

# JACL

Japanese American Citizens League



*I want a career in art*



*Family come first*



*I have a social life*



*I'm a workout warrior*



*I worry about my future*



*I have a voice*



*I love reading poetry*



*I have multi-ethnic friends*



*I'm not easily defined*



*I love to rock and roll*



*I'm strong*

## Myths and Mirrors: Real Challenges Facing Asian American Students



*I will cast my vote*



*I'm learning yoga*



*I'm an athlete*



*I live outdoors*



## Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) for the amazing opportunity to serve as the Ford Fellow for 2008-09. This year has only deepened my interest in reaching out to my fellow students, sharing advice from my own experiences and encouraging them to keep their heads up as they tackle life's challenges ahead. The fellowship has also opened my eyes to the breadth and depth of issues facing Asian Americans. It has helped me realize that while Asian Americans have come a long way since the first Asian immigrants stepped onto American soil, there is a lot of work left to be done. I have never felt more inspired or empowered to affect change .

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*Jacqueline Mac*  
2008-2009 JACL Ford Program Fellow



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# You Know Who You Are, Right?

You've probably read plenty of books and articles on what it means to be Asian American. Maybe you've attended workshops or conferences to hear other people talk about what it means to be Asian American. And there's a chance you don't consider yourself Asian American at all because you identify yourself as Chinese American, Vietnamese American, or ethnic Chinese Vietnamese American. Although Asian American identity runs the gamut from acculturated immigrants to third generation bicultural individuals, from mixed heritage peers to multiracial communities, there is a shared experience amongst us all.

Whether you define yourself as Asian American or not, the critical point is that your personal and collective identity, whether racial, cultural or ethnic, is integral to you and your leadership, even if you don't consider yourself a leader or want to become a leader. Leadership is no longer narrowly defined as the aggressive, type-A personality individuals taking the reigns of an organization or project; leadership is about working together to create something extraordinary.

Examine leadership coursework, pick up a book about the components of leadership, or speak with anyone who is a leader, has been a leader or studies leadership, and you will find that a repeating characteristic of leadership is a strong sense of self. Knowing who you are is one of the most important steps any developing leader needs to discover, be secure in and reflect to the world outside.

Wikipedia defines "self identity" as "the sum total of a being's knowledge and understanding of his or herself." You may have been exposed to books, magazine articles, online surveys, TV shows or even people telling you who you are or are not. This publication is not one of those. This booklet is meant to bring up blood-boiling topics or stressful subjects, such as racism and conflicting cultural values, which affect your identity and could possibly impede your development into a strong Asian American leader.

What is the "Model Minority Myth?" How do you respond to everyday racial microaggressions? What do you do when the stress of getting an "A" to please your parents overwhelms you? Who do you go to when your academic advisor doesn't understand why you can't give up your pre-med major to pursue your passion for art?

It is my hope that this booklet will provide you with action items to empower yourself, others around you and even your community, whether it is challenging stereotypes, fighting for a cultural center in your community, or for Ethnic Studies courses on your college campus.

Wherever you are in your identity formation, I hope this publication may help you establish a strong personal and collective Asian American identity through self-empowerment.

# Not Easily Defined: Stereotypes, the Model Minority Myth, and You

**Stereotypes** are over-generalizations applied to all who belong in a particular group. There are several prominent and persistent stereotypes applied to Asian Americans.

The *Yellow Peril stereotype* generally paints Asian Americans with having loyalties or ties to foreign Asian nations, even if we were born and raised in America, speak only English and have never traveled to Asia. The *Perpetual Foreigner stereotype* is the tendency to assume that Asian Americans are not really American, but rather foreigners. We experience this through questions and comments such as, “Where are you really from?” and “You speak English very well.” Asian Americans also face *personality and physical appearance stereotypes*, where we are viewed as being submissive or sneaky and one who wears glasses or has slanted eyes. Asian Americans face *gender stereotypes*, where Asian American men are seen as feminine or evil and Asian American women are seen as subservient or exotic.

All of these stereotypes have been imposed upon us. They were not created by us, and therein lays the danger.

## **How do stereotypes and the Model Minority Myth affect you?**

Stereotypes are broad generalizations and may rob you of your unique identity. You might be left feeling as if you are only defined by these stereotypes or you don't have control over your own identity.

