Interest Convergence or Divergence?: A Critical Race Analysis of Asian Americans, Meritocracy, and Critical Mass in the Affirmative Action Debate

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We use the Critical Race Theory frameworks of interest convergence and divergence to critique the anti-affirmative action movement’s co-option of Asian Americans. Past discussions of affirmative action and Asian Americans mainly concentrate on how Asian Americans are affected by affirmative action, whether positively or negatively. We demonstrate how Asian American collegiate experiences ought to affect public understanding of affirmative action itself by demonstrating the need for broader conceptualizations of meritocracy and critical mass.

Academically successful White students rejected for admission by highly selective institutions have challenged the fairness of affirmative action in the courts. Landmark cases such as Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978), Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), and Fisher v. University of Texas (2013) were all initiated by White plaintiffs. However, the most appealing poster children for the anti-affirmative action movement are not Whites but Asian Americans—specifically, Asian Americans with stellar academic records and perfect or near perfect test scores who have been rejected by the institution of their choice. Arguing that affirmative action hurts Asian Americans allows challengers to frame their opposition to the policy with colorblind language that seemingly reflects a concern for fairness and even thoughtful concern for a...
minority group (see examples and critiques in Kidder, 2000; Robles, 2004; Wu & Kidder, 2006). For example, writing in support of the ban on affirmative action in California, prominent affirmative action critic Stephen Thernstrom wrote: “A fair, open, colorblind process does not advantage racial minorities in general. Indeed, Asians are distinctly better off when judged strictly as individuals, on the basis of their academic qualifications” (qtd. in Kidder, 2000, p. 35). Opponents of affirmative action have contrasted the high academic achievement of Asian Americans who did not gain entrance to elite universities with the supposedly less successful records of Black, Latino/a, and Native American students accepted to such institutions (see examples in Kidder, 2000; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). They argue that Asian Americans have also experienced discrimination and hardship but overcame these challenges without receiving any breaks in the admissions process. In these accounts, college admissions is presented as a zero sum game: If some students benefit from affirmative action (e.g., Blacks, Latino/as, and Native Americans), then it is at the expense of other students—Whites and Asian Americans.

Supporters of affirmative action have asserted that such arguments exploit Asian American interests by telling an overly simplistic and incomplete story of how Asian Americans are affected by such policies. They contend that Asian Americans benefit broadly from affirmative action, that affirmative action is still needed to advance opportunities for underserved Asian American subgroups, and that Asian Americans have been hurt by “negative action,” a process by which Whites are more likely to gain admission than Asian Americans with the same test scores and GPAs (Chin, Cho, Kang, Wu, 1996; Kang, 1996; Kidder, 2006; Lee, 2006; Omi & Takagi, 1996). Several scholars have written excellent overviews of the politicization of Asian Americans in the affirmative action debates and the symbolic role that affirmative action plays in the complicated racialization of Asian Americans (see, for example, Allred, 2007; Inkelas, 2003b; Lee, 2006, 2008; Takagi, 1992). Interestingly, polls of Asian Americans have generally found a 50/50 split in terms of support for and opposition to affirmative action (Ong, 2003; Sax & Arredondo, 1999), reflecting mixed feeling towards the policy within the population (Inkelas, 2003a).

To date, much of the scholarship on affirmative action and Asian Americans focuses on how Asian Americans are affected by the policy versus how Asian American experiences should affect public understanding of the policy itself. We argue that Asian Americans exemplify why narrow, “objective” conceptualizations of meritocracy and critical mass—two concepts central to affirmative action—are flawed and thus
why revised, more holistic conceptualizations are needed. In our analysis, we use the Critical Race Theory tools of interest convergence and divergence to explain how (re)definitions of meritocracy and critical mass are key to understanding the multi-faceted relationship between Asian Americans and affirmative action.

This article is intended for two audiences. First, we encourage fellow Asian American readers to consider how the concepts of “meritocracy” and “critical mass” have been (mis)applied to our community. In doing so, we contend that more nuanced consideration of both concepts bolsters the case for Asian Americans and others to support affirmative action in higher education. Second, we write for the broader community of educators, researchers, and policy makers to help them understand how consideration of Asian Americans experiences begs for more nuanced, holistic conceptualizations of meritocracy and critical mass, underscoring the relevance of Asian Americans to the affirmative action debate. We begin with a brief overview of past arguments for why Asian Americans should support affirmative action. We then introduce the Critical Race Theory constructs of interest convergence and divergence and use both tools to critique dominant conceptualizations of meritocracy and critical mass. Finally, we explain how Asian American experiences speak to the need for broadened understandings of both concepts.

**Reviewing Asian American Support for Affirmative Action**

There are three prominent arguments advanced for why Asian Americans should support affirmative action: the broad educational benefits that affirmative action offers to society, the specific benefits that Asian American subpopulations may receive, and the issue of negative action.

**Broad Benefits**

The first argument for why Asian Americans should support affirmative action policy is because they benefit broadly from it. Unlike in the past when Asian Americans were direct beneficiaries of affirmative action in college admissions (Chan & Wang, 1991; Lee, 2008), today they are rarely considered under affirmative action programs in selective admissions. According to some scholars, this shift over the past several decades does not mean that Asian Americans should oppose affirmative action because Asian Americans still benefit educationally from the policy. In an amicus brief filed in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) signed by 28 Asian American civil rights groups, the groups maintained that Asian American students benefit from engagement in a diverse student body and supported the University of Michigan’s use of affirmative
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action to attract such diversity (“Brief,” 2003). Briefs filed in Fisher v. Texas (2013) also reference benefits associated with diversity for Asian American students, including enhanced intellectual engagement, civic engagement, and positive intergroup attitudes (Park, 2012a). Furthermore, in Chin et al. (1996), the authors, all Asian American law professors, argue that affirmative action helps create a more just and equitable U.S. society, which benefits everyone.

