



STUDENT VOICES

BREAKING THE SILENCE

THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Two summers ago, an energetic young reporter from *Time* asked to interview me for a cover story on Asian American “super achievers.” I asked her why *Time* wanted to publish such a narrow, possibly harmful piece. In all of my years as an educator, I explained, I had never run across a myth or stereotype (positive or negative) that had contributed much to life in America. She responded, “*Time* thinks the topic is hot. Asian ‘super achievers’ are what *Time* readers want to read about.”

To illustrate the potential effect, of *Time*’s almost 25 million readers, there were approximately 4.3 million subscribers who received the issue. Of these, 11 percent, or approximately 506,610, were in the education field, with 9 percent, or approximately 390,000, educators.

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It was clear that my reservations didn’t fit the story. It ran in the August 31, 1987 issue with the title, “Those Asian American WHIZ KIDS: Bright Asian American Students Are the Marvel of U.S. Classrooms.”

That *Time* article typifies much of the media’s coverage of Asian and Pacific American students in higher education. The stock picture is of bright-eyed “whiz kids,” the “best and the brightest,” math and science majors, students who pass through our toughest universities with ease.

I’m struck that the few real facts presented about these students are limited to the *point of college entry*—their test scores, admission rates, and the fields of study they choose—and to the *exit point*, as measured by graduation rates, acceptances to graduate and professional schools, or by honors garnered. These few facts, too, tend to be limited to data about the “cream of the crop” in selective colleges.

But even with the highest achievers, the media leaves untold what happens to these students during their undergraduate years. Nor will reporters leave off the successes at Cal Tech for the



more mundane story of the much larger number of Asian American students at the community college down the road.

Early this fall, I interviewed by phone a variety of students and their advisors on campuses across the nation, including seven undergraduates and three spring 1989 graduates. The 10 came from various Asian and Pacific American backgrounds (Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Filipino, Indian); six were American born and raised, the others immigrated to this country in their teens. Their academic careers varied, as did their experience of “Asian American.”

BY PAULA Y. BAGASAO



Each student had a lively and pointed story to tell. All were willing to share their stories with *Change* readers. Why? "It would be a chance to break the silence," one told me, and, as several remarked, a chance to speak to college and university decisionmakers. As Christopher Ing of Penn put it, "It's impossible to change things without the help of administrators. They barely know we're out there, let alone what we need."

Given the mix of the students interviewed, I wasn't all that surprised by the very different personal experiences they reported. Certain themes emerged across their stories—themes that in some cases



Campus-based Asian and Pacific American student groups are voicing their protests not only on campuses across the country, above and right, but to their representatives in Congress, left.

(Photo above by John Carriveau/Oberlin College)



Don't Fix Anything That Isn't Broken



Christopher Ing
University of Pennsylvania

Senior
Asian Studies/Biology

Career Plans
Community Medicine

Dr. Bagasao, I phoned you last April on behalf of Penn's Chinese Students Association for help in disseminating a job description for a senior administrative post to Asian American professionals across the country. I'm glad AAHE's Asian Caucus could help. We've got our fingers crossed now; they're interviewing the finalists.

BAGASAO: Tell me about the Chinese Students Association.

ING: It's one of six Asian groups here: the South Asia Society (Asian Indians); Penn Philippine Association; Korean Cultural Society; Japanese Cultural Society; Penn Vietnamese Club; and us. Most are small groups and usually include foreign and American students. Most clubs are not too political. There are a few individuals from each of the groups, like me, who are fairly political, who will run for student body positions and lobby the administration.

BAGASAO: What sorts of issues do Penn Asian American students push?

ING: There are very few Asian professors in most departments, even in Oriental studies. As of spring 1988, of 1,838 faculty at Penn, 76 were Asian American—just 40 of them tenured. They're mostly in the traditional Asian fields, like science. We need them in the humanities and social sciences.

The situation is worse in administration. According to my spring 1989 figures, among the top 25 officers here, none are Asian American or Pacific Islander. I don't know of any counselors. I only know of one dean.

When we noticed that there were no Asians in "high level, visible" jobs, some of us decided to work to increase the numbers. First, we decided to demand more representation. Then we decided to take responsibility to get the word out, to pass out the job description. That's why I called for help. I got hold of the job description and wrote a letter to the administration and other Asian groups saying it would help our community if an Asian were hired for the position.

We're the largest minority

group on campus. The number of Asian American students is increasing, but the number of faculty and administrators is seriously low. Even if students don't say anything, something should be done. It's like if colleges feel there's no problem, they aren't going to do anything. The slogan here is, "Don't Fix Anything That Isn't Broken." The situation isn't very promising; we feel that the administrators won't fix things on their own, and the students are too busy studying.

BAGASAO: In student eyes, what's not working at Penn?

ING: There's the Justice Department's investigation into admissions quotas in the Ivy League schools. Penn was mentioned, so we're looking into the statistics here, which currently show some bias.

We're also asking for Asian American studies courses. Right now there's only one course, taught by a Caucasian professor whose specialty is the Pacific Islands. We think that an outside person, an Asian American, should be brought in to teach a course, but they seem to worry about finding a qualified person. They want to know what Penn's peer institutions are doing.

