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**Embracing Diversity: Exploring the Multifaceted Experiences of  
Asian American Students at PWIs**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Molly Furman

Lewiston, Maine

April 1, 2024

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite Asian Americans' being well represented in higher education in the United States, their experiences on college campuses are commonly misunderstood and overlooked when it comes to advocating for minority voices. While there are previous studies that have explored Asian Americans' sense of belonging and self-formation in post-secondary education, this present research aims to disaggregate the pan-ethnic label to avoid perpetuating monolithic perceptions of Asian American experiences in higher education. This paper gives greater visibility to sub-ethnic variations and overlapping identities that shape perceptions of self, belonging, and institutional support in predominantly white institutions. Drawing from 25 semi-structured interviews with Asian American undergraduate students across 11 colleges and universities, participants' responses resulted in 6 themes: hypervisibility and invisibility in the classroom, monolithic stereotypes, conflicting national and ethnic identities, negotiating minoritized identities, co and pan-ethnic relationships, and lack of institutional recognition. In this thesis, I argue that monolithic stereotypes continue to define many of the racialized experiences Asian American students face in predominately white institutions (PWIs). This paper further presents solutions that Asian American students want to see implemented at their institutions to amplify Asian voices on campus.

Keywords: Asian American, sense of belonging, higher education, sub-ethnicity, minority voices, PWIs, self-formation, DEI

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing racial demographics in the United States representing 6.2% of the total population with a growth of 103% from 2000-2023 (Claritas 2023: 3). Since the 1970s, a growing body of research on Asian Americans has been published (Trieu 2017). However, scholars argue that there has been a paucity of research on Asian Americans in predominantly white colleges and universities and more broadly as a diverse, multi-ethnic group (Museus and Park 2015; Trieu 2017). This is believed to be a direct result of the Model Minority Myth, a racialized framework that has consistently been used to describe a generalized Asian collective (Suzuki 2002; Lee, Park, and Wong 2016; Trieu 2017; Ball 2019; Jang 2021). The Model Minority Myth praises the achievements of certain racial and ethnic minorities at the expense of other marginalized communities. In the 1960s, the *New York Times* published an article extolling the ‘Japanese Style’ success by comparing Japanese Americans to Black and white groups (Kim 1999). While the Model Minority Myth does recognize Asian Americans’ hard work, intelligence, and economic success in a positive nature, the myth also reinforces the illusion that Asian Americans are free from racial discrimination and that Asians are a homogenized group (Museus and Park 2015; Ball 2019).

While many minority communities’ experiences are shaped by Model Minority myths and other stereotypes meriting further exploration, several scholars call attention to pernicious racialized labels that hinder Asian American experiences in the United States. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes toward Asian Americans have been characterized by two dominating and juxtaposing narratives. They are referred to as the ‘honorary white’ and the ‘forever foreigner’ (Kibria 2000; Suzuki 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Museus and Park 2015; Yi 2023). The ‘honorary white’ status is a social and politicized label that recognizes minorities who have paralleled or

surpassed white people in various economic and social measurements of achievements. Therefore, within this context, honor is defined by a fixed secondary status to whiteness (Bonilla-Silva 2004). At the same time, forever foreigner stereotypes reinforce xenophobic sentiments towards people with minority identities regardless of one's citizenship status. In addition to having to navigate both racialized social labels, Asian Americans are routinely exposed to racial and ethnic stereotyping that fails to recognize the diversity of Asian origins that constitute the Asian American community (Kibria 2000). Therefore, from the perspective of many non-Asians, "Asian-ness" has become a synonym for sameness.

Of the limited research that has focused on Asian Americans' sense of belonging and experiences in higher academia, scholars reveal that Asian Americans' sense of belonging is heavily influenced by informal social interactions and standards that accommodate whiteness (Museus and Park 2015; Mena 2017; Nguyen 2018; Jang 2021; Lewis et al. 2021; Yi 2023). Samura (2016) found that some Asian American students changed their physical features to match Western beauty standards as one way of increasing their sense of belonging. However, Samura (2016) also found that for other Asian American students, their sense of belonging was fortified by joining Asian affinity groups and building ties with individuals who shared the same identity and lived experiences. Therefore, it is essential one recognizes that