Subgroup Benefits

A second argument for why Asian Americans should support affirmative action is that some subpopulations should still benefit directly in college admissions. Challenges to the disqualification of all Asian Americans from affirmative action date back to the 1970s. Asian American law students at Boalt Hall protested the 1975 removal of Asian Americans from consideration for affirmative action, arguing that the revised policy erroneously lumped all Asian Americans together and overlooked the needs of Asian American subgroups (Asian American Law Students’ Association, 1978; Lee, 2006). Though Asian Americans are notorious for attending elite colleges, the portrait of Asian American success in higher education is far more nuanced. Almost half of Asian American undergraduates attend community colleges (CARE, 2010). A closer look at educational attainment by ethnicity reveals immense disparities between Asian subgroups. While some groups such as Asian Indians (63.9%) and Korean Americans (43.8%) have higher attainment levels of at least a bachelor’s degree, Southeast Asian Americans have considerably lower levels of bachelor’s degree attainment (e.g., Cambodians, 9.2%; Laotians, 7.7%; Hmong, 7.5%) (CARE, 2008). Thus, supporters of affirmative action argue that some Asian American subgroups could still benefit from race- or ethnicity-conscious admissions policies.

Negative, Not Affirmative, Action

A third reason advanced for why Asian Americans should support affirmative action is the idea that Asian Americans face disadvantages in the admissions process not because of affirmative action but due to a phenomena known as negative action. Kang (1996) pioneered the term to explain how Asian Americans are often displaced by Whites, and not other ethnic minorities, in college admissions. Negative action occurs when White students are more likely to gain admission than Asian Americans with equivalent standardized academic records. In other words, negative action “is in force if a university denies admission to an Asian American who would have been admitted had that person been
White” (Kang, 1996, p. 3). One past incident related to negative action was the anti-Asian quotas of the 1980s, in which the federal government investigated charges that elite institutions capped the number of admitted Asian American students and admitted White students with weaker academic credentials (Hsia, 1988; Takagi, 1992). More recently, Espenshade and Radford (2009) found that with grades and test scores held constant, Whites were three times more likely than Asian Americans to gain admission at selective institutions.

This trend starkly undermines the popular perception that Asian Americans are being displaced by other ethnic minorities because of affirmative action. Selective college admissions is often portrayed as a zero-sum game where benefits related to affirmative action for underrepresented minority (URM) students come at the expense of Whites and Asian Americans. Hence, Asian Americans are often portrayed as losers, not winners, when it comes to affirmative action (Golden, 2006; Sander & Taylor, 2012; Trow, 1999). However, negative action challenges one of the fundamental claims of the anti-affirmative action movement—that considering race in selective admissions unilaterally disadvantages Whites. Instead, negative action contends that Whites receive some preferential treatment in the elite admissions process in comparison to Asian Americans with comparable academic records (Poon, 2009).

These issues—broad benefits, subgroup benefits, and negative action—are the three main arguments Asian Americans have used to challenge the idea that Asian Americans are unilaterally disadvantaged by affirmative action. While they show how Asian Americans have been affected by affirmative (or negative) action, they do not give much attention to how consideration of Asian Americans ought to shape affirmative action itself—specifically, the need for revised understanding of key concepts associated with the debate. In the next section, we introduce the analytic tools we will use to advance our argument for redefining meritocracy and critical mass as they apply to the affirmative action debate.

**Critical Race Theory: Interest Convergence and Divergence**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) foregrounds “the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 63). Underlying CRT is the argument that society tends to associate race with explicit, overt acts of racism, neglecting to understand how race and racism continue to affect people’s lives in subtle, complex ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).
Originally developed in legal scholarship, tenets of CRT commonly applied within education include the centrality of race and its intersectionality with other disenfranchised identities (e.g., gender, sexuality), a challenge to dominant ideology or master narratives, a commitment to social justice, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and an interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano et al., 2000). Within the affirmative action debate, CRT has served as a framework for rejecting the idea that we live in a colorblind, equitable society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Teranishi, 2010). A CRT perspective also acknowledges that affirmative action is not a panacea to the pervasive racial inequities of society, but is “a limited approach which has achieved a meaningful, if not modest, measure of racial justice” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xxx).

Legal scholar Derrick Bell (1995) developed the concept of interest convergence and used it to contend that racial segregation in schools would not have been eradicated if it were merely a matter of improving education for Black children. Instead, Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was possible only because racial integration eventually converged with White interests (Bell, 1995). Bell argued that racial segregation became viewed as an economic threat to the industrialization of the South and a setback to America’s reputation during the Cold War. Thus, ending segregation became a viable option only when Whites recognized how ending it would serve their interests. He summarized: “The interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of Whites” (p. 22). In CRT, interest convergence is typically used to explain the political and economic interests behind certain acts that people of color have benefited from, underscoring how such actions generally do not occur due to pure benevolence or sudden enlightenment.

Guinier (2004) coined the term interest divergence to argue that while Brown represented interest convergence between certain Black and White populations, in hindsight the Brown decision further marginalized the interests of poor and working-class Blacks and Whites, hence representing an ultimate divergence of interests. More generally, Guinier has contended that the Brown case consequently fostered interest divergence along racial, class, and geographic boundaries for myriad communities (e.g., Black, White, elites, poor, middle class, northern, southern, etc.). Arguments in the case also ascribed the negative outcomes of segregation to “differential treatment rather than demeaning treatment within a racialized hierarchy” (p. 109). Guinier points out that racialized hierarchies “reinforce divergences of interest among and between groups with varying social status and privilege, which the ideology of
white supremacy converts into rationales for the status quo” (p. 114). As a result, supposed goals of racial equity often mask an underlying framework of interest divergence that perpetuates racial, class, and geographic hierarchies.