If there was an Asian American administrator here, he or she could help us see alternative ways to achieve our objectives. Black students are more vocal on this campus. There is an Afro-American Studies Program and black administrators and faculty at Penn, and they support the students. When issues come up in the black community, the administration deals with them. When we talk to administrators, they find it hard to understand us. The words of students are never as credible as those of an administrator.

BAGASAO: How are relations between Asian Americans and other students at Penn?

ING: Last fall there was an anti-Asian racial incident on campus, in the Wharton School of Business. Someone placed an anti-Asian statement on the tickertape machine, "Fuck You Asians, Get Out of Wharton." I understand it had to have been well planned; it takes time to get a message on the tickertape system. Anyway, it was a major event that brought us (students) together. We wrote a letter to the administration. The administration published a letter in the student newspaper saying that the act was wrong and that this would not be tolerated. They never caught anyone.

BAGASAO: Do the various Asian student groups that you described interact with each other?

ING: I personally get concerned about racial tension at Penn, nothing overt. People, especially minorities, don't tend to mix. There's voluntary segregation. Asian students, too, don't feel totally comfortable with other Asian groups, or other minorities. When we have parties, people move in cliques. There is some inter-racial dating, mostly white males and Asian women. Rarely is it the other way around. Some of my friends complain that you have to choose between Asian and Caucasian friends.

BAGASAO: What are your plans for after graduation?

ING: When I first came to Penn, I wanted to be a doctor. I still do, but my experiences here have helped me narrow my interest in medicine. Rather than be a researcher, I think I'm needed in the community. I'd like to work in an urban setting, in a community clinic in New York City, Boston, or San Francisco. □

are common to students in general; in others, tied to being of an Asian or Pacific American background. In the profiles that accompany this article, the stories of several of these students are presented more fully, largely in their own words; in the present article, looking for themes, I again want to bring forward student voices.

Be willing to listen to what students have to say. Take them seriously, even if it goes against what you've seen in *Time* magazine or ideas you came to campus with. Give up the stereotypes and appreciate our diversity. As *individuals*, we are different. Our needs vary from campus to campus. But, some of our experiences are parallel. Listen.

Claire Kinsley, Oberlin College

If you want to serve *all* students, if you want to understand *us*, ask us.

Woei-Ming New, Hunter College

Major Stories

College majors are a major story in the undergraduate experience of Asian and Pacific American students. One doesn't have to look far to learn about the Asian stereotype majors: math, science, engineering, and computer science. The students I spoke with added to that list classical music and business. They know the stereotypes well and understand the forces that lead counterparts into these fields. Only now are they learning the ins and outs of exploring other options.

Math and science are indeed popular majors among Asian and Pacific American students, and remain honored fields of study among the students I interviewed. Half of these 10 started college in a science field. The males' choices were physics and pre-med; for Kim-Dung Nguyen of U-Mass, Boston, the plan was to be a nurse. By this fall, however, only one of the five, Christopher Ing of Penn, remains in a science profession. Even for him there has been a shift, from medical research to community medicine.

What happened? Like students in general, these students "tested out" their first-choice majors, then moved on to a "better fit." Being Asian or Pacific American played some role in their initial choices, and it explains in part why and how they got to their next choices.

Nguyen didn't feel welcomed at all in the nursing department at U-Mass, Bos-

ton. After taking a sociology class, "Asian Americans in the U.S.," from lecturer Peter Kiang, she discovered course content that she could connect with. She now studies sociology and plans to work in Boston's Vietnamese community when she graduates.

By connecting with the experiences of Japanese American author John Okada in his book, *NO-NO Boy*, Dario Ng of Oberlin (initially a chemistry major) overcame his fear of writing and developed the confidence to pursue an economics major.

Fred Alfonso of San Francisco State just didn't like pre-med, even though his mother did. So he tried what he calls "the other Asian major—business," where he was disconcerted by the competition, compulsion, isolation, and the stereotyping that characterize business majors. Finally he discovered a calling—broadcasting. In the School for Creative Arts, "people don't see you as just an Asian," and "everything is a team effort." This helped him make friends, "feel a sense of belonging."

Alfonso is a pioneer in his family: the first to graduate from college outside a science field.

Elmer Almachar, Oberlin, wanted to be different from his high school friends, who chose to study physics at Harvard and Princeton. Elmer chose instead to study physics in the "liberal establishment" of Oberlin. After discovering government his first semester, he switched. He now serves on Oberlin's Educational Planning and Policy Committee.

Among the other students, math and science are still revered. While Ming New and Bevayani Nautiyal are not studying math or science at Hunter, they are clear about the status and prestige of these fields in their respective home countries, Malaysia and India.

Ming fell behind and "lost out" on mathematics preparation when he dropped out of school in Malaysia. For him, an economics major is the compromise. Unlike her Indian friends who do study science, Bevayani Nautiyal studies economics at Hunter. "In India, she reports, "people don't take you seriously if you study the humanities. In fact, most Third-World countries don't have liberal arts programs. Everything is geared towards the technical." Nauti-

yal cherishes the opportunity she has in this country to read German literature and watch Swedish films.

