GUEST ESSAY

Asian American Students Face Bias, but It's Not What You Might Think

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By Jennifer Lee
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Affirmative action is on trial again. This time, opponents of race-conscious college admission practices are claiming that Asian Americans are hurt by it. The plaintiffs in Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College, which presented oral arguments before the Supreme Court on Monday, allege that Harvard holds Asian American applicants to higher academic standards and rates them lower than other students on personal characteristics, such as fit, courage and likability. The proposed solution is to abandon race as a factor in admissions decisions.

This approach is based on a fundamental misconception. Asian Americans face bias in education, but not in the direction the plaintiffs claim. Research that I and others have done shows that K-12 teachers and schools may actually give Asian Americans a boost based on assumptions about race. Affirmative action policies currently in place in university admissions do not account for the positive bias that Asian Americans may experience before they apply to college. Abandoning race as a consideration in admissions would further obscure this bias.

The surge in violence against Asian Americans in the United States since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic is clear evidence that they are the targets of pernicious discrimination. Going back much further than the pandemic, U.S. history is fraught with anti-Asian violence and nativist discrimination, including decades of exclusion from immigration and citizenship that kept the Asian American population at a mere 0.6 percent of the country's total as late as 1960, according to the Pew Research Center.

But in an educational context, those biases play out in very unexpected ways. In "The Asian American Achievement Paradox," which I wrote with Min Zhou and is based on 162 interviews of Asian, Hispanic, Black and white adults in Los Angeles, we found that Asian American precollege students benefit from "stereotype promise": Teachers assume they are smart, hard-working, high-achieving and morally deserving, which can boost the grades of academically mediocre Asian American students.

We found that teachers' positive biases of Asian American students sometimes led them to place even low-achieving Asian American students on competitive academic tracks, including honors and Advanced Placement classes that can be gateways to competitive four-year universities. Once there, we found that these students took their schoolwork more seriously, spent more time on their homework than they had previously and were placed in classes with high-achieving peers, thereby boosting their academic outcomes.

A Vietnamese American student I'll call Ophelia (all names have been changed to protect participants' privacy under ethical research guidelines) described herself as "not very intelligent" and recalled nearly being held back in second grade because of her poor academic performance. Ophelia had a C average throughout elementary and junior high school, and when she took an exam to be put in Advanced Placement classes for high school English and science, she failed. Ophelia's teachers placed her, with her mother's support, on the AP track anyway. Once there, she said that something "just clicked," and she began to excel in her classes.

"I wanted to work hard and prove I was a good student," Ophelia explained. "I think the competition kind of increases your want to do better." She graduated from high school with a grade-point average of 4.2 (exceeding a perfect 4.0) and was admitted into a highly competitive pharmacy program. Ophelia's performance was precisely what her teachers expected, so they did not have to confront the role they may have played in reproducing the stereotype of Asian American exceptionalism.

Ophelia's experience is not unique. In our research, we found numerous examples of Asian American students who were anointed as promising by their teachers, even in spite of weak grades and test scores.

None of the white, Black or Hispanic adults we interviewed were treated similarly. Hispanic students in particular experience the opposite effect in school, as my work with Estela Diaz shows. The Hispanic students we studied received little encouragement from their teachers to attend college and even less information about how to get in.

The sociologist Sean J. Drake drew on two years of ethnographic research in a highly ranked Southern California high school and found a similar positive bias toward Asian American students: "I don't necessarily look at my classroom and treat a kid differently because they are Asian, but I know that if I have an Asian student in my classroom, I can count on that student. That student will probably work hard and be engaged. I can rely on that kid, and the parents, more so than I can for other groups," one teacher told him.

Teachers' positive biases toward Asian students affect their assessment of white, Black and Hispanic students, too. The economists Ying Shi and Maria Zhu looked at the standardized test scores of public school students in North Carolina and compared them to teachers' judgments of the same students. In research the economists presented at a National Bureau of Economic Research conference this spring, they found persistent Asian-white disparities in teacher ratings. Teachers are significantly more likely to rate Asian students' skills higher relative to their standardized test scores compared to similarly performing white peers in the same class, even after adjusting for sociodemographic and behavioral measures.

Dr. Shi and Dr. Zhu also found that the presence of a single Asian student in a class amplifies teachers' negative assessments of Black and Hispanic students vis-à-vis white students. Research in education typically focuses on Black-white or Hispanic-white achievement gaps and pays little or no attention to Asian Americans. But these new lines of research show how much more we learn about the ways race affects achievement when we include Asian Americans in our studies. They also show what we get wrong when we exclude them.

Asian Americans made up 6 percent of the U.S. population in 2020, and 27.6 percent of Harvard's class of 2026. Students for Fair Admissions argues that number would be even higher if admissions were based on objective, meritocratic metrics, unconstrained by race. But the research my colleagues and I have done shows that some of the metrics that are most commonly cited as objective indicators of academic talent and effort — things like teachers' assessments and grades — are subject to bias and woven into the educational system well before students apply to college.

Asian American students who have earned admission to Harvard are smart, promising and have no doubt worked very hard. But in ways that are most likely not visible to them, they may have also benefited from their racial status long before they applied. Race-conscious policies provide a mechanism to address this and other biases, and help level the field of opportunity for a diverse student body.

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