In our discussion, we use interest convergence to show how the (largely White) anti-affirmative action movement embraces Asian Americans in order to bolster the case against affirmative action. While we recognize that “White” and “anti-affirmative action” are not interchangeable descriptors, we also recognize that Whites are by far more likely to oppose affirmative action than any other racial/ethnic group (Park, 2009a). We also use the concept of interest divergence to show how ultimately the interests of Asian Americans depart from the anti-affirmative action movement. As we will show, the current state of interest divergence shows how revised conceptualizations of meritocracy and critical mass would better serve the interests of Asian Americans and the broader college-going population.

**Meritocracy: Competing Definitions in Shifting Contexts**

*Understanding Merit in Higher Education*

American colleges and universities pride themselves on meritocratic values. In the past, admission to elite institutions was generally available to only the wealthiest and most privileged sectors of society. That pattern eventually gave way to the ideal that only the most qualified and talented (i.e., the meritorious) should be allowed entry to selective higher education institutions, not the richest and most connected (Cohen, 1998). Need-blind admission reflects this belief that one’s talents and qualifications should be the deciding factors in admissions, not one’s ability to pay. Despite espousing commitments to merit-based admission, institutions can stray from their ideals. For instance, in 2009 there was public outrage in the University of Illinois system when it was found that admission was granted to politically-connected students with academically weak records (Cohen, Clair, & Malone, 2009). The continued debate over legacy admissions is another example that offends meritocratic sensibilities.

Valorizing the concept of merit suggests that everyone admitted to an institution “deserves” to be there because of her or his own accomplishments. It also implies that standards of merit can be objective, narrowly defined, and consistent. However, admissions policies at selective institutions are certainly not static, even at institutions that attempt to standardize admissions criteria. For instance, in 2009, the Texas legislature
approved a change whereby the University of Texas at Austin only guarantees admission to applicants in the top 8% of their high school class, and not the top 10%, in order to consider candidates outside the top 10% of their high school class (Associated Press, 2009). In California, all but one University of California campus employs a comprehensive review admissions policy, but each campus weighs the various traits of applicants differently (Johnson, Mosqueda, Ramon, & Hunt, 2008).

The apparent fluidity of what constitutes “merit” is an issue that confounds any conversation about admissions policies. A narrow and restrictive view of merit might heavily privilege SAT scores. A more holistic view might consider special talents, leadership, and resilience, and grit. An institution may reject some students in the interest of assembling a multi-faceted and diverse student body; these same students may be accepted at other institutions. Conceptions of merit vary from institution to institution. In a study of admissions policies at 17 elite colleges, Killgore (2009) found that students’ academic and extracurricular accomplishments merely serve as a baseline for admissions consideration. Admissions personnel weigh individual talent and effort against their organizational interests and needs, which may include athletic goals, financial stability, and social justice concerns.

More holistic considerations of merit align with the Supreme Court’s majority opinion in Grutter v. Bollinger (2003). While the more rigid undergraduate policy that assigned point values for traits valued by the university (including, but not limited to, race) was struck down in the companion case Gratz v. Bollinger (2003), the University of Michigan law school’s finer consideration of student assets was upheld in Grutter. In the Grutter case, the Court affirmed that race-conscious admission policies are permissible so long as they are narrowly tailored. That is, race and ethnicity can be considered a “plus” factor among myriad “soft” variables (i.e., non-explicitly quantitative measures) that institutions may examine when assessing applicants. The Grutter decision serves as testament to an inclusive, holistic conception of merit, particularly vis-à-vis efforts to attain a critical mass of URM students, a concept we dissect later.

The battle over merit can also be viewed as a struggle among status groups and organizational interests (Karabel, 2005). When admission by merit, however defined, does not converge with institutional interests, a general course of action is to redefine the manner of assessing students. The early 20th century changes to admissions practices at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton that curtailed Jewish enrollment is an example of the institutional management of merit (Karabel, 2005). Indeed, Karabel (2005) has suggested that the definition of merit “always bears the im-
print of the distribution of power in the larger society” (p. 550). In the 1930s, James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard introduced standardized testing as a means of “objectively” assessing student aptitude, thereby ushering in a new era of testing as a way to measure merit. The intent was that standardized testing would allow students from more modest backgrounds an equal opportunity to pursue higher education (Lemann, 1999).

The establishment of the SAT and the growing influence of the Educational Testing Service created a strong perceptual link between test scores and merit that has been difficult to disassociate (Lemann, 1999). Such narrow conceptions of merit work to cloak the reproduction of inequality in supposedly scientific, objective terminology (Baez, 2004). Bourdieu (1993) argued that the dominant class uses IQ testing to reproduce “itself by transmitting cultural capital, which appears embodied and has, therefore, an apparently natural and innate quality” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 293, qtd. in Baez, 2004). Baez (2004) has argued that the same dynamic is at work in standardized, high-stakes testing, where the public assumes that standardized tests capture a pure, untainted conception of merit. Asian Americans are not part of the traditional dominant class in the United States and have been largely excluded from hierarchies of power. Still, the extensive SAT prep industry catering specifically to mainly Chinese and Korean Americans in metropolitan areas (Park, 2012b; Zhou & Kim, 2006) reflects the prioritization of standardized testing for many Asian Americans. The East Asian American SAT prep industry represents a number of commendable factors such as immigrant aspirations and a willingness to invest in the future. It also arguably represents an effort by some East Asian Americans to gain entry into the elite educational world described by Bourdieu (1993), where a high SAT score represents a natural standard of achievement. To describe the scenario bluntly, a historically dominant White society has set the terms of the game through the objectification of merit and valorization of standardized tests, and many Asian Americans are trying to play by what they perceive to be the rules.