August Espiritu and Kelly Nishimura are U.S. born and raised. Claire Kinsley, born of American parents, was raised in Canada. Each chose a non-science major right from the start with parental support and has enjoyed his or her studies. Their anxieties are those of many college students. Kinsley doesn't know exactly where her double major in history and Latin American studies will lead. Espiritu knows he wants to be a history professor, but doesn't know very many Pilipino, or for that matter, Asian American professors; he worries about ever getting tenure. Nishimura is off to a good start in the New York City publications world, with internships at *Mature Health* and the *Ms.* Foundation, but does plan to return to Hawaii after she graduates. What job will she find there?

For these American-born students, a felt freedom *not* to study science or engineering has led them to genuine academic interests and new worries about those interests in the world of work.

The Whiz Kid Myth

The "whiz kid" myth disturbs Oberlin's Claire Kinsley. "Apart from the actual distorted images that it portrays," she says, "it is potentially dangerous." Claire and other students I interviewed feel that the myth is used to divide people of color. The message sent to Afro-American and Hispanic students is, "Why aren't you like the Asians? If they can make it, why can't you?"

As UCLA's Augusto Espiritu states, "Admissions quotas are used to pit Asian American students against blacks and other nationalities." At the same time, he notes, the quota phenomenon suggests to other minorities that there is an "upper limit for success" among students from ethnic backgrounds.

The Asian students I interviewed do not distinguish themselves from blacks and Hispanics in terms of "minority status." Most students, in fact, work actively for minority rights and affirmative action. They worry about what seems to be voluntary segregation among the minority groups and between minorities and whites. They've joined, and been joined, by other minority students to

Overcoming the Fear of Writing



Dario Ng
Oberlin College

Junior
Economics

Career Plans
International business

Both of my parents are Chinese. My father left China when he was 14, and my mother when she was 18. They moved to the Dominican Republic to work in my grandfather's business, and I was born there. We left in 1976 for a better life, and moved to the Bronx. I went to public school and graduated from the new high school for the arts, Fiorello LaGuardia.

BAGASAO: How was it that you chose an arts school?

NG: I had a great teacher at IS-137, junior high, who inspired me. There were a few other Asians at LaGuardia, but mostly in the stereotype areas, violin and piano. I was in the creative field—studio art, drawing, photography.

BAGASAO: What led you to Oberlin?

NG: Friends from the year before me went there. My black friends at Oberlin convinced me it was a good place to go. It took my parents a while to see it my way. I'm the oldest, and my mother didn't want me to go that far away. I was glad to get a good financial package so I could go.

BAGASAO: What are you majoring in?

NG: Economics. At first I wanted to be a typical pre-med major, so I started in chemistry. Then I tried computer science. Now I'm thinking about a career in finance and business. In high school I was afraid of economics. I had this fear about writing papers. But at Oberlin, I decided to try it again (taking an economics class) and was lucky enough to get a good prof who inspired me. So now I'm an economics major.

BAGASAO: Talk about your fear of writing.

NG: I've had a fear of writing in English since I came to this country, when I was 9. Then I only spoke Spanish and Cantonese. In New York, I had to take my classes in both Spanish and English . . . they call it bilingual education. I think I would have been better off in regular classes, where you had to write. I stayed in art and science, where you didn't have to write.

BAGASAO: And at Oberlin?

NG: I've overcome my fear of writing, and it has changed my life. Last year I

took an English and history course at the same time. Both required writing. The English class had writing every day. My teacher pushed me, and this inspired me to "tackle writing." My English teacher said that I really improved. I was so inspired!

Another thing helped, too. Tommy Woon (assistant dean student support services), talked to me about writer's block. He gave me lots of advice and told me it was ok to write papers over and over again. He also said it was important to talk them over with people, even professors.

It was really my history class, "Modern Japan," where things happened. The readings were interesting, and the professor let students pick a book and write about it. One of my Asian friends told me about a book called *No-No Boy*, by John Okada, about post-World War II from a Japanese American perspective. I was inspired because I could relate to the experiences he wrote about. It made me want to write and give it my all. I spent days with the dictionary and thesaurus. Plenty of people looked at my paper and gave me suggestions. My grade on the paper was an A minus.

BAGASAO: I take it the subject matter of the book helped you?

NG: Yes. If the subject had not been interesting to me, I would not have spent that much time. Something like this happened in my sociology class, too. I did my

paper on "Leadership in the Asian American Community." At first my paper had too much information. After talking to my professor, I was able to focus it more and get it right. It was a breakthrough for me.

BAGASAO: What did it mean for you?

NG: I feel different, more comfortable. I can get into courses that require reading and heavier writing. Now I'm thinking about grad school, an MBA. I could go to Hong Kong or Singapore and work for an international firm. I speak Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, and now English.

BAGASAO: Any other campus experiences related to your Asian heritage?

NG: Back in 1988, the Asian American students here organized a big conference. Lots of students from other colleges came. It was called "Making Waves, Breaking the Silence." We networked a lot and discussed the stereotypes. Students can learn a lot by describing themselves.

BAGASAO: Your Oberlin education has meant a lot. What message do you have for readers?

NG: It's important for them to see that I made it. I didn't quit; minorities can make it. And I want to say to students, explore what you really want to be in college. Sometimes Asian students say, "My parents want me to do this." But they should find what's best for them, not just what their parents want. And a college should help them do that. □

protest racist acts on campus.

