

We Are Asian American And We Are More Than Our Stereotypes

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“What does it mean to be ‘Asian’?” is a question only a certain demographic of people has to think about on a daily basis, and as such, is a question that gets ignored quite frequently in a classroom setting. The term “model minority” (Wadhwa, 2015) has created a rift in the Asian community, setting predisposed expectations of what it means to be Asian in American society. Those who self-identify as Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, or South-Asian (APIDA) arrive at the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article in various times in their life (Winters, 2015). For the sake of this article, we use the term APIDA because, “The reason for using one term is the dominant American society, wherein ethnic variations are minimalized and similarities are exaggerated (E. Lee, 2005; Liu, 2002), an individual’s personal ethnic identification is often unrecognized” (Kim, 2001). Far too often the identity development of the APIDA community goes unnoticed, leaving out important stories and voices in history books, and being forgotten about in the news. The same sentiment could be said in our Greek-letter organizations as well, particularly when joining most Interfraternity Council (IFC) or Panhellenic organizations which historically were not created to support the specific developmental needs of students who identify as Asian American.

This month’s *Essentials* is all about challenging the way we perceive the identity of others, and looking at how we can engage with fellow professionals, our students, and anyone else that goes beyond the surface level of who we are. To that end, it is time to stop thinking of cultural conversations as only being within this “black and white” dichotomy, but really to think about what problems exist beyond what we cannot see. At the height of critical conversations happening across college campuses around the world, we hope our stories serve as a continued conversation around how we can redefine the fraternal experience to satisfy all identities. What measures are our individual chapters taking to celebrate the differences among their brothers/sisters? Are we going to continue to throw culturally insensitive parties resulting in unchanged behavior? How do we get back to genuinely wanting to know what makes others unapologetically them?

As products of the fraternal experience, it is time we start creating meaningful emotional realities for our organizations. When we can get back to fostering real human connections, the possibilities are endless. We are here to say...

“I am an IFC man, but I am not white.”

“I am a Panhellenic Woman, but I am not white.”

“We are Asian American, but we are more than our stereotypes.”

Taylor: I remember the first interaction I had with my new set of suitemates whom I had never met before, during my sophomore year of undergrad. Upon entering my room I was greeted with the question, “So like are you Chinese or Asian?” In that moment, my journey to explaining what it truly means to be Asian American really began.

All my life I had been accustomed to being in spaces where those around me either looked like me, or were like me. Throughout my years in grade school, I was fortunate to attend schools that afforded me the opportunity to be surrounded by people of varying identities, and I never had to think critically about my race or ethnicity. It was not until I attended two predominantly white institutions, and also joined my fraternity, I realized how numb my mind had become to my cultural identity. I remember it like it was yesterday, the first time after I was initiated and hung out with my old friends from high school. Their immediate reactions when a couple of them found out I had joined a fraternity was to say, “Wow, you’re white now.” In that instance I began to process this in my mind: Where would they get this idea? Why do I have to be white just to be in a fraternity? Who created this image of what a fraternity man should look like?

I owe a lot of my personal development as a student leader to the fraternal experience. My chapter brothers and those I encountered along the way gave me something I never knew I needed when coming to college. But as I started my graduate program in higher education I realized how much was also missing from my story. My development as a person of color and a fraternity man were two different journeys to navigate, and because I had always been in predominantly white spaces, it did not occur to me how separated I became from my cultural identity until I would return home to my family and be reminded of how different my traditions, values, and even food were from those of my fellow fraternity brothers.

The power of the fraternal experience can be such a stepping stone in helping students navigate through their own personal development in so many ways. As an individual who self-identifies under the APIDA umbrella and works with APIDA students, I advise you to take the time to get to know those students in our predominantly white chapters. Identity is not a regular conversation that occurs in APIDA households. Far too often the APIDA community ends up becoming the ignored minority in many spaces. Hear their stories, learn about their cultural upbringing, and become an ally for students who otherwise would not speak about their personal development.

Amanda: I am Laotian, Asian American. My parents emigrated (escaped) from Laos in the 80’s, met 8 years later, and married. I was born and raised in Boise, Idaho. I am not Chinese, Vietnamese, or Japanese. I am Laos, just to be clear. I share and emphasize that because I often get the question when people first meet me: “Where are you from?” or “What’s your ethnicity?” There is often some small confusion because Laos is not as well known of a country, and I will sometimes get reactions such as, “that’s the same as Chinese right?” No.

For 25 years, I have lived in predominately white areas: I grew up in Boise, Idaho, attended Indiana University for my master's degree, and worked at the University of New Hampshire. My environments did not expose me to many people of color or of other identities often, unless I intentionally looked for those spaces.

This is going to sound silly, but I didn't notice I was Asian until I started reflecting in graduate school. To me, all I knew was I was always a little different. My family was different, my food was weird, and my traditions were odd or interesting. As I sat there and read through the different student development theories, I had many of those, "aha moments," or "that's why I felt that way" moments. And I felt unsettled, angry, joyful, sad, and proud as I looked back to my experiences growing up. Graduate school allowed me and challenged me to reflect back on some of the pivotal moments of my undergraduate experience.

Hands down, joining a sorority was one of the best decisions of my undergraduate experience. I felt very loved and supported in my sorority. There were some very tough personal moments my sisters really helped me through. However, as I reflect back on my Asian identity development, I had very little space to explore. I was one of two women of color in the organization when I initiated. We'd joke in the sorority that I reached our diversity quota or made our sorority more "diverse." I thought I felt proud during those times to be able to bring that to my sorority, but now more than anything, I felt tokenized and used. It was as if I checked off a box on the list of "diversity."

As people got to know me, I found it interesting I would get statements like, "Well, you're not like Asian, you're more like white." Honestly, I didn't realize the impact of that statement until years later. How did I not seem Asian? Just look at me, I am clearly Asian. I felt as if I was stripped of my salient identity, something I was told growing up that I should be proud of. I found myself living in three worlds, one that I wasn't Asian enough, too white, and the mixing of two cultures. This is still a big struggle for me today.

Joining a sorority was perceived to be a white thing to do in my family and in many ways I can understand that. The activities such as socials and events we planned focused more on white culture: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Don't get me wrong, I had a lot of fun and I learned a lot. However, there wasn't much conversation on how to diversify or be more inclusive in our socials or processes. I distinctly remembered asking to change the name of our annual Alumni Christmas party to something more inclusive. I thought the conversation was received well, but nothing has changed since I asked four years ago. My intent for a name change was an attempt to start conversations on how to be more inclusive of other identities. When I joined my sorority in 2009, there were about 20 of us. Now, the group has grown to be in the 100s. That's a lot of women with a lot of identities, and I believe it's so important we

have these types of conversations and create space to do so. My fear is if we don't create those spaces, we miss the opportunity to have great dialogue on other social identities and learn from one another.

I ask for you to think about how we welcome diversity into spaces and be more mindful of the words we use and the statements we make. The potential impact can be life lasting.

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