**Narrow Conceptions of Merit and Interest Convergence**

Acknowledging the premium that many Asian Americans place on standardized test performance, the anti-affirmative action movement has used the case of Asian Americans to argue in favor of a narrow view of meritocracy. As an aggregate group, Asian Americans have traditionally performed well on standardized measures of academic achievement, although the population has varying levels of educational attainment (Hune & Park, 2009). Opponents of affirmative action reason that
it punishes Asian American achievement by allowing URM students with lower SAT scores into certain colleges while denying admission to Asian Americans with higher SAT scores. In multiple works, Kidder (2000, 2006; see also Wu & Kidder, 2006) has shown how Asian Americans are used as “racial mascots” to prove that affirmative action penalizes members of this so-called hardworking minority group who have been denied admission to the selective institution of their preference. When narrow conceptions of merit are prioritized, the alliance between some Asian Americans and the anti-affirmative action movement is a case of interest convergence: Opponents of affirmative action happily annex Asian Americans to their cause when Asian Americans are angered that high test scores and GPAs do not automatically guarantee admission into highly selective institutions.

**Recognizing Negative Action:**
**When Only Whites Benefit, Interests Diverge**

Despite this commonality, there has been little willingness on the part of the anti-affirmative action movement to acknowledge that Asian Americans are more likely to be displaced by Whites than URM students in the selective admissions process via negative action. Scholars have documented shifting enrollment standards over the years in response to increases in Asian American applicants, paralleling the overall growth in the Asian American population (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Hsia, 1988; Takagi, 1992). From 2007 to 2018, Asian American student enrollment in higher education is projected to increase by 29%, while White enrollment is projected to grow by only 4% (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). While many, if not most, of these students will attend non-selective or low-selectivity institutions, we wonder how the projected growth of the Asian American population will affect admissions criteria at more selective institutions when there are an even greater number of students competing for a still-limited number of spots. History suggests that such dramatic demographic shifts will result in glass admissions ceilings for Asian Americans and calls for investigations into these unspoken limits (Nakanishi, 1989).

While anti-affirmative action advocates are quick to lament that non-standardized measures of merit hurt Asian Americans and favor URMs, they have yet to meaningfully acknowledge how holistic review can favor Whites in the selective admissions process. Defenders of standardized conceptions of merit may decry efforts to curb Asian American enrollment as an injustice to Asian Americans, but we suspect they are more prone to view such practices as unjust when framed as a byproduct of affirmative action—in the interests of URMs—versus
negative action, in the interests of Whites. It is quite possible that the anti-affirmative action movement is generally unwilling to acknowledge negative action because doing so would disrupt the master narrative that holistic admissions policies unilaterally hurt Whites. Their failure to recognize and challenge negative action and the White advantage in holistic admissions testifies to how anti-affirmative action advocates are less likely to support Asian Americans when interest divergence occurs, as is the case with negative action. It is possible that the lack of attention towards negative action may not be a matter of intentional neglect. Still, it remains a compelling concern, one that the anti-affirmative action movement ought to address if it purports to care for the welfare of Asian American applicants.

(Re)Defining Meritocracy: The Need for More Holistic Definitions

We find interest convergence when Whites embrace Asian Americans as victims of affirmative action but divergence with respect to the problematic nature of negative action. Divergence may also occur if opponents of affirmative action resist the majority Asian American student bodies that would likely come out of only admitting students on the basis of test scores and GPAs if affirmative action were banned. Cross and Slater (1994) have suggested, “If SAT scores and GPAs become the overriding consideration in admissions at . . . highly selective schools, Asians would so dominate the admission track that there would certainly be an intolerable outcry from the White alumni who fund, and whose children would lose places at, these institutions” (p. 90). Ward Connerly, a former UC regent who has mobilized numerous anti-affirmative action ordinances, stated that he would be “quite comfortable with only White and Asian students at UC” (qtd. in Rockwell, 1997, para. 1). However, we question whether most opponents of affirmative action would truly embrace this outcome, be it from latent racism (i.e., not wanting to attend a predominantly Asian American institution) as Cross and Slater (1994) suggest or ironically from the belief that diversity actually has pedagogical and civic value. Opponents of affirmative action may be less quick to embrace Asian Americans when Asian Americans’ ability to meet narrow admissions standards threatens or diverges from their own interests, showing the shakiness of their commitment to supporting equity for Asian Americans.

Ironically, the latter case of divergence should challenge opponents of affirmative action to reassess whether a narrow and standardized framing of merit is really advantageous, but we find that anti-affirmative action advocates will play both sides when it comes to merit. They want quantifiable standards of merit when they keep out supposedly unquali-
fied URMs but appear willing to dismiss such rigidity if it works against their self-interest. In a compelling example, a recent study found that White adults are more likely to support flexible, holistic versions of merit when they are reminded that Asian Americans in the UC system make up more than double their proportional representation in the state of California. However, when they were simply asked about criteria for UC admission without any mention of Asian Americans, they favored a heavier emphasis on standardized tests and GPA in admissions (Samson, 2013; Jaschik, 2013).

Asian Americans complicate the affirmative action debate by providing evidence that merit is actually a highly flexible, subjective, and dynamic concept tied to the interests of various stakeholders. When the demographic shifts of the 1980s led to increasing numbers of Asian Americans participating in higher education, admissions debates abounded regarding narrow conceptions of merit vis-à-vis the virtues of selecting a diverse or balanced body of students. The lower admission rates for Asian Americans at highly selective institutions compared to other applicant groups led to questions about Asian Americans being held to different standards of merit (Nakanishi, 1989). Asian American admissions trends demonstrate that the idea of merit is neither concrete nor transparent; rather, it is a contextually defined and determined concept.