Given this, these students express great concern over their exclusion from their preferred identification with "minority." At Hunter College, Kelly Nishimura argues that Asians should be put back in the "minority" category. Ming New, as Hunter's student body president, challenges the administration to

seek graduate fellowship opportunities for Asian Americans in the humanities. (Mellon Foundation Minority Undergraduate Fellowships for the study of the humanities target black and Hispanic students only.)

Espiritu worries about Pilipino students being dropped from the Affirmative Action Program at UCLA, point-

ing out that their attrition rate is nearly 50 percent.

For Dario Ng, separating out "minority" from his personal identity is impossible. He was born in the Dominican Republic, of Chinese parents, who later moved to the U.S. He considers himself Latino by birth, Chinese by race, and American by citizenship. "I'm a combi-

Do the Right Thing!



August Espiritu
UCLA

Senior
History

Career Plans
History professor

My parents and I chose UCLA. We thought it was one of the best schools in the country, a top-ten ranked university. Nobody told us the ranking came from graduate programs. The undergraduate programs were weaker. But my sister went to UCLA. For her, getting involved with the Samahang Pilipino club was an attraction. For me, UCLA promised a variety of experiences. Besides, it was close to home.

BAGASAO: UCLA is a good place for exploring. Tell me about your first years there.

ESPIRITU: I didn't do much as a freshman, tried to check out different things—Samahang, Asian Coalition. I studied a lot, starting in

philosophy, my major. I changed to history my second year. The philosophy department here doesn't teach anything related to social issues. I got tired of discussing "How do you know if you are not now dreaming?"

I felt disparities between what was taught and what's going on in the world. The huge classes don't provide an intellectual climate for the students. The first year is alienating; there's not much of a multicultural climate in the dorms yet. Undergraduate education should be tied to concrete, practical work. Research should contribute to community needs, like the work of Tanya Azores (UCLA researcher), which opened a can of worms about Pilipino student attrition.

BAGASAO: Did you consider dropping out?

ESPIRITU: I hung in there. But there's a 55 percent attrition rate among Pilipino students at UCLA, the same as at Berkeley. In 1982, it was worse—an 86 percent drop-out rate. There are a lot of reasons—alienation, under-preparation, lack of counseling. Then we Asians hear we're "over-represented." One Pilipino female student was told by a white woman, "The reason UCLA is losing (the football game) is because of all you Orientals."

BAGASAO: But you've made it. Tell me how you did it.

ESPIRITU: I took six years. It was a combination of parental and family encouragement and the activities I got involved in. My sense of

what I had to do to change the environment to make it more sensitive to people of color kept me going. I learned a lot as president of Samahang Pilipino.

After graduation, I'll take a year off, then work for a Ph.D. in history. I want to teach at LA Community College. There are not that many Pilipinos who are professors, but there are a lot of Pilipino students at LACC. I'm inspired to teach, but I worry that I won't get tenure.

BAGASAO: Why worry about tenure at this point?

ESPIRITU: I saw what happened to Don Nakanishi (professor, UCLA School of Education); it took years of struggle for him to get tenure. To me it was institutional racism, and the example of it helped Asian students get organized here. We held a candlelight vigil on June 25, 1987, launched a letter-writing campaign, lobbied legislators in Sacramento, and organized two rallies. Last year the Asian students played a real role in student government elections. Of the 7,500 UCLA undergraduates who voted, about 3,000 were Asian Americans, and our demand was that student government take up Don's issue.

As it happened, Don's case was settled before the student elections; he finally got tenure. But the Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Pilipinos, and other Asian American students had played a key role in the elections. They were not just voting, they were

leveraging issues. This is progress.

BAGASAO: What else would you share with readers?

ESPIRITU: The "model minority" thing shows Asians as having *no* needs. We have to fight for services and classes that talk about us. For example, I heard about a Stanford professor who said, "Asians haven't been here long enough (in the U.S.) to have an Asian American Studies Center."

I'm most passionate about my recent awareness that Asian Americans are not really respected in this country. I think some people fear our political power, especially in California. I also get upset when people pit us against blacks as well as other nationalities.

There're a lot of misperceptions about us out there. Think about Spike Lee's new movie, "Do The Right Thing!" In it, he highlights various minority stereotypes. He used the Korean grocer to illustrate the widespread perception of Asian success. While there are a lot of these untrue portrayals in society right now, it's not an accurate picture of us.

Lots of Asian American students are angry. They are showing it by strengthening their organizations and continuing the debates. □

nation," he chuckles. "At Oberlin, people know me as a Latino-Chinese American."

Most of these students, too, report being touched in some way by campus anti-Asian hostility. In 1988 at Oberlin, following an Asian American student conference in the Midwest, Ng and his friends found their conference poster

—"ALL ASIANS ARE WELCOMED"—defaced. It read instead, "KILL ALL ASIANS." Many of these students have traveled to intercollegiate Asian and Pacific American student conferences and learned of incidents elsewhere. Last year's big story (which interviewees reminded me about) was of the six Chinese American students at the

University of Connecticut who were spit upon by football players as they sang, *We All Live in a Yellow Submarine*.

Students told me of other racial statements and incidents. Some report tensions on campus, and feeling like they don't belong and aren't wanted. Some students have protested campus racism; others have decided to remain silent.

