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The Midwest regional context complicates Asian American college student activism and social justice efforts; so understanding these dynamics can equip higher education practitioners to better support these students.

Asian American College Student Activism and Social Justice in Midwest Contexts

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Systemic oppression shapes the experiences of Asian Americans in profound ways. Globally, imperialism, colonialism, and struggles among major economic powers have led to systemic violence toward, and significant challenges for, Asian American communities (Aguirre & Lio, 2008). Nationally, systemic racism—as well as other forms of oppression such as neoliberalism, poverty, and heteropatriarchy—continue to cause challenges for Asian America and the diverse communities within it. And, on college campuses, these forces have an impact on the everyday lives of Asian American faculty, staff, and students (Museus & Park, 2015).

Many Asian Americans engage in efforts to resist systemic forms of oppression and advance equity through political activism. College and university leaders often view such resistance as a burden. However, political activism is a fundamental democratic process (Kezar, 2010; Slocum & Rhoades, 2009). Therefore, we believe that institutions that claim and seek to cultivate students' skills to productively engage and lead in a democratic society should encourage student activism and understand how to collaborate with activists to improve conditions on their campuses and in their surrounding communities. To inform such efforts, we provide insight into the factors that shape Asian American activism in the Midwest. In the following sections, we discuss critical context necessary to understand the experiences of Asian American activists in postsecondary education in the Midwest region. Then, we present the findings of a study on the experiences of Asian American college student activists in the Midwest. We also offer

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a set of recommendations to support educators engaging Asian American college student activists in the Midwest region and beyond.

Racial Context: Racism, Misconceptions, and Misleading Data

Existing scholarship demonstrates that Asian American college students experience the effects of racial oppression in a multitude of ways (Kiang, 2002; Museus & Truong, 2013; Vue, 2013). For example, this population experiences racial stereotypes, isolation, and hostility, as well as anxiety resulting from the pressure to assimilate into majority cultures (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Museus & Park 2015; Vue, 2013). There is also evidence of the ways in which racism intersects with sexism to emasculate Asian American men and objectify Asian American women in college (Museus & Truong, 2013).

One of the most salient mechanisms through which racism shapes Asian American college students' experiences is the model minority myth, which portrays Asian Americans as passive or docile, successfully integrated into mainstream society, and exemplary (especially in science and math) relative to other racially minoritized groups (Museus, 2008). Although this myth may not seem harmful on the surface, it can fuel a false narrative that Asian American students do not face challenges or need support. This assumption can also lead to a lack of investment in support for Asian Americans, impediments to them seeking help, and pressure for them to major in science or math while foregoing academic and career paths that some of them might find more meaningful and fulfilling (Choi & Lahey, 2006; Museus & Park, 2015).

In addition, researchers have noted that the reliance on aggregate data can reinforce model minority misconceptions (Kiang, 2002; Museus, 2014). As an aggregate, Asian Americans appear to have high rates of educational attainment. However, many Asian American subgroups face significant disparities in college access, persistence, and success (Museus, 2013). However, an overreliance on aggregate data and the model minority myth can converge to reinforce the exclusion of Asian Americans from higher education conversations. This racial realities heavily shape Asian American student activism in college.

Asian American College Students and Activism

While dominant narratives position Asian Americans as failing to possess leadership skills and engage politically (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004), this community has a long history of political activism in higher education and society (Nguyen & Gasman, 2017; Umemoto, 1989). Indeed, prominent Asian Americans have been heavily involved in some of the most significant national movements in history, such as the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, Asian Americans have helped spearhead movements in

support of immigration (Lowe, 1996; Vo, 1996), against unfair labor practices (Wong, 2000), against racial violence and discrimination (Kurashige, 2000; McClain, 1994), against residential racial segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Park, 1996), for educational equity (Umemoto, 1989), and for redress for Japanese Americans forced into internment camps during World War II (Maki, Kitano, & Berthold, 1999). Thus, despite stereotypes of Asian American complacency, they have historically organized politically, socially, and economically to fight for social justice in the United States.