In the case of what constitutes merit, standardized measures of excellence are a double-edged sword for Asian Americans. On the one hand, when Asian Americans are significantly more likely to be rejected than White students with the same academic credentials, quantifiable standardized measures alert us that something is possibly amok. On the other hand, an overreliance on standardized measures as markers of excellence overshadows the multidimensional ways in which students may demonstrate achievement, aptitude, and potential. We believe narrow definitions of merit neither meet the interests of Asian Americans nor the goals of colleges and universities. Yet, we recognize that a legitimate danger of more holistic and dynamic notions of merit is that such practices can open the door to admissions officers stereotyping Asian Americans or holding them to a higher standard of excellence than other racial/ethnic groups, even on non-standardized measures of achievement (e.g., co-curricular involvement and leadership). Historically, admissions personnel used holistic assessments of merit to justify formal and informal quotas on Jews and Asian Americans rooted in stereotypes about these populations (Karabel, 2005; Takagi, 1992). In the interests of assembling a balanced and diverse student body, admissions officers may make comments such as “We have too many Asians” without real-
izing the troubling and problematic implications behind such statements (Jaschik, 2006). Opponents of affirmative action might retort that using “objective” standards of merit like test scores prevents such stereotyping and allows admissions officers to judge each applicant independently of subjective attitudes and bias. However, standardized tests are limited in capturing many of the attributes that colleges and universities highly value, such as leadership potential and experience in overcoming adversity; furthermore, such tests were never intended to be the sole barometer of potential and achievement (Wightman, 2003).

The case of Asian Americans can help us understand that standardized tests and holistic assessments do not have to be diametrically opposed in an “either-or” stalemate. As tempting as it is to advocate for the complete abandonment of standardized tests, we recognize how they help admissions officers sift through an overwhelming number of applicant files. However, they should not and cannot be the sole or dominant way we assess academic potential in a complex, diverse, and multi-gifted pool of applicants. While Asian Americans as an aggregate group are known for consistently meeting certain standards of merit valued by the dominant culture (primarily standardized measures of academic achievement), we urge admissions counselors and policy makers to remember that Asian American students bring far more to the table than test scores that boost U.S. News and World Report rankings. Further, Asian Americans themselves need to consider that test scores are not the sole way to demonstrate merit and that an admissions system that over-privileges test scores does not serve their long-term interests.

Redefining Critical Mass: More Than Just Numbers

Understanding Critical Mass

In addition to complicating notions of meritocracy, Asian Americans further confound the affirmative action debate by challenging understandings of critical mass. Critical mass is traditionally understood as the idea that minorities are better served in certain environments where there are more of them, alleviating challenges such as tokenization or isolation (Kanter, 1977). The focus is on increasing the proportion of minority to majority persons in a group in order to combat the negative effects a skewed ratio potentially engenders. Kanter (1977) suggested that without a balance, those in the numerical minority group are vulnerable to serving as “tokens,” thereby being exposed to three perceptual tendencies: visibility, polarization, and assimilation. In terms of visibility, the fewer the number of individuals in a minority group, the
larger the share of group awareness each individual must shoulder. As Kanter explained, “For tokens there is a ‘law of increasing returns’: as individuals of their type come to represent a smaller numerical proportion of the group, they potentially capture a larger share of the group members’ awareness” (p. 971, emphasis in original). It would seem reasonable then that the counter to this phenomenon is to increase the numerical proportion of the minority group, thereby decreasing the share of awareness each member in the minority group is subject to. The implicit goal in reaching critical mass is such that individuals no longer feel the acute pains of being visibly tokenized and having to “speak for” or “represent” the minority group.

Polarization is another perceptual disposition that arises when there is a highly skewed ratio of persons in the minority versus majority group. As Kanter (1977) clarifies, “The presence of a person bearing a different set of social characteristics makes members of a numerically dominant group more aware both of their commonalities with and their differences from the token” (p. 971). In this situation, the differences between the majority and minority group are apt to become exaggerated such that it is difficult for those in the minority group to effectively counter generalizations or stereotypes. With a more balanced ratio or critical mass, individuals in the minority group are less likely to find themselves in the position of feeling socially isolated or having to defend or hide their differences.

The third perceptual inclination, assimilation, addresses the tendency to ascribe generalizations to individuals in the minority group. Persons placed in a “token” position may find their characteristics being twisted to fit stereotypes or generalizations. Kanter (1977) suggested that the more individuals there are in the minority group, the greater the diversity of characteristics such that “it is possible that the generalization will change to accommodate the accumulated cases [of discrepant examples]. But if individuals of that type are only a small proportion of the group, it is easier to retain the generalization and distort the perception of the token” (p. 972). The purpose of achieving a critical mass is to diminish the likelihood that those in the minority group will feel entrapped by stereotypes and generalizations.

The discussion of ratios and group proportions often leads to an oversimplified association of critical mass with a magical numerical tipping point. Reflecting this assumption and in the eyes of the general public, critical masses of Asian American students exist at most selective institutions of higher education either because Asian Americans have achieved “parity” overall in higher education or because Asian Americans are even “overrepresented” at some selective institutions (Cho,
Legislation to create a federal designation for Asian American and Pacific Islander minority-serving institutions faced notable challenges due to the overriding perception among policy makers and the public that Asian Americans do not encounter challenges in higher education and have achieved more than adequate enrollment figures (Park & Chang, 2010). Asian Americans make up anywhere from 14% to 19% at Ivy League institutions and 39.6% at prestigious flagship state universities like the University of California, Berkeley, but they only made up 5.6% of the overall U.S. population in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2011). The dominant narrative with respect to Asian Americans in higher education is that their numerical representation in selective institutions is a proxy for success. As we show, enrolling critical masses of Asian American students is in some ways a case of interest convergence for selective higher education institutions and Asian Americans. Supporting admitted students, however, is a different story.