From Honolulu to New York City



Kelly Nishimura
Hunter College

Senior
Art and Women's Studies

Career Plans
Writer on Women's Issues

I was born and raised in Hawaii. Until two years ago, I attended the University of Hawaii. A big change seemed important, so I packed up, moved to New York City, and enrolled at Hunter. I'm a senior now.

BAGASAO: That was a big change. What are you majoring in?

NISHIMURA: I like to write, and am an arts and women's studies major. I'm studying these fields purely out of interest, not because of a job. Hunter has a great in-service learning center. Right now, I'm interning at *Mature Health* magazine. I've gotten great assignments, and it feels like a

real job. Next, I'll work for the *Ms. Foundation* and get three class credits.

BAGASAO: What do your parents think of this?

NISHIMURA: My parents are patient and supportive. My mother encourages me to study art and my father likes the idea of the media. I'm lucky—they're liberal parents.

BAGASAO: Describe your first semesters at Hunter.

NISHIMURA: It was a hard adjustment, going from a real campus in beautiful Hawaii to a college in the middle of New York. I had never gone to class on the 16th floor! I felt that people here weren't friendly, which happens at a commuter school. Things changed when I got involved in the Asian Pacific Student Alliance. The Alliance members do more things than just school and work. I was looking for that, and a chance to learn about Asian American issues.

BAGASAO: Tell me more about the differences between Hawaii and New York City.

NISHIMURA: In Hawaii, you don't have to explain that you speak English. At Hunter you do—not only with white students but also with foreign students. The international students don't understand the concept of "Asian American." They think all Asians are from other countries, that they are all alike.

The Hunter student body is very international. I have more contact here with Third-World students from Latin America and the Caribbean. I enjoy that. Third-World students are very aware of the politics in their countries, and they have taught me to be more aware of important international issues. The scholars they bring from Latin America talk about their own personal struggles. This is a wonderful experience.

One big difference is that, in Hawaii, people are relaxed. Here, people are always running around. Since I like to relax, I plan to return to Hawaii.

BAGASAO: How has your understanding of "Asian American" changed?

NISHIMURA: In Hawaii, we never talked much to different Asian students. Most of my friends were "locals." At Hunter, you can meet first-generation students from Hong Kong and mainland China. Most of these students are from working-class families. At first I was surprised that, even though our backgrounds are different, we share a lot of common ground. I also understand better what these first-generation students have experienced.

BAGASAO: What kinds of problems do immigrant students face at Hunter?

NISHIMURA: They have to take remedial English. It's an issue to them because they

don't get class credit, but they have to take it and pay tuition for the class. Then, they still have to pass English I to graduate. The immigrant students try hard. One of my friends took the class four times. She was demoralized. We certainly take English for granted. People think that the students don't try hard enough. Instructors work with the students three times a week, but still nothing happens. We don't know, but someone needs to figure out what's going on. Some students major in computer science to avoid writing.

BAGASAO: What about parental expectations?

NISHIMURA: The first-generation students don't have the same kind of freedom I have. They can't stay out late at all. Their parents are very protective. The students don't get angry, they accept it. Most of the students live in Chinatown near Allen Street, or in Queens, and they work.

BAGASAO: Given your experience at Hunter, what are you concerned about as a student?

NISHIMURA: I'd like to fight to put Asian Americans back in the category of "minority." Ugh, that word! I worry about the immigrant students and rumors of budget cuts here. They would really hurt these and all working-class students. □

Many expressed a hope that campus administrators would declare racism intolerable and punish its perpetrators.

The "whiz kid" myth harms students, I was told. "It imposes a burden on these students to perform at the highest levels, to be 'whiz kids' themselves," reports Kinsley of Oberlin. Who holds these expectations? Parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, friends, and the students themselves. "Oberlin," Claire admits, "was

quite stressful. I couldn't separate the academic from the other parts of my life. I put a lot of stress on myself that wasn't healthy, and got bad eating and sleeping habits. I pulled a lot of all-nighters. When things got really tough, I'd remember that there's a payoff. My GPA was 3.78." Good grades, she told me, "suck you back into it."

Many Asian American students have definitely *not* "whizzed" through college. Dario Ng had to take a year off, then return to Oberlin. He wants to

graduate no matter what, "to show that minorities can make it," to show that *he* can make it.

On Being Asian American

Their undergraduate experience helped these students learn the wider story of Asian Americans in this country and to formulate their own personal sense of being Asian American. At UCLA, the Asian American Studies Center became the avenue for growth; at Oberlin, students benefit from the

Learning English, Learning in English



Jenny Le (Phuong Thuy Nhu Le)
Pasadena City College, CA

Major
Special Education

Career Plans
Teach handicapped children

I came to this country from Vietnam with my parents in 1981. I live with them now, and, according to my culture, I will live with them until I get married. I have six brothers and sisters. We receive welfare. To help the family, my older brother and sister work, and I work part-time. This is my fifth semester here. It is hard to work and go to school at the same time. At least with a work-study job, you have flexible hours. This is better than what some students do. When there is a lot of homework or a test, I can stay home and then work different hours.

BAGASAO: I was a counselor

at PCC in 1979. At that time, learning to speak, write, and read English was a big problem for many students.

