our divergent experiences to be recognized and for us to be recognized as whole people,” Poon continued.

Asian-Americans are often lumped together as a monolith in the world of college admission but there are so many factors to consider, Ochi noted.

How many generations a student’s family has been in the US, the various languages spoken by Asian-Americans, and the fact that many Asian students are undocumented—it all plays a role.

“Asian-Americans are very misunderstood because of the diversity and the complexity that fall within the Asian-American label,” Ochi said. “I’ve seen some training materials that university admission offices have used to educate their admission officers about the different issues in each racial category and I have noticed that for Asian-Americans, it is not really robust enough. It’s a lot smaller than any other section and it doesn’t really go into just how much diversity there is.”

Tom keeps a spreadsheet of colleges who actively recruit Asian-Americans and her students are often shocked at the wide-range of schools on the list.

“Being Asian-American is a plus factor for so many colleges because it adds diversity of thought, of life experiences,” she said.

But Tom wants college admission officers to know “adding people of color to the campus isn’t enough. You really need staff and faculty who are open to it as well.”

She would love to see more fly-in programs and recruitment programs aimed specifically at Asian-American students, as well as more diversity and anti-bias training for staff.

“While I’m not ready to say that the admission process is biased against Asians, I will be quick to say there are plenty of faculty and staff who have biases against Asians and people of color in general,” Tom said.

“Faculty and staff need to be ready to interact with people who are different than they are.”

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