

## ARE ASIANS AND ASIAN-AMERICANS EXCLUDED IN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES?

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The need for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in academic spaces is not new. However, such discussions were reinvigorated by many different events this year. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in anti-Asian racism incidents, exacerbated with the current U.S. administration calling COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus.” The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and many other Black lives at the hands of police, and the largely inadequate justice and accountability that followed those many incidents, reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement that is still happening today.

FFFA as an earlier response to the BLM movements, many universities, institutions, and academic societies released statements reaffirming their commitment to DEI within their spaces. While these statements are well-intentioned, efforts to practice DEI in academic spaces cannot be successful without addressing the root of racism within those spaces that excluded those groups in the first place. Racism affects different racial and ethnic groups in varied ways, and is noted on the history of oppression that affects them. This also applies to the history of science and how groups historically interacted, or rather, were negatively affected, from science.

There are recent efforts to reexamine the language that we use to describe the so-called “underrepresented minorities” (URM) and work to reform that language to better reflect the current situation. I look to the National Science Foundation (NSF) as an example of their language that needs to be critiqued and reformed. The NSF is a federal agency that supports and funds fundamental nonmedical STEM initiatives across U.S. academic institutions. As such, their impact on STEM spans entire disciplines. The NSF also releases biennial reports that outline the demographics of women,

minorities, and persons with disabilities in STEM (NSF 2019).

### SO, WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

The NSF is fairly consistent with how they define “minorities” vs. “underrepresented minorities.” From their latest report published in 2019 (based on data from 2016 to 2017), they define a minority as:

*A racial or ethnic group that is a small percentage of the U.S. population. Blacks or African Americans, Hispanics or Latinos, American Indians or Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians or Other Pacific Islanders, Asians, and persons reporting more than one race.*

In comparison, they define “underrepresented minorities,” abbreviated as “URM” as:

*Women, persons with disabilities, and three racial and ethnic groups—Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians or Alaska Natives.*



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From their definitions, they do not consider Asians (as the entire racial group—regardless of gender) as an underrepresented minority. Instead, the NSF considers Asians as an “overrepresented majority among science and engineering degree recipients and among employed scientists.”

The first time reading that statement was one of confusion and frustration. As a Filipino-American Ph.D. candidate in marine ecology, the only situations where I would find people of similar identities were within intentionally crafted social media accounts and informal Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-made spaces during very expensive conferences. While I wish to not detract

from the experiences of other peoples in their STEM spaces and experiences, I’d like to address another issue that is the erasure of Asian-Americans in STEM.

### SO, ARE ASIANS REALLY AN “OVERREPRESENTED MAJORITY” IN STEM?

According to the NSF’s 2016 data, Asians make up 5% of the whole U.S. population, yet make up 9% of bachelor’s degree holders in STEM disciplines, 31% of STEM doctorate recipients, and have the highest median salary in STEM occupations compared to White and URMs in similar occupations. However, almost 70% of employed scientists were White, compared to 19% among Asians, 8% among Hispanics and Latinos, 6% among Black and African-Americans, 2% among groups identifying as more than one race, and 0.5% among Native Americans, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders. While 19% of representation is less than 70%, overall Asian representation in STEM is higher than other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.

With that in mind, I’d ask two questions: Is this “overrepresentation” consistent across ethnicities within the Asian group? And, is it consistent across disciplines within STEM?

The simple statement of Asians being overrepresented is a misleading one. A closer look reveals that Asians are not overrepresented in all disciplines. A study on representation in technology and engineering shows that second-generation Chinese, Indians, and Vietnamese are more represented in those areas compared to other Asian subgroups, while Filipinos are more represented in healthcare fields (Min and Jang 2015). In ecology, Asian-Americans made up only 3% of ecology Ph.D. studies in 2018 and were scant in leadership positions in the Ecological Society of America (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020).

The irony of treating all Asians as one monolithic group is that it is not unique to other underrepresented groups, as Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and American Indigenous peoples are also diverse in their identities. It is through the exclusion of Asians in DEI initiatives that the erasure of intragroup diversity becomes an issue.

This supposed Asian overrepresentation in STEM is a legacy artifact of America’s racist policies. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, most Asians in Asia were barred from immigrating to the U.S.A. through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 as a

result of Sinophobic “Yellow Peril.” However, the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act overturned those laws to emphasize work occupation-based preferences, resulting in increased diversity of professions entering the U.S.A., and attracted more middle- to upper-class Asian immigrants. Concurrently, a white sociologist was formulating and promoting the Model Minority Myth, which claimed that the success of Japanese-Americans (and later East Asians) was tied to their hard-working and authority-adhering ethic, showing that any “minority” can achieve economic and professional power, compared to other racial groups deemed “lazy” and “disruptive.” The promotion of the “Model Minority” in mainstream media and politics effectively sowed dissonance between Asians and other BIPOC at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and continued to uphold white supremacy for decades to come (Chen and Buell 2018). This wedge between Asians and other BIPOC produced its fruits from the many anti-Asian racist incidents during the pandemic, and the dilemma of whether Asians should stand in solidarity with BLM.

### SO, WHAT SHOULD ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS DO?

Firstly, I’d like to amplify the call to *abolish the term “underrepresented minorities”* (Williams 2020). The term URM implies a deficit among groups that were historically excluded or erased in STEM disciplines, and that representation by assimilating in the STEM work climate would solve centuries of oppressive systemic racism that led to these conditions. There were suggestions to reword Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people in STEM as “people of excluded identities” or “People Excluded because of Ethnicity or Race”. While it somewhat addresses the root of the problem of exclusion rather than underrepresentation, changes in terminology mean nothing without prolonged and sustained action.

Second, institutions and programs conducting demographic or workplace climate surveys need to *deaggregate the demographic data*. Aggregating the demographic data erases the

complexities and actual diversity within stated racial and ethnic groups. Even within Asian spaces, some ethnicities such as Filipinos question their belonging within those spaces as a result of their complex history of colonialism and imperialism, and the geography of the social environment where they grew up. Racializing Asians, or other racial groups, as monoliths while ignoring the diverse challenges and obstacles within those groups is racist. Data can be deaggregated by specifying ethnicities within racial groups, their major or expertise, and those intersections between. This more nuanced understanding allows an avenue to meet the needs of excluded peers that were previously overshadowed by other peers of overrepresented identities.

With our increased understanding of how different racial and ethnic groups are treated differently in STEM, we need to be cognizant of these differences and work to *dismantle the causes of disparities at our institutions, policies, and practices*. Such initiatives are better said than done, and there are many approaches we can take, but I list some examples to move forward:

- *Education*: Provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to learn how science has roots in racism and white supremacy (e.g., biology from a historical and philosophical perspective). Complement this historical perspective with DEI training, including a bystander component for bystanders to intervene should they encounter micro- and macro-aggressions in their spaces.
- *Accountability*: Form a committee of both faculty and students to address racist policies or incidents, and provide long-term solutions for communities of excluded identities who were disenfranchised from their spaces.
- *Consultation*: Hire antiracist consultants and educators to assess the work climate of institutions, programs, and spaces, and suggest ways to improve the climate for people of excluded identities.

Finally, we need to implement in our core values that science is for everyone, regardless of however people identify. In our scientific and professional endeavors and conversations, we need to *center people of excluded identities and amplify their voices*. It has been long overdue that we need to not only include and advocate for peoples of excluded identities in STEM spaces and institutions, but also to center their needs and talents to benefit all people in STEM. It is long overdue that we remove systemic forces and policies that enable oppression or erasure towards peoples of excluded identities. It is long overdue to start making such changes at the collective level that we need to see.

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