LE: I have found it very hard to learn to speak the English language. I didn't speak English at all when I came to the United States. I'm luckier than some of my friends. I am learning to speak by speaking with my ESL teacher. She helps me with my pronunciation. I also have a neighbor friend, who helps me when I am at home. She is a native speaker. Other Vietnamese students don't have native-speaking friends. This can make a difference.

But still, I have a problem with studying, with reading. The subjects that are most difficult for my friends and me are biology and psychology. These courses have a hard vocabulary. I have to spend a lot of time studying. It takes me about four to six hours to read one chapter in biology. I have to look in the Vietnamese dictionary to find out what things mean. So I study first in Vietnamese, then in English. It takes a long time.

BAGASAO: How do your friends study?

LE: They have to help each other. They read and translate for each other. If someone can't read, the other students explain everything in Vietnamese. When it comes to writing, they read

each other's papers, pointing out what's wrong. Or they write papers together. This is a problem for some of the teachers. Vietnamese students have to take ESL. They have lots of problems. I help them out, especially with writing a good essay. Most students don't think that English is a good subject. They don't care about writing, only speaking. They feel they can get a good job with only speaking.

BAGASAO: Lots of people believe that all Asians like math and are good at it. What is your opinion on this?

LE: Vietnamese students know math and are good in it. My older brother was good in math and always helped me when I was a little girl. I have two math classes, and I find them interesting. You know, my math background is good. In Vietnam, the main subject is math. We study high math in third and fourth grade. We are experienced in competing in math.

BAGASAO: Will the next generation of Vietnamese American students be good in math?

LE: I think it depends on the family. If the older kids are good in math and teach the younger ones, then Vietnamese will have high math education. But if the young ones are living in a house without math experience, they will learn like other

American children—that math is difficult. This will scare them away from it.

BAGASAO: What do you and your friends plan to do after leaving PCC?

LE: Most students transfer from PCC to a four-year college. Some stop after two years because of family problems or money. We like to go to colleges nearby or where our sisters and brothers have gone, so I will go to Cal Poly—Pomona. Then I want to go to UC—Irvine. They have a good teacher credential program.

BAGASAO: Do you have any messages for colleges that enroll Vietnamese students?

LE: I have one suggestion. I have seen some teachers who discriminate against the students. They always point to the students who can't speak English and try to pressure students to drop the class. But it is their job as professors to help us. I just talked to a student who was pressured because she couldn't speak the language well. She cried. I told her to stand up and say, "That's not right!" But Vietnamese students always keep it inside. They think if they stand up for themselves, they will get a bad grade and not pass the class. □

guidance and mentorship of Tommy Woon, assistant dean, Student Support Services.

Asian American studies were the chief means for students to learn about the history and literature of Asian Americans. On some campuses, that implies a center; at others, a course with an outside lecturer; at still others, merely an occasional lecture given by an Asian American scholar at the behest of a student organization. All the students I interviewed agreed that Asian American

studies—a center, a course, a lecture—make a difference in their education. Students at Penn, Oberlin, U-Mass, Boston, and Hunter have petitioned for Asian American studies programs.

The number of Asian student organizations is on the rise, and their strength increases. These student associations serve to bridge the college with the students, and both with the Asian American communities. Student organizations fight tenure battles, push affirmative action, and investigate admissions

quotas. Most importantly, like the Asian American studies centers, these organizations provide individual students with a place to make human contact with the college.

"Being Asian American is so personal," a student told me. For immigrant students like Ming New and Kim-Dung Nguyen, the first year at college meant being treated as an Asian while learning to be American. It was by becoming active in Asian student activities at Hunter that New made the connec-

The Education of a Leader



Woei-Ming New (Ming)
Hunter College

Senior
Economics

Career Plans
International Economics

Where should I start? It's a long story, not typical. It can't be, since they say I'm the first Asian American student body president in the CUNY system.

How did I get to Hunter? By accident! Back in '85, I worked in a restaurant five blocks from here. On the way to the subway, I'd see these two bridges over the street connecting buildings and wonder what was inside. One day I just walked in. It was a college! I wanted to go. I'd see these businessmen in expensive suits at the restaurant, talking about current affairs, signing big deals, and I was inspired to get an education.

BAGASAO: How did you get in?

NEW: Well, they had open admissions, so all I had to do was pass this GED test. I

did, barely. I felt good because I was a dropout in Malaysia in the seventh grade, and I came here only eight years ago. Still, I had to "prove myself" so I could become a regular student. For two years I went to school full-time—then I was part-time, worked, and didn't get involved in anything else.

BAGASAO: What were your first two years like?

NEW: I was nervous. I only knew about college from the movies and TV. Now I was in one. I didn't know how to act. Should I speak my mind? At first I felt inferior to the American kids. My self-confidence grew when I got involved later in extracurricular activities. Hunter is a commuter school in an urban area. There's no campus life, but you hang out. I'm a city kid, so it felt ok after a while.

That first year they signed me up for German and political science. No one explained to me what a liberal arts school is or why I took these courses. A semester later an older student told me I could meet the lan-

guage requirement by taking a test, which I took and passed. I speak Malaysian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Fujianese, and now English. As for my English, it was poor then. I sat through ESL 005 and got two credits, but I still couldn't write essays. I had a hard time expressing myself; my vocabulary was low.