Within higher education, Asian American activism frequently emerges in response to systemic oppression manifesting on college campuses and their surrounding communities. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, in response to higher education's failure to meet the needs of minoritized communities, Asian American students joined their peers to fight for more culturally relevant curricula and increased racial equity (Ryoo & Ho, 2013; Umemoto, 1989). Since this time, Asian American movements have led to the creation of critical ethnic subcultures (e.g., Asian American studies and Asian American student organizations) on campuses across the nation (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Kiang, 2002; Museus, 2008; Museus, Shirota, & Dizon, 2016; Vue, 2013). These identity-based subcultures provide spaces for the exploration of Asian American history, culture, community, and identity, thereby cultivating leaders and activists (Lin, 2018; Suyemoto, Day, & Schwrtz, 2015). For example, Lin (2018) conducted a mixed-method study of Asian American college students and established that grassroots political student organizations led to increased political consciousness among these students and led them to advocate for educational and social justice causes. The exclusion of Asian Americans from mainstream social and political conversations makes these counterspaces even more critical. Moreover, such exclusion might be especially pronounced in the Midwest, where Asian Americans are less visible than in other regions of the nation.

Midwest Contexts and Asian American Activism

Asian American communities vary across geographic contexts within the United States. (Lee, 2009). For example, according to the last national census in 2010, almost half (46%) of Asian Americans in the United States resided in the West, followed by 22% in the South, 20% in the East, and 12% in the Midwest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These statistics suggest that Asian American communities in the Midwest are smaller than in other regions, which might lead to them facing unique challenges as a result of these low levels of representation.

At the same time, there are sizable Asian American communities in the Midwest. For example, over 2 million Asian Americans lived in the Midwest in 2010, and Illinois has the sixth-largest Asian American population of all U.S. states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). With regard to Southeast Asian

Americans (Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese Americans)—the refugee groups that face some of the most significant barriers to education—several Midwest states are among those with the largest communities (Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, 2011). In addition, between 2000 and 2010, the Asian American community grew most rapidly in the South (69%), while their growth was second fastest in the Midwest (48%). In sum, these data indicate that the Asian American community is growing faster in the Midwest than in most areas of the country, Asian Americans in the Midwest might continue to play an increasingly salient role in defining Asian America moving forward, and it is therefore important to understand their experiences, needs, and stories within this region's context.

There is some indication that geographic context in general and the Midwest context in particular might play a role in shaping the experiences and perspectives of Asian American college students. For example, scholars have argued that place, space, and geographic location influence how race and racial identity are experienced, understood, and expressed (Berry & Henderson, 2002; Chan, 2017). This research suggests that the Midwest is dominated by Black–White racial discourse, a lack of Asian American representation, and smaller Asian American communities that lead to limited educational opportunities to learn about Asian American histories and cultures. Yet, little is known about whether and how such regional factors shape Asian American activism.

Study and Methods

Qualitative methods were utilized to execute the current investigation because they facilitate the in-depth examination of processes and phenomena through detailed information (Creswell, 1998). In addition, qualitative methods were deemed ideal for answering our overarching research question: How does the Midwest regional context shape Asian American social justice activism? To answer this question, we conducted qualitative focus group interviews with administrators and staff working with Asian American student organizations in the Midwest.

Participant Recruitment. To recruit the sample for this study, we utilized purposeful sampling to achieve intensity (i.e., information richness) and variation (i.e., diversity in social identity, position, and institutional type) (Patton, 2002). Specifically, we sought administrators who work with Asian American student organizations because they were deemed most likely to understand the systems within which Asian American student leaders and activists are embedded.

A letter soliciting recommendations of participants for the study was sent to senior student affairs administrators at institutions of higher education affiliated with the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU). MAASU is a regional annual student-run conference that is held in various locations across the Midwest region and focuses on understanding

Asian American issues, Asian American leadership development, strengthening Asian American resistance to all forms of oppression, and uniting and serving Asian American communities. We utilized responses from senior administrators who were contacted to develop an initial list of potential participants. These potential participants were invited to apply to participate in the study by providing basic demographic data, describing their experiences with Asian American student leaders, and submitting their curriculum vitae. Participants who had significant experience working with Asian American organizations and diverse social identities (race, ethnicity, gender) and position levels (entry, mid, and executive level) were selected for participation. The final sample included thirteen participants.