Interest Convergence: But Who Truly Benefits?

Admitting numerical critical masses of (East and South) Asian Americans works in the interests of elite higher education institutions as well as the short-term interests of Asian American students. Both parties seemingly benefit: Some Asian American students benefit by gaining admission to a prestigious university, and having a higher Asian American enrollment can allow an institution to boast that “almost half of our students are students of color” or “so many of our students come from diverse backgrounds.” While these statements may be factually true, they can also be a form of damage control for institutions wanting to mask their low URM enrollments. High Asian American enrollments can contribute to the perception that an institution has done its duty to recruit a racially diverse student body when in reality it has not.

Institutions also benefit from admitting numerical critical masses of Asian American students because doing so preserves the façade of SAT scores as a substantive indicator of merit. In an era where institutional SAT averages are a prized asset due to their role in the U.S. News and World Report rankings and overall reputation maintenance, it is not inconceivable that as an aggregate group, Asian American students are helping institutions boost their SAT percentiles. At highly selective institutions, Asian Americans are less likely to be admitted even when they have higher SAT scores (Espenshade & Radford, 2009), raising the possibility that those who are admitted generally have exceptionally high scores. In previous years at least, Asian Americans had the highest SAT scores out of Harvard undergraduates (Lee, 1993). The message from institutions that SAT scores matter has led East Asian Americans
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in particular to invest substantial time and money in the test prep industry (Zhou & Kim, 2006). The willingness of many Asian Americans to “play the game” works to the advantage of institutions that rely on admitted students’ performance on standardized tests to project an image of selectivity and rigor.

On a less cynical note, Asian American students, like students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, contribute to the diversity and vitality of a university environment. Enrolling a greater proportion of Asian Americans better allows institutions and students to dodge the potential hazards that accompany the token status that would likely arise with lower enrollments of Asian American students. While certain higher education institutions’ willingness to admit substantial numbers of Asian Americans represents a case of interest convergence, their scant investment in social and academic programs that would support and foster Asian American students’ well-being and identity development, such as cultural resource centers and Asian American studies programs, is evidence of interest divergence (Chang, 1999; Lee, 2009).

When (Numerical) Critical Mass Backfires: Interest Divergence

The relatively high enrollments of Asian Americans at selective higher education institutions obfuscates the documented challenges that Asian American faculty face in receiving tenure, the low number of Asian American senior administrators, or the fact that Asian American students tend to be less satisfied with their campus environments (Cho, 1996; Park, 2009b). Despite achieving numerical critical mass at numerous campuses, the processes that Kanter (1977) describes as resulting from critical mass have not been fully actualized; Asian American students continue to encounter a relatively unsupportive campus racial climate (Cress & Ikeda, 2002; Museus, 2008; Poon, 2010). Asian American students are less satisfied with campus diversity and more likely to feel that they have experienced racism from faculty (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Park, 2009b). They remain a racialized and minoritized group with very real experiences with discrimination and racial microaggressions, which are subtle verbal, non-verbal, and visual insults directed at people of color (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006). Common microaggressions targeted at Asian Americans include invalidation of interethnic differences (“all Asians look alike”), ascription of intelligence (“you people always do well in school”), and denial of racial reality (“Asians are the new Whites”) (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007, p. 76). Sometimes racialized comments are more direct. In 2011, Alexandra Wallace, a White student majoring in political science at UCLA, an institution with a high overall percentage of Asian
Americans, uploaded a short, stereotype-filled tirade against “Asians in the library” to YouTube, replete with disdain for “their moms and their brothers and their sisters and their grandmas and their grandpas and their cousins and everybody that they know that they’ve brought along from Asia with them” (qtd. in Yu, 2011). The video went viral, attracting national media attention.

Negative campus racial climate and experiences with discrimination have tangible, negative consequences for their Asian American students’ well-being. Perceptions of a negative campus climate are linked with higher rates of depression for Asian American students (Cress & Ikeda, 2002). Slights such as microaggressions may seem insignificant, but they are manifestations of larger systemic racial oppression (Solorzano et al., 2000). Furthermore, over time they have a wearing, cumulative negative effect on individuals’ mental health and well-being (Sue et al., 2007). Also, stereotypes about Asian Americans reflect the collective public ignorance regarding the diversity of the Asian American community. This lack of awareness plays a significant role in perpetuating inaction towards different Asian American subgroups’ unique needs within higher education.

**Interest Divergence:**
*When Universities Benefit and Asian Americans Lose*

These nuances within the Asian American student population are often overlooked because critical mass is commonly assessed through aggregate numerical representation and enrollment statistics at the point of entry. When critical mass and the numerical representation of Asian Americans are seen as interchangeable, interest divergence is at work between universities and Asian Americans. Interchanging the two is in the interest of universities: They get high “minority” enrollments and test scores. However, high numerical representation of Asian Americans can easily divert institutions’ attention from acknowledging and tending to the actual unique needs of Asian American college students, leaving Asian American interests behind. Lee (2006) argues that the portrayal of Asian Americans as overrepresented leads to their “de-minoritization” in higher education, the view that Asian Americans have achieved majority status and are no longer in need of any special programs or support. Indeed, claims of overrepresentation seem to displace guarantees for adequate provision of resources and recognition. At the University of California, Berkeley, with its rich history of Asian American activism, curriculum, and co-curricular activities, a campus report found the following: “A recurring observation in the preparation of this report is
the finding that [Asian Pacific Americans] on campus share a common feeling of marginality. This occurs at all levels of faculty, students and staff” (Campus Advisory Committee for Asian American Affairs, 2001, p. 3). The finding suggests that numerical critical masses do not automatically translate into a supportive campus environment or adequately spur the processes described by Kanter (1977). Asian Americans demonstrate how numerical representation appears to be a necessary but insufficient condition for combating the tokenization and marginalization of students of color.