BAGASAO: But those years are obviously behind you. What turned things around for you?

NEW: Around that time, I looked for other Asian Americans, a support group. It took a while because they didn't have office space like the other groups. But when I found it, it was great. Then I started doing things with the East Coast Asian Student Union. I went to an Asian American conference, and for the first time came into contact with American-born Asian Ivy League students. At first I was careful. They have a reputation for being aggressive and snobbish. But they made me feel positive. Gradually I gained confidence and started talking with everyone. My coursework and writing improved, and I got into an economics major.

BAGASAO: How did you get into student politics at Hunter?

NEW: In my third year I became a student senator. I felt Asian American students were neglected, they didn't have the funding or office space the others did. But then I learned how things function. The next year, I became activities commissioner. A coalition among Asian groups was formed and has become a swing vote in the elections. We became a political force. People told me I should be student body president, and, moreover, I wanted to change the student apathy. So the Asians,

blacks, Latinos, and special interest groups, like the gay and lesbian groups, formed a coalition. We won by about a 2-to-1 margin.

Now I've been in office two weeks. It's a lot of headaches, I can tell. But a main reason I ran was to break away from the stereotypes. We are not just here to study. Our goals are those of all students. This year in student government our issues will be day care, tuition increases, the cost of books and meals, and environmental safety on campus.

BAGASAO: Even so, I know Asian American issues are close to your heart.

NEW: I have a message for college leaders and administrators: Don't let the "model minority" myth deceive you. The problem for us is bigger than you think. There are Asian Americans showing up in the middle class, but more of the population is in the lower ranks. I worked in Chinatown for two years. I registered the Chinese garment workers and senior citizens and listened to their experiences. We have to vote and therefore empower ourselves to make a point. Lots of kids drop out of school in Chinatown, you know; many become gang members.

I think college leaders feel Asians are well prepared and represented in higher education. That's debatable even in the Ivy League, which has gotten visibility. But not in the Hunter-type college. We are regular students here, many of us immigrants. What you read about in the papers isn't the student body here.

A final point to college presidents is that if you want to educate *all* the student populations, you have to know them. Read our journals. Talk to us so you have an accurate perspective.

PHOTO BY ANNE LEE

tion between Asian and American. The same happened for Nguyen when she took her first Asian American studies course at U-Mass, Boston. For Jenny Le at Pasadena City College, that connection remains harder; she's a commuter there, and is still Vietnamese at home. Beviyani Nautiyal of Hunter still experiences Indian and American every day.

Kelly Nishimura experienced "Asian American" differently in Hawaii than she does in New York City. The contrast: her definition now encompasses immigrants from a wider variety of Asian and Pacific countries. Within just the Chinese American community in Chinatown she sees a wider range of generations.

Claire Kinsley is Eurasian. Her experience at Oberlin in the Asian American student organization added new light to her self-image. Students there welcomed her inter-racial background; she now understands herself as Asian American.

Making it Better

Interested educators need to better understand the "real" Asian and Pacific American students. The fact that most of them *don't* whiz through easily, and that many have unmet educational and counseling needs, shouldn't be a surprise. The college administrators and counselors interviewed for this article confirm the voices of the students. They join with me in making these recommendations.

- The variability *within* the Asian and Pacific American population militates against generalizing about it in the aggregate. As a check on generalization, we need *inter alia* systematic data on the particular ethnic populations (Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Pilipino, Guamanian, etc.) and especially on these peoples in higher education, so that we can identify and understand more particular needs.

- The doors labeled "minority opportunities" are closed to Asian and Pacific American students, despite their minority status and some very real needs. Retention services, for example, should be provided to all students from "high risk" backgrounds, perhaps as identified on a campus-by-campus basis. Universities should ensure that Asian and Pacific American students

have access to appropriate grant and fellowship opportunities, especially ones in the humanities and social sciences—fields in which they are under-represented. (This message is specifically directed to the major governmental and private foundations that support minority programs.)

- Exposure to the broader world of college majors and careers would be of great benefit to Asian and Pacific American students, especially immigrant students. This can be accomplished by preparing students with a full set of skills—including good communications skills—by introducing students to the humanities and social sciences, often through Asian American studies, and by providing counseling and advising services that avoid "stereotyping."

- Appropriate services are needed for immigrant students, whose experiences differ greatly from those of fourth-generation students. Ray Lou, in this issue ("Model Minority: Getting Behind the Veil"), suggests specific student and campus activities toward this end. We would add that it is important to avoid *blaming* immigrant students for the inevitably slow process of learning English and learning in English.

- Often, immigrant students are made to repeat ESL classes, for which they pay, but for which they do not receive credit toward graduation. In such cases, both the class and the tests should be investigated for effectiveness and validity.

- All college curricula should be "Asian American sensitive." This can be accomplished through Asian American studies course offerings and by the integration of such content into regular coursework.

- Like black, Hispanic, and all other students, Asian and Pacific American students are greatly served by the presence on campus of role models. Affirmative action in the areas of faculty, counselor, and administrator recruitment, hiring, tenure, and promotion is necessary.

- Asian and Pacific American students themselves are a ready source of information about student needs. Their student organizations should be viewed as a campus resource.