Data Collection and Analysis. The participants were split into three focus groups, which were facilitated by a member of the research team and lasted approximately three hours, including breaks. Participants were asked a series of questions about contextual factors that influence Asian American students' experiences and involvement in social justice activism. Another member of the research team took notes and recorded observations. The interviews were also audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Once the focus group interviews were transcribed, we coded data in Dedoose—a web-based qualitative analysis software program. We used initial, axial, and focused coding to analyze the data (Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this first phase of initial coding, we read transcripts with an openness to all possible thematic and theoretical possibilities that may be generated. We then used axial coding to build upon the initial codes and identify their attributes (e.g., properties or elements). Finally, we utilized focused coding to determine the most salient themes in the data and relationships among them.

Findings

Our analysis generated important insights into how the Midwest context shapes Asian American student activism. Before discussing our findings, however, it is important to underscore that participants supported Asian American students engaging in many forms of activism, including supporting national movements (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter and the movement to protect undocumented students), organizing events (e.g., social justice conferences), facilitating dialogues across communities of color, and responding to discriminatory incidents that sparked tension in their campus climates. Thus, Asian Americans in the Midwest were fighting for social justice in many ways. These efforts, however, were complicated by the realities of the Midwest context, to which we now turn.

Exclusion From Diversity and Equity Discourse. Given the relatively small size of Asian American communities and low levels of representation in most areas of the Midwest, it is not surprising that Asian Americans in this region often experience exclusion. However, participants

also described ways in which diversity and equity conversations specifically excluded Asian American voices, concerns, and issues in the Midwest. One participant stated, “In the Midwest, Asian Americans don’t have a seat at the table. They are not invited to conversations about diversity. They’re not thought of in diversity initiatives.” They noted that these conversations typically focused on White and underrepresented students, and the term “underrepresented” was often used synonymously with Black students or Black and Latinx students. Participants underscored the importance of addressing the challenges faced by these communities and problems with ignoring Asian Americans—as well as Native Americans and Pacific Islanders—altogether. As a result of these dynamics, participants asserted that Asian Americans in the Midwest struggled to balance their support for movements to advocate for other communities (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter) and fighting for their own voices and issues to be acknowledged.

Participants also noted that the dismissal of Asian Americans from these conversations was fueled by the model minority stereotype, reliance on simplistic aggregate data, and a myopic focus on retention rates in determining who should be included in conversations about diversity and equity. Specifically, they described how campus leaders often emphasized lower retention and graduation rates among Black and Latinx students as a rationale for ignoring Asian Americans. They underscored that such assumptions were problematic, as they fueled competition among communities of color. They also highlighted the problem with their institutions’ overreliance on aggregate data, because it masked significant struggles and disparities within Asian American communities and reinforced model minority assumptions. These realities often led Asian American students to expend excessive amounts of energy explaining and justifying why they should be included in diversity and equity conversations.

Cooling Effect of “Midwest Niceness.” Participants discussed the ways that Midwest culture was characterized by “Midwest niceness,” which was described as being nice to each other and avoiding conflict and disruptive behavior. They perceived this Midwest nice culture as making Asian American and other college students on their campuses more inclined to participate in social organizations, activities, and events than to gravitate toward social justice work.

Our interviewees also suggested that this Midwest niceness compounded other pressures for Asian American students to avoid engaging in social justice activism. For example, stereotypes of Asian Americans as passive, docile, and assimilative model minorities reinforced messages that they should not engage in disruptive activist behavior. In addition, participants noted that many families of Asian American students with whom they worked did not immediately understand the value or benefits of students engaging in this work. In response, they highlighted the importance of educating students about how the model minority stereotype might influence their lives and the lives of other people of color, as well as informing Asian

American families about the benefits of being involved in social and political causes.

Limited Access to Knowledge of Community Activism. Participants also discussed how students had limited access to knowledge about Asian American activism histories and efforts in the Midwest. They highlighted the reality that histories of Asian American activism and engagement in social justice work exist in the Midwest, citing Asian American icons from the civil rights movement and the ways in which Asian American movements led to the creation of Asian American studies programs and departments on Midwestern college and university campuses. They also noted that Asian American studies programs were critical in constructing Asian American histories and sharing knowledge of Asian American communities in the Midwest and beyond.

Yet, interview participants noted that these stories were untold and unheard in most spaces in the Midwest. They reported that students who were not from major cities had limited exposure to stories of activism in general and Asian American activism in particular. As a result, they perceived many Asian American students in the Midwest to be unable to see themselves as social justice activists. As a result, participants discussed the need for faculty and staff to spend significant time and energy with Asian American students to build a foundation of knowledge about the social and political issues that affect their communities and the importance of addressing them, before cultivating their skills to engage in social justice leadership and advocacy work.