Historically and today, the Yellow Peril stereotype has been used to discriminate against Asian Americans by prohibiting individuals from naturalizing, casting doubt on an individual's citizenship status, or by assuming their allegiance is to a foreign nation, even if they are American citizens. Examples of this include Bruce Yamashita's battle against institutional racism in the United States Marine Corps, when his superiors associated him with Japan and Pearl Harbor, and Wen Ho Lee's struggle for freedom when he was accused of being a spy for China.

Stereotypes may also be used as justification for unfair treatment. For example, some alleged reasons for the lack of Asian American administrators in higher education are that Asian Americans are said to lack “American” leadership qualities and assertiveness. You may feel the affects of stereotypes in subtler forms, such as racial microaggressions, where the perpetrator is not aware they have said or done something to offend you.

The **Model Minority Myth** is the view that Asian Americans as a racial and/or ethnic group have achieved a higher level of success than the population average. This stereotype characterizes Asian Americans

as pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, intelligent, gifted in math and science, polite, quiet, hard-working, family-oriented, law-abiding and successfully entrepreneurial, with few societal problems and little complaint.

This stereotype shields the public from problems such as domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, drugs, and suicide that occur among Asian Americans, and paints a rosy picture of Asian Americans as a group without problems and struggles. The Model Minority Myth is often used as justification for excluding Asian Americans from the definition of “a minority.” Too often, this “belief” that Asian Americans are the Model Minority is paraded out to criticize other minorities who are speaking up for equal rights. They are told, “Why are you protecting? Why can’t you be hard-working and compliant like Asian Americans?” But, as Asian Americans who recognized how racism has impacted us and other people of color, we refuse to be used by the myth against other marginalized groups.

However, this stereotype is a pervasive one, and, you may experience resistance when trying to work with other minority groups and even a grudging sentiment from your peers, who are unaware that you as the Model Minority are more myth than reality.

You may also experience extra pressure and anxiety to uphold the expectations of this stereotype from teachers, your friends and even your family, becoming embarrassed or depressed when you don’t get straight As, or when you need help but fear asking for it, and find yourself striving to be a perfectionist. Because the myth tells you that Asian Americans do not experience problems, you may ignore your own needs or dismiss acts of racism and discrimination and feel something is wrong with you. The Model Minority Myth can limit the range of career aspirations or choices you have because employers and even our families see Asian Americans as better suited for technical occupations or staff positions, rather than the creative arts or management.

The Model Minority Myth is often used as justification for discouraging Asian Americans from accessing resources on campus. A university administrator who believes in the Model Minority Myth that all Asian Americans are financially well off may be shaped by a view that readily accepts the findings of aggregated data on the socioeconomic patterns of Asian Americans. When he sees that their average household income is higher than that of White Americans, he decides not to offer need-based scholarships to Asian Americans. The concern about aggregated data of Asian Americans is that it masks the financial disparity that exists within the Asian American community.

Together, these publicly-ingrained stereotypes can contribute to a sense of not knowing who you are. It is difficult to formulate an identity apart from the stereotypes, pressures and expectations, but it is critical that you reject the restraints that keep you from who you really are and want to be.

## What can you do?

The ways you and your community can cope with and battle stereotypes and the Model Minority Myth are many. Here are some ideas:

- **Do this now:** Be yourself; you don’t need to fit the stereotypes, especially the Model Minority Myth. You are you. The stereotype is an artificially-created image, not a goal to be met.

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- Speak up. Let people know that such stereotypes are not real, and that Asian Americans are not “all alike.” Learn to voice your opinion even if you’re nervous. You’ll gain respect if you hold your ground on an issue you feel strongly about. Find ways to be the first to voice your opinion.
- Self-awareness. Don’t place stereotypes upon yourself or others. Don’t tease friends who don’t get that perfect test score or grade. Support and encourage those who want to be artists or try a different professional path. Try to think of another costume to wear on Halloween instead of “geek.”
- Know when to challenge authority and other individuals. Pick your battles wisely and exercise thought. A supervisor should treat you with respect and not as a stereotypical dutiful subordinate. But keep in mind that a “perpetrator” of racism, discrimination or prejudice may or may not be aware of their actions. Decide if you need to talk and educate them or if stronger action needs to be taken. Others have been taught the stereotype just as you have and that may be all they know.
- Fight for the needs of Asian Americans. Join committees or task forces that make decisions affecting Asian Americans. Register to vote and go to the polls because your voice counts. Write a letter to your elected officials about something you think is important to you and other Asian Americans. Respond to inappropriate media images.
- Become visible in leadership roles. You can make a difference and show that Asian Americans matter in decision-making processes and can be leaders.
- Work in coalition with other marginalized groups. Our voices can be strengthened by others who share common struggles.
- Be educated about Asian American history and current demographics. Take Asian American Studies courses, attend cultural events or indulge in Asian American media.
- Share your Asian American culture with your peers. Host cultural events, information workshops and movie nights.