- Anti-Asian hostility seems to be on the rise. Campus racism should not be tolerated. □

The Student Voices

I am deeply grateful to the following students for their willingness to put voice to their experiences for this article. They have faced the challenge of being Asian and Pacific American students and they inspire me.

—Paula Bagasao

Elmer Almachar
Senior, Oberlin College

Dario Ng
Junior, Oberlin College

Claire Kinsley
Senior, Oberlin College

Woei-Ming New
Senior, Hunter College

Kelly Nishimura
Senior, Hunter College (1987-89)
University of Hawaii (1983-87)

Beviyani-Nautiyal
Senior, Hunter College

Kim-Dung Nguyen
Junior, U-Mass, Boston

Fred Alfonso
Senior, San Francisco State University

Christopher Ing
Senior, University of Pennsylvania

August Espiritu
Senior, UCLA

Phuong Thuy Nhu Le
Pasadena City College (CA)

Those Who Helped

Many thanks, too, to the following individuals for their observations about their experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander students. As I found, their students are thankful to them, too.

—Paula Bagasao

Tommy Woon
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Margaret Chin
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Peter Kiang
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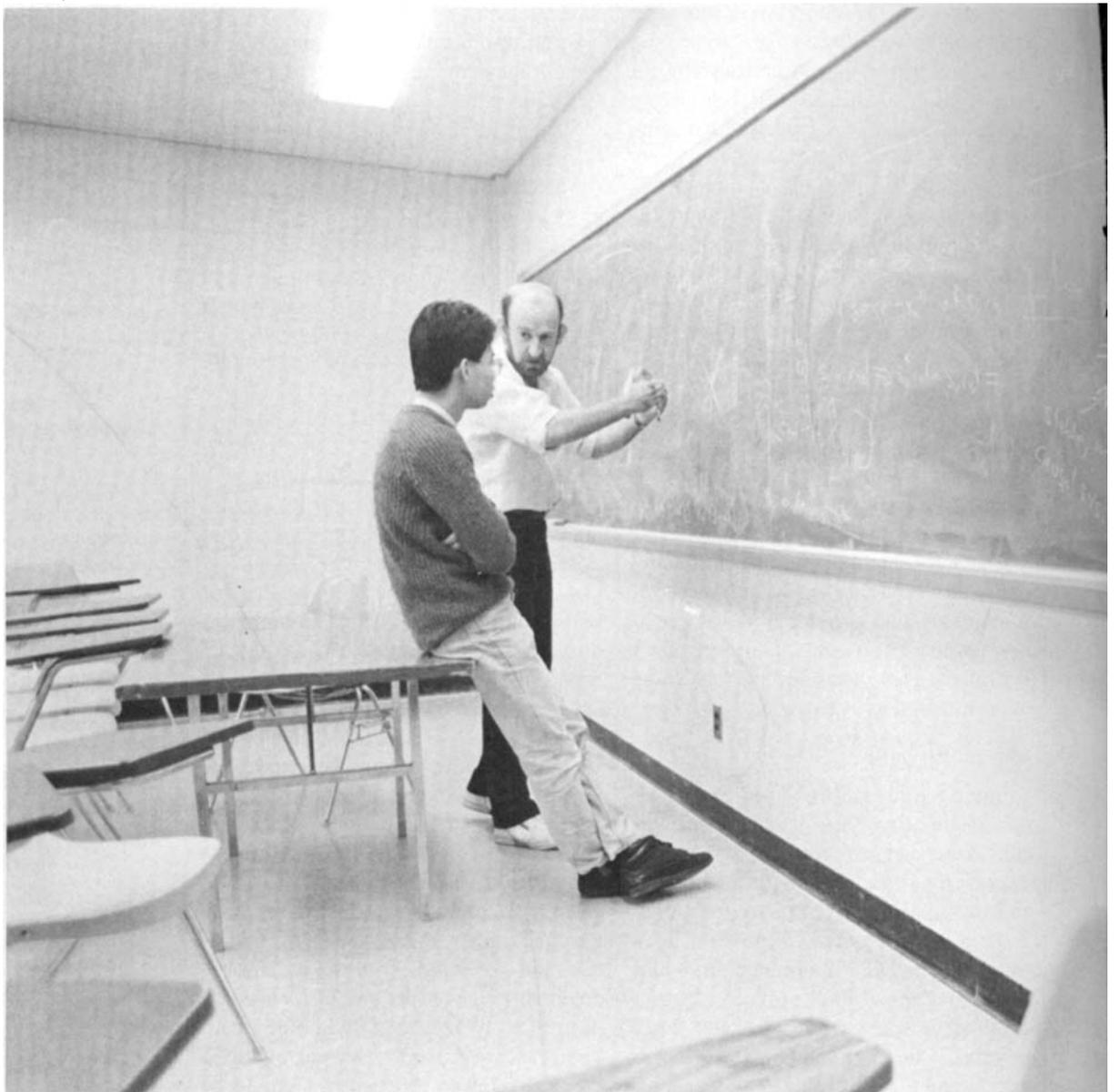
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The Asian American admissions debate represents a serious challenge to a number of long-standing goals of American higher education, such as socially engineering a "diverse" or "balanced" student body or seeking the meritocratic ideal of choosing the best of the brightest.

(Photos by John Foraste' Brown University)