Baez (2004) contends that the pitfall of giving uncritical authority to quantitative measures capturing the benefits of diversity is that we limit ourselves to acknowledging only aspects of diversity that are easily quantifiable and measurable. Similarly, by using enrollment data as the primary indicator of the state of well-being for Asian Americans (or any other racial/ethnic group), we reduce ourselves to privileging what is most easily communicated numerically and overlooking the actual multidimensional experiences of Asian American students in higher education. Because Asian Americans are generally not considered under affirmative action policies, it is assumed that critical masses (and sometimes amply more at certain institutions) of Asian American students are enrolled in selective higher education institutions and that these students have no need for extra care or support.

The greatest divergence between the master narrative of Asian Americans having achieved numerical critical mass and the actual needs of Asian American students is the case of Southeast Asian American subgroups, which are severely underrepresented in higher education (Teranishi, 2010). The perception of numerical critical mass for Asian Americans detracts attention from the persistent underrepresentation of these students. We recognize the paradox of decrying numerical critical mass but also using it to diagnose how certain sectors of the Asian American student population are especially underserved. Regardless, the master narrative of Asian American overrepresentation stops with a single number—the percentage of the aggregate Asian American population—and does not allow for fuller understanding of how some Asian American ethnic subgroups are not even attending college. The dominance of using a single metric to gauge Asian American representation is partly due to the lack of disaggregated data in the reporting of federal education statistics. Because institutions are currently not required to report disaggregated data to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), there is little incentive for them to collect data disaggregated by ethnicity for Asian Americans.
Expanding Definitions and Assessments of Critical Mass: A Case Bolstered by Asian Americans

The status quo of Asian American enrollment in selective higher education institutions is a case of interest convergence, serving both the interests of higher education institutions and to some extent, Asian Americans. However, institutions’ failure to move beyond the status quo represents an interest divergence, where actually supporting Asian Americans and working to recruit and retain underrepresented Asian American subgroups is apparently not in the immediate interest of these same universities. We propose that universities redefine critical mass as consisting of more than enrollment figures and structural diversity. Asian Americans provide prime evidence for the idea that numerical critical mass is inadequate to trigger the processes described by Kanter (1977) and that a more holistic approach to critical mass should be advocated for in higher education.

Such an approach would take into consideration assets such as the campus racial climate, the role of campus culture, and institutional support for minority student populations (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012; Yun & Marin, 2009). Accounting for the campus racial climate entails that the state of campus race relations cannot be solely determined by enrollment figures for students of color. Rather, the numbers (structural diversity) must be viewed in tandem with considerations such as intergroup relations, psychological perceptions, and institutional support for diversity efforts (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). Here we are influenced by the work of Yun and Marin (2009), who assert that critical mass should not be decoupled from the achievement of positive learning and social outcomes for diverse populations. They suggest that a new conceptualization of critical mass tailored to higher education issues is necessary to recognize the fluidity and complexity of what it really means to achieve critical mass. Because Asian Americans’ needs are often unacknowledged by institutions, we agree with Yun and Marin (2009) that a reconceptualization of critical mass is needed, especially in relation to our understanding of Asian Americans and other students of color.

Some might question the necessity of reconceptualizing critical mass given that the term is traditionally seen as reflecting a numerical threshold for adequate representation. In this line of thinking, other aspects of the campus racial climate are important but are distinct constructs from critical mass. However, we argue that the utility of critical mass as a numerical figure is severely limited because it fosters an overreliance on numbers that is counterproductive to the overall and origi-
nal goal of critical mass: to alleviate marginalization and tokenization (Kanter, 1977). In light of the challenges that Asian Americans have faced in higher education, we believe it is imperative to incorporate the non-quantifiable enhancements of campus racial climate into a revised conceptualization of critical mass to ensure that critical mass in practice moves beyond a simplified numbers game.

Under an expanded understanding of critical mass, one potential learning outcome might be the development of critical consciousness for Asian American students. The social process of becoming critically aware of one’s racial/ethnic identity and position and then leveraging that consciousness into action requires a combination of structural diversity and an inclusive campus climate. Osajima (2007) found that for most students, developing an Asian American critical consciousness, a process of “conscientization” (Freire, 1970/2004), marked a significant departure from the perspectives they previously held. As students became increasingly aware of the societal struggles and issues that Asian Americans face, they also began to recognize the transformative possibilities that conscientization can have for Asian American activism. Similar processes often occur in Asian American studies courses. As documented by researchers, opportunities to connect with other Asian American students both intellectually and cognitively, as well as socially and affectively, help students become critically aware of their identities (Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009). Improved mental health services, culturally-conscious academic and career counseling, and recognition of the unique needs of Asian American students are needed to support the holistic development of Asian American college students. Further, institutions need the tool of disaggregated data to help them gauge the representation and experiences of underserved Asian American ethnic subgroups. It is not enough for institutions to just admit Asian Americans; they must also work to foster learning environments that contribute to their flourishing as students and citizens in a diverse democracy.

In some ways, the current case of general institutional neglect towards Asian Americans may be a harbinger of what could happen if selective institutions were to boost Black, Latino/a, and Native American enrollments absent any substantial changes to the organizational cultures of their campuses. Even if institutions gained the structural diversity that they so desire, recruitment without adequate attention to the unique needs of students upon enrollment is insufficient from an equity perspective (Bensimon, 2004). The example of Asian Americans shows how significant changes are needed in order to retain minority student populations, support their flourishing, and ultimately transform insti-
tutions into inclusive learning environments that support all students. Thus, we challenge institutions to rethink their understanding of critical mass to include consideration of students’ well-being on campus.

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated, the debate about affirmative action is a complicated one for Asian Americans. While many have argued that affirmative action hurts Asian Americans, others contend that Asian Americans benefit broadly from affirmative action, that certain subgroups receive direct benefits, and that Asian Americans are disadvantaged by negative action. However, we argue that Asian Americans are not just passively affected by affirmative action but that they actually affect the policy itself by challenging traditional conceptions of meritocracy and critical mass and offering support for more holistic measures of both. We add to the conversation by using the CRT tenet of interest convergence to demonstrate how the dominant narratives of meritocracy and critical mass appear to represent the interests of Asian Americans and may do so in the short term. In fact, a deeper investigation reveals that interest divergence is more powerfully at work in both cases. Asian Americans are evidence that mainstream conceptualizations of merit and critical mass do a disservice to students, Asian American and otherwise, thus necessitating broader, more holistic understandings of these two concepts.

Our article makes numerous contributions. First, our analysis expands CRT as a framework for addressing the unique challenges facing Asian Americans in higher education. Just as critical race theorists moved beyond a legal framework and adapted CRT for the context of education, our work here pushes the current boundaries of the nascent subfield of AsianCrit in legal studies and develops its relevance as a lens for greater racial understanding and justice in higher education (Park, 2008; Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Chang, 1993, Chon, 1995; Liu, 2009; Teranishi, 2002; Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009). Second, we showcase how the CRT constructs of interest convergence and divergence are applicable to the affirmative action debate in novel ways, showcasing and critiquing the agendas of the different stakeholders. Third, our work shows how Asian Americans are highly relevant to how the theoretical constructs of merit and critical mass are defined and measured, lending support for more holistic conceptualizations of both. While Asian Americans are often left out of discussions on students of color (Park & Teranishi, 2008), our analysis
shows how specifically focusing on Asian Americans reveals unique insights into the affirmative action dialogue.

By showing how Asian Americans demonstrate a case for a broadened understanding of meritocracy and critical mass, we show the continued necessity of affirmative action as a tool that can help universities enroll a talented and multi-faceted class. In line with CRT, we agree that affirmative action is limited and modest in its ability to spark racial justice (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The question remains of how Asian Americans themselves might respond to our arguments. Interestingly, while some surveys have found a 50/50 split in Asian Americans’ attitudes towards affirmative action (Ong, 2003; Sax & Arredondo, 1999), one national longitudinal analysis of college students found that while half of Asian Americans entered college opposing affirmative action, by the fourth year of college, 63% supported the policy (Park, 2009a). The finding suggests that a younger generation of Asian Americans is more likely to recognize the value of race-conscious admissions policies. Why this is so, and whether these Asian Americans will retain their support for the policy into the years, is unknown, necessitating future research. However, one thing is apparent: Not only do Asian American interests diverge with the anti-affirmative action movement, but for a substantial portion of the population, their viewpoints do as well.

Overall, the politics of admissions is a volatile terrain subject to influence from public, status group and organizational interests. Opponents of affirmative action would have us believe that Asian Americans are caught between having to relinquish their own self-interest in favor of “less qualified” URMs. Our discussion of meritocracy and critical mass demonstrates that it is misguided and counterproductive to box Asian Americans into conventional narratives. However, in matters of access to perceived scarce resources, the CRT perspective of interest convergence suggests that debates about admissions will sway in favor of policies that benefit Whites (Bell, 1995). If the basic premise of interest convergence holds firm, then advocates of holistic conceptions of merit and critical mass are unlikely to gain mainstream backing unless Whites view such notions as being advantageous to them. While it seems unlikely that affirmative action will ever gain widespread support within the White population, we have shown how Asian Americans’ interests are less in line with the affirmative action movement than some might assume. While there are never simple solutions to reconciling educational disparities, and while affirmative action certainly is not the only answer, a commitment to access and equity in higher education necessitates that we champion holistic admissions policies, including ones
that foreground race and ethnicity. Our goal here has been to ensure that Asian Americans remain an involved part of the discourse, illuminating the complexities that this diverse population brings to the conversation.

Notes

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1 In the Bakke case, Allen Bakke, a White male, alleged he had been denied admission to the University of California Davis Medical School in favor of less qualified minority applicants admitted under a special admissions program. While the Court held that the special admissions program violated the Equal Protection Clause, it also held that race can be taken into account as a factor in admissions decisions. In the Grutter case, Barbara Grutter, a White female, alleged that she was rejected by the University of Michigan Law School because its admissions policies unduly factored race for certain minority groups into its admissions decisions. The Court held that it is permissible to use race in admissions decisions, though it must be “narrowly tailored”. In the Fisher case, Abigail Fisher, a White female, contended that the University of Texas at Austin violated the limits on race-conscious admissions policies set forth in the Grutter case.

2 These scholars note the ways in which Asian Americans are essentially “de-minoritized” and are not considered a minority group because of their higher statistical representation in higher education, especially at highly selective institutions, relative to their overall representation in the general population. Asian Americans were assigned minority status in the 1960s and then stripped of it in the 1970s and 1980s, in part due to their perceived academic success and higher education attainment. The ideological imposition of a “model minority” label also contributed to the inconsistent racialization of this population.

3 This percentage includes those who reported Asian alone and Asian in combination with one or more races.

References


Interest Convergence