### Resources available to you

- Check out JACL’s Anti-Hate Program. Attend a hate crimes workshop to learn how to respond to hate crimes. Schedule a workshop on your campus.
- Read [Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images](#) to learn more about media images of Asian Americans and what others are saying (or doing) about it.
- Report inaccurate media images to the Media Action Network for Asian Americans.
- See Jeff Adachi’s film, “The Slanted Screen,” on Asian stereotypes in Hollywood and his film, “You Don’t Know Jack: The Jack Soo Story,” of an Asian American actor who refused to be a stereotype.
- See the film, “Patsy Mink: Ahead of the Majority,” the life story of this Asian Pacific Islander trailblazer who became a congresswoman and broke stereotypes.
- Attend OCA’s APIA-U program to learn how to be an Asian American leader on your campus.
- Watch the documentary, “A Most Unlikely Hero,” about Bruce Yamashita’s story.
- Read [My Country Versus Me](#), an autobiography by Wen Ho Lee.

# More Than Black and White: Racism and Asian Americans

**Racism** is a social construct that refers to the denigration or subordination of a group based on its racial and cultural characteristics. Racist perspectives allow a dominant group to exercise a real or imagined superiority over members of a minority group while justifying a disproportionate distribution of power and resources.

There are several dimensions of racism. **Individual racism** refers to one's personal attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that his or her race or ethnicity is superior to that of others. **Institutional racism** refers to the manipulation of social policies, laws and regulations to ensure and sustain the dominant group's advantage over other groups. **Cultural racism** involves societal beliefs and customs that assume that the dominant culture, such as language, traditions and appearance, are superior to other cultures.

## How can racism affect you?

Frank Wu states in his book, *Yellow*, “being neither black nor white, Asian Americans do not automatically side with either blacks or whites.” Race has historically been a black-white debate, excluding the experiences of Asian Americans, who are presumed not to face prejudice or discrimination.

In fact, Asian Americans experience racism mostly in the form of racial microaggressions. **Racial microaggressions** are everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned people who are unaware of the effects of their actions upon us. This is not to say that Asian Americans do not experience overt racism, such as physical attacks, property damage, and even murders. However, this type of racism often receives more public attention compared to racial microaggressions, which have more adverse effects because of a general lack of awareness.

There are three types of microaggressions. *Microassaults* are conscious and intentional actions, such as someone using a racial slur or a waiter purposely ignoring you to serve white customers first. *Microinsults* are verbal and nonverbal communication that subtly conveys rudeness and insensitivity, and may demean a person's racial heritage or identity. For example, someone is only interested in dating you because they expect you to be a subservient girlfriend who would take care of their every need. *Microinvalidations* are communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. You may have experienced this when someone repeatedly asks you where you are from or mentions that you speak English very well, thus, conveying the message that you are a foreigner in your own country.

Asian Americans also experience racism in the form of a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, where a prediction indirectly or directly causes itself to come true due to the link between belief and behavior. An example would be when a teacher, acting on his belief that all Asian American students are good at math, assigns harder

math problems to his Asian American students. The teacher's belief is confirmed if the students answer the problems correctly. The students are then pigeon-holed into the stereotype that all Asian Americans are good at math.

In a study where Asian American women taking a math test were reminded of either their identity as a woman or their identity as an Asian American, researchers found that those who were reminded of their Asian American identity did better on the test compared to those who were reminded of their identity as a woman.

While the aforementioned example may seem like a positive thing, being a target of racism is always a negative experience regardless of how, when, why or by whom. You may not always understand why it occurred or why the perpetrator isn't acknowledging their wrongdoing. Some racial slights may also be ambiguous so you are often left feeling confused and powerless because you don't know what you could or should have done. You might also face the dilemma of wanting to remain quiet and walking away or fighting. This dilemma could result in extra stress, feeling helpless, hopeless, powerless, lonely, frustrated and angry, and even contribute to adjustment and academic difficulties. You might choose to cope with racism through denial as well. However, these methods of coping may not always be the best or most helpful.

## What can you do about racism?

Just as there are different dimensions of racism, there are different levels of response you may employ to cope with racism. Here are some suggestions on how to cope with racism that affect you personally:

- Understand the concept of race and how it's used. Know that it is a social construct and it is kept in place to justify power and resources over others.
- If you've experienced an ambiguous incident from friends who consciously believe in equality, they may not realize that they've acted in a racist manner. Explain and educate them on how their action has offended you.
- Instead of getting angry, get empowered. If a person makes an offensive remark, you can choose to get angry and see the person as a bigot or see the person as ignorant and move on. Don't resort to a physical response; you don't want to get arrested for assault because someone uttered a racial epithet. Know when to take action and when to walk away.
- **Do this now:** Confront the false belief and attitude that your race and ethnicity are inferior to others. Learn about Asian American issues and confront and challenge their negative beliefs and stereotypes.
- Know that yellow and brown are also beautiful. Be authentic, assertive and proud of your ethnicity and culture. Find support when you've experience racism. Go to mentors, teachers, family, friends and community organizations. It is often unhealthy and usually unnecessary to confront racism alone.
- Be self-aware and careful not to impose these stereotypes upon others.





If you want to tackle racism on a broader scale, here are some things you might do:

- Join a student or community organization committed to fighting for social justice on your campus or in your community.
- Teach others about Asian American issues by coordinating an Asian American student conference on your campus. (Also attend other student conferences to show your support.)
- Serve on campus committees to ensure an Asian American perspective and voice are represented.
- Collaborate with other minority groups on campus to push for resources. Power comes in numbers. It is likely you are fighting for the same things, so why not join forces?

### **Resources available to you**

- Check out Anti-Hate programs sponsored by JACL.
- Read Frank Wu's [Yellow: Race in American Beyond Black and White](#) to learn more about the racial dialogue.
- Watch the movie “Crash” (2004).
- Look through Tufts University’s Social Justice Resource Toolkit called “Education For Social Justice: A Guide to the Resources.”

# Get empowered

# “A” Equals Average: Overcoming Perfectionism

**Perfectionism** is a tendency to set highly unrealistic goals and believe that achieving anything less is considered unacceptable, and to have self-defeating thoughts and behaviors. Perfectionists enter into a vicious cycle, where, by failing to meet these unattainable goals, they then become self-critical and self-blaming, both of which result in lower self-esteem. In addition, perfectionists may have learned to value themselves based on the approval of others, leaving them vulnerable and extremely sensitive to outside opinion and criticism. To protect themselves from such criticism, perfectionists decide that being perfect is their only defense.

## How can perfectionism affect you?

While perfectionism is often mistakenly seen in our society as desirable or necessary for success, Asian American students are very likely to fall prey to this type of mindset. One persistent reason is the fear of failure. Regardless of how minor the mistake or how easily it can be corrected, you may feel like a flawed human being. Fear of failure can come from a shame-based culture, where your failures are not just your own, but also your family’s or your community’s. If you are from an immigrant family, the expectation to do well to upgrade the family status through educational means is another pressure altogether.

Asian American students also face the pressure set by the Model Minority Myth, which creates unrealistic demands that many students cannot live up to in work, academic, and even social settings. You may come to feel that there is something wrong with you when you don’t meet those expectations. This unrealistic push for perfectionism can be experienced at home, where you feel like an “A-” is never good enough for your parents, or at school, where your peers expect you to achieve the highest grade in class.

A perfectionist’s cycle feeds on negative feelings. You may fear making mistakes and forget that there is a valuable opportunity to learn and grow from one’s mistakes. Perfectionists frequently structure their lives around an endless list of “shoulds” and rarely take into account their own wants and desires. They also believe that success comes easily to others and view their own efforts as inadequate. You may become critical of others when you apply your unrealistically high standards to others without realizing it, therefore, hurting some interpersonal relationships.

## What can you do about perfectionism?

You don’t need to fit into the definition of a perfectionist in order to benefit from the following tips as many of us have perfectionist tendencies or habits that can be just as



debilitating. It is important to view ourselves as competent and strong individuals. Here are some tips to challenging your illusion of perfectionism and the self-defeating thoughts that accompany it.

- **Do this now:** Use the space in the booklet to jot down all the things you learned from a recent mistake and how you can use these new lessons in the future.
- Set realistic goals based on your own wants and desires in a sequential order. That way, when you check off smaller goals you've set, you feel like you are making progress towards the larger goal.
- Because the process is often filled with meaningful experiences, focus on the process and not just on the end result.
- Be okay with making mistakes. There are lots of positive things that can only be learned by making a mistake.
- If you've done badly on an exam, read the following passage out loud to yourself: "Hey, lighten up! I can learn from my mistakes, and this is just one test, one test out of the entire semester. I won't let this one test define me as a person. I am not a failure. I shall remain positive and continue to do my best."

#### Asian grade scale:

A = Average

B = Bad

C = Catastrophe

D = Disowned

F = Forever Forgotten

Asian Americans tend to attach a strong stigma to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. Talking about problems or asking for help is often considered taboo and shameful, so many simply deny their existence. In school settings where this cultural consideration isn't well known, Asian American students may be silently crying out for help. Here are some ways to address this campus-wide or community-wide:

- Facilitate a "Lunch and Learn," "Brownbag," or "Food For Thought" workshop on stress, perfectionism or any other taboo-like topic accompanied by lunch. Students are always looking for free food opportunities.
- Conduct relaxation workshops. Asian American communities often view the body and mind holistically where some mental distresses are often expressed somatically. An opportunity that offers mental and physical relaxation may be helpful.
- Hold a stress relief fair to include massage therapists, yoga sessions, nutrition presentations, and counselors talking about stress prevention, including perfectionism.

### Resources available to you

- Visit your school's counseling center for more individual information.
- Check out the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Asian American Cultural Center for their "Food For Thought" lunches and "After Thought" onsite counseling duet.
- Contact the Asian/Asian-American Forum at Cornell University for tips from their stress relief fairs.
- Spend some time looking through Stanford University School of Education's Challenge Success program, which values parent-educator relationships, differing skills and abilities, and balance.
- Check out Asian Community Mental Health Services for resources.

# Eating Spaghetti with Chopsticks: Asian v. American Values

You may have grown up attending American schools, making non-Asian American friends, and speaking English. At the same time, you may have also returned home to eat Asian food for dinner, speak a language other than English, and conform to the cultural standards and expectations of your parents.

Like many Asian Americans, you may consider yourself as a **bicultural individual**, having to face the challenges of negotiating two sets of cultural norms, practices, identities, and values of both your ethnic community and mainstream America. Managing these two worlds can be difficult and this need to straddle two cultures may extend beyond your years at school and continue after you leave home, start your first job, and begin to raise your own family.

Asian and American cultural values often clash with each other. For example, at home you are raised to respect your elders no matter what they say, however, in the work place or at school, asking questions or expressing your opinions are highly valued. Asian American women may struggle with being dutiful daughters while simultaneously speaking out as feminists. The values of these two cultures as they relate to leadership are briefly described in the table “A Comparison of Asian American and Mainstream American Values.” Note that this table is a summary and is not intended to be exhaustive.

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## A comparison of Asian American and mainstream American values\*

Mainstream American Values	Asian American Values
<p><b>Spontaneity/Casualness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of social skills, informal relationships</li> <li>• Small talk</li> <li>• Acceptable to show full range of emotions</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> </ul>	<p><b>Self-control/Discipline</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking only when spoken to</li> <li>• Inner stamina/strength to tolerate crisis</li> <li>• Hiding emotions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Acceptability of Questioning Authority</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anticipation of problem areas, opportunities initiation of appropriate actions</li> <li>• No fear of challenging or opposing authority; ability to push the envelope with parents, professors, bosses, and clients</li> </ul>	<p><b>Obedience to Authority</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect for those who lead</li> <li>• Loyalty</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Follow-through on assignments</li> </ul>
<p><b>Promotion of Personal Accomplishments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility (individual is acceptable)</li> <li>• Rewards individual for outstanding actions</li> <li>• Power perceived as individual power</li> </ul>	<p><b>Humility</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low individual visibility</li> <li>• Power shared with others</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tough, Individualistic, and Authoritative Leadership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual leadership</li> <li>• Individual responsibility and ownership</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Creativity and innovation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Collective Decision Making</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proving the sources (accuracy and attention to detail)</li> <li>• Collective responsibility and ownership</li> <li>• Interdependence</li> <li>• Strong sense of teamwork</li> </ul>

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Other values that are common amongst Asian American cultures include maintaining interpersonal harmony, pursuing education, reciprocity, filial piety, avoidance of family shame and placing others' needs ahead of one's own. Many mainstream American values operate on the principle of freedom, emphasize the importance of education but not its necessity to be successful, encourage individuals to have a voice, and enjoy personal fulfillment.

## How does this affect you?

Straddling two worlds with contrasting values can be very stressful. For many Asian American students, it may be confounding to differentiate which of their values are “American” and which are “Asian,” leading to feelings of resentment in wanting to rebel against one world or the other. You may also feel as if you can only be “Asian” or “American” but not “Asian American,” leaving you pressured to choose between the two. Moreover, you may feel stuck in the middle because you don’t know how to effectively balance both and become “Asian American.”

If you exhibit more values from one culture, you might feel out of character and out of place when you enter the other culture. For example, if you grew up valuing modesty about your accomplishments, it may cause discomfort in situations where you need to promote these accomplishments, such as at an interview, a job promotion or at a competition. Conflicts may surface especially when the time comes to make a decision about your college major or your career path. These decisions often involve parental influences, which is especially true for children of immigrants who feel tremendous pressure to satisfy their parents by pursuing seemingly practical fields, such as medicine, law or engineering rather than following their passion and dreams that may lie in a different area. When you make a career decision, it is instructive to know that job dissatisfaction is harder to overcome than you think. Psychologists have reported that people who go into professions blindly tend to burn out quickly.

## What can you do about it?

The one thing you can do right now to help ease this dilemma and the stress related to it is to stop thinking about it as a conflict. Studies have shown that individuals who believe they can function in two cultures were more satisfied with their lives and had lower levels of anxiety and depression. The ability to function and behave appropriately in both cultures is called *bicultural competence*. In simpler terms, if you believe you have bicultural competence, you will achieve a greater level of self-comfort. This is extremely important if you are exposed to and interact frequently with both cultures.

Here are some other things you can do to remedy this constant struggle. Keep in mind that everyone comes from a different place and what may work for a friend might not work for you. While you can’t use the same game plan, your friend would be great as a sounding board.

- **Do this now:** Brainstorm any “Asian American” value that comes to mind and jot it down in the margin. Then, talk to those in your peer group and see if you can come up with more values.
- Learn to juggle. This type of juggling means multi-tasking or managing multiple projects or papers at one time. Think about those things that cause stress about your Asian American identity, then focus on resolving the important things first. Sort through the things you can’t change, and then devise a game plan to deal with the conflicting values that you can resolve.
- Utilize specific values when it is appropriate to do so. For example, you may not want to be modest when you are interviewing for a top job or fellowship, however, it’s alright to be humble after you get that position.
- Involve your parents, especially when making important life decisions. It’s a good idea to include your parents early on when you need to make important decisions so that they will understand your rationale for the choices you make. Show them that you are committed and accountable for your decisions. For

example, explain to them how extracurricular activities related to your interests are important or describe role models who are successful in the field you want to pursue.

- Spend some time explaining your cultural values to others. It's important to educate others about your cultural values because most individuals you meet in the classroom or workplace are probably unaware of the differences.
- Hold a workshop on what it means to be Asian American and how that affects important career choices. Pair it with a professional skills training session.

### **Resources available to you**

- Read Jane Hyun's [Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling](#).
- Watch Renee Tajima-Peña's documentary "My America...Or Honk if you Love Buddha."
- Check out Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) website for leadership development opportunities.
- Google "Asian American Identity" to find numerous essays, newspaper articles, studies, videos and documentaries on this subject.

# Stop thinking about it as a conflict

# My Voice Counts Too: Addressing Lack of Support

**Lack of support** is generally defined as having insufficient assistance within your environment. Here are some ways you may feel unsupported on your campus:

- Lack of role models in the school administration or in academic departments.
- Little or no multicultural competency within student services on campus.
- No Asian American Studies program offered in the curriculum.
- Administrative and departmental resistance to establishing an Asian American Studies program.
- Limited financial aid offered to Asian American students.
- Superficial Asian American programming for the Asian American student population and for the general campus population.
- Small number of Asian American student organizations and/or limited funding for these organizations.

This lack of support can occur for different reasons. Asian Americans may not be considered as a minority, thereby excluding them from affirmative action programs or even funding allocated for minority students. In 1999, the College Board sponsored a study on educational achievement that excluded Asian Americans from their definition of “minority.” By any definition, Asian Americans are a minority. This ambivalence in categorizing Asian Americans as a minority group may be the result of positive stereotypes that often mask problems within the community.

*Lack of knowledge* about Asian Americans often prevents administrators from instituting proper programming and support. In addition, aggregated data can lead to misinformed generalizations about Asian Americans because the data fails to account for distinctions among the various Asian ethnic groups. Some groups with recent immigration history are likely to have different demographics compared to groups who have had a longer history in the United States. If a school administration does not recognize the complexity of needs within the Asian American student body, it is difficult to fully trust in their ability to provide proper programming and support. In 2009, the Committee of 100 issued a report on American attitudes toward Chinese and Asian Americans. The report found that the general population still does not know much about the Asian American community, which is similar to their findings in a study conducted in 2001.

The *Model Minority Myth*, coupled with statistics that show low student services usage, also paints a false picture that Asian American students do not need any help. However, Asian American students may be overlooked because they often experience psychological symptoms, including stress, depression, or anxiety, in somatic ways such as chronic neck or back pain because Asian cultures have a tendency to see the mind and body as one. This, combined with Asian cultures’ tendency to keep personal issues quiet, may lead to the underreporting of psychological symptoms resulting in an underutilization of mental health services.

## How can lack of support affect you?

Stress can arise if systems of support are not provided in your surrounding environment. This is especially true if you believe this support should be provided in the same manner as it is for other students.

The absence of Asian American studies courses may make you feel like your Asian American identity is being marginalized. According to a study conducted by an East Coast university, Asian American students benefited from Asian American studies courses and the presence of Asian American faculty. The students described the importance of learning about their own people and being in a classroom where they felt comfortable. Because some faculty members are not trained in multicultural competency, you may be receiving instruction in a classroom that operates on stereotypes and mainstream cultural values, leaving you feeling like the professor does not understand you. There may be additional pressures to live up to the Model Minority Myth or the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype.

On many campuses, an office of student affairs is just as important as an office of academic affairs. However, on many campuses the presence of Asian American professional staff is limited, if they exist at all. Without staff attuned to Asian American students and the issues they face, outreach to Asian American students is limited because of the cultural tendency to keep personal problems private in order to avoid the appearance of shame. Even if you did muster the courage to talk to someone, you may be left with the feeling that they don’t understand you and are unequipped to provide useful advice. In the same study, students felt that they were not aware of available resources or they did not receive culturally sensitive counseling. If an academic advisor counsels an Asian American student to become an art major, it could cause more stress than the struggle of pursuing this path if the advisor doesn’t consider familial piety in the recommendation.



## What can you do?

Here are some things you can do on campus to increase the amount of support you receive, which will make a lasting difference for students who follow you:

- Learn from the experience of other schools where there has been success in acquiring additional resources for their campus, and reach out to them for guidance.
- Sign up for Asian American studies courses to show the administration that there is interest and a demand for these courses.
- Talk to faculty about how students can support the initiation of an Asian American studies program or turn an existing one into a major.
- Drum up student support for a cultural center dedicated to serving Asian American students.
- Ensure that Asian American students have a voice on campus by serving on campus committees, student government bodies, or even hiring committees.

- Look to national and professional organizations for immediate role models engaged in careers that interest you. Many national organizations have local chapters as well. Many organizations and businesses have youth and minority outreach initiatives. You could also try contacting Asian American alumni of your student organization for the same purpose.
- Join a mentor program on campus that pairs new students with older students, especially if this program is available through a student organization.
- Participate in research opportunities with professors in departments that generally have an interest in minority populations such as sociology, psychology, and political science. Strike up interest in researching the needs, attitudes, or profiles of Asian American students on campus.
- Pressure the university administration to disaggregate student data to reveal hidden needs of the student population.
- Hold educational workshops, multicultural fairs or cultural days, especially during Asian Pacific American heritage month, to inform the campus about the diversity of the student body.
- Reach out to community-based organizations in your area as a source of advice and support.

### **Resources available to you**

- Check out the following schools with established Asian American Studies Programs: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Massachusetts-Boston, University of California-Los Angeles and New York University, among others.
- Look at the following schools for Asian American Cultural Center development: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Pomona College, Yale University and the University of Connecticut, among others.
- National Organizations you can browse for mentors include:
  - Japanese American Citizens League
  - Organization of Chinese Americans
  - Asian American Journalist Association
  - Asian American Bar Association
  - Asian American Psychological Association
  - NAPSA – Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education: look at the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program which pairs undergraduate students interested in student affairs with student affairs professionals as mentors
- Visit [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) to search community based organizations in your area.
- Support and learn about Asian American Serving Institutions.

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## Resources

- *A Most Unlikely Hero*: <http://www.unlikelyhero.org>
- Asian American Bar Association: <http://www.napaba.org>
- Asian American Journalists Association: <http://www.aaaja.org>
- Asian American Psychological Association: <http://www.aapaonline.org>
- Asian American Serving Institutions: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/aanapicraa/index.html>
- Cornell University Asian and Asian American Forum: <http://www.rso.cornell.edu/aaaf>
- Japanese American Citizens League: <http://www.jacl.org>
- Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics: <http://www.leap.org>
- Media Action Network for Asian Americans: <http://www.manaa.org>
- *My Country Versus Me: The First-Hand Account By the Los Alamos Scientist Who Was Falsely Accused of Being a Spy*: by Wen Ho Lee (2002)
- NASPA – Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education: <http://www.naspa.org>
- New York University Asian Pacific American Institute: <http://www.apa.nyu.edu>
- Organization of Chinese Americans: <http://www.ocanational.org>
- Pomona College Asian American Resource Center: <http://www.pomona.edu/adwr/aarc>
- *Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images*: edited by M. Evelina Galang (2003)
- Stanford University School of Education's Challenge Success: <http://www.challengesuccess.org>
- Tufts University's Social Justice Resource Toolkit: <http://ase.tufts.edu/macc/documents/socialjusticeresourcetoolkit.pdf>
- University of California-Los Angeles Asian American Studies Program: <http://www.aasc.ucla.edu>
- University of Connecticut Asian American Cultural Center: <http://www.asacc.uconn.edu>
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Asian American Cultural Center: <http://studentaffairs.illinois.edu/diversity/aacc/index.html>
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Asian American Studies Program: <http://www.aasp.illinois.edu>
- University of Maryland-College Park Asian American Studies Program: <http://www.aast.umd.edu>
- University of Massachusetts-Boston Institute for Asian American Studies: <http://www.iaas.umb.edu>
- Yale University Asian American Cultural Center: <http://www.yale.edu/aacc>

## Afterthoughts

Contrary to stereotypes, media image, personal belief and popular opinions, Asian American students face a large number of issues that continue to go unrecognized. The effects of these issues can be detrimental to you and your peers if some action is not taken.

At the end of the day, know that Asian Americans have come a long way, but still have a way to go. For example, multiethnic and multiracial Asian Americans are still not recognized or included in the multicultural discussion within or outside the Asian American community because these individuals defy seemingly clear lines of race and ethnicity. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2050, minority individuals will become the majority population in the United States. The world as we know it is becoming more and more multicultural.

It is important to remember that finding the answer to the question, “Who am I?” is not simple. As you have seen, the answer does not fit into perfect silos. Our identity is defined by more than social constructs such as race or ethnicity, but includes aspects such as religious affiliation, gender identity, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status.

Focus on the larger picture and follow dreams that can empower you and your community. Know that there is an Asian America of which you can be proud and from which you may draw strength. It is an Asian America that continues to evolve with each new generation—and it is waiting to be defined by you.

Who am I?

# JACL

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