Pull Away From the Midwest. Finally, participants discussed the ways in which Asian American students in the Midwest experienced a pull away from the region. Specifically, they noted that Asian American students often romanticized the volume of historical and contemporary forms of activism on the west and east coasts. They attributed this romanticization, at least in part, to the students' limited knowledge of the racial challenges and struggles that existed in other regions of the United States.

Participants also noted that many Asian American student activists with whom they worked expressed a desire to leave the Midwest after finishing college. These students believed they would learn much more about activism and have greater capacity to make change on the coasts. Participants believed that these perceptions were inflated, given the significant potential to make a difference in the Midwest. For example, one participant underscored the reality that many swing states that determined the outcome of the last presidential election were located in the region. As a result, they underscored the need for more documented stories and models of activism and progress taking place in the Midwest, so that Asian American students can see their potential impact on the system. Although participants discussed this phenomenon primarily as a pull away from the region, the exclusion of Asian Americans from diversity and equity conversations, limited representation and structures to support their activism, and

Midwest niceness that hinder activist behavior also likely fueled these desires to leave and pushed students away from the region.

Recommendations for Institutional Policy and Practice

Our analysis has several implications for administrators and educators working with Asian American activists in the Midwest and beyond. They include the following:

- *Ensure Asian Americans are Part of the Larger Diversity and Equity Agenda.* Institutions of higher education can and should engage Asian American student leaders in campus diversity and equity conversations to ensure that their needs and interests are included in their institutions' larger diversity and equity agendas. The engagement of Asian American college students in these conversations is necessary for campuses to provide them with opportunities to develop civic responsibility and commitments, cultivate their capacities to engage in political processes, and foster greater understanding between them and other communities on their respective campuses.
- *Create Data Systems to Facilitate More Accurate Understanding of Asian American Communities.* Institutions of higher education must create and maintain systems to generate data that illuminate the diversity and disparities that exist within the Asian American community. Colleges and universities should implement policies and practices to normalize disaggregation of institutional data across ethnicities and socioeconomic classes to equip campus community members to challenge pervasive misconceptions about Asian Americans.
- *Encourage Greater Understanding of Regional Differences and Similarities.* Educators working directly with Asian American students should provide them with opportunities to engage in hands-on advocacy experiences in different areas of the Midwest and beyond. For example, institutions in rural areas of the Midwest can collaborate with Asian American community organizations in Chicago, Minneapolis, and other major cities to learn about and engage in activism with these organizations. Such opportunities can help students develop a more complex understanding of activism across regional contexts and help them find greater value in activism within the Midwest region. Asian American student leaders should also be encouraged to attend regional and national meetings that focus on Asian American issues and social justice, such as the MAASU and Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) conferences, where they have an opportunity to interact with Asian American community leaders across the nation and learn about common and different struggles and successes across regions.
- *Support, Expand, and Sustain Asian American Studies Programs and Curricula.* Asian American studies programs provide spaces for Asian Americans

to learn about and advocate for their communities. Asian American students should be encouraged to take courses in Asian American studies to gain a richer understanding of their communities' histories and contemporary issues. Equally important, however, is the fact that faculty across disciplines and fields—such as history and sociology—can offer culturally relevant curricula that engages the histories, struggles, and stories of Asian American communities into their courses. It is especially urgent for faculty in the Midwest to find ways to highlight the histories of Asian American communities in the Midwest to expose students to the many ways that Asian American social and political action takes place within the region.

- *Encourage Engagement in Controversy With Courage.* Asian American student activists struggle with their “place” in conversations about current social justice issues. For example, Asian American students may struggle with how to balance their support of Black student activism with fighting for recognition of the history of racism against Asian Americans. And, while such conversations can be difficult, activism requires some level of risk (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017), and advocating for social justice requires engaging in controversy with courage (Museus, Lee, Calhoun, Sánchez-Parkinson, & Ting, 2017). Institutions should consider how to equip and support Asian American and other students to engage in these conversations within and outside of their communities. Campuses should also create more spaces to engage in dialogue about critical social and political issues across communities. If institutions of higher education can provide tools for students to navigate these complex issues, it will only strengthen students' abilities to build coalitions within and across racial and ethnic groups, which are critical in efforts to combat systemic oppression in our society and around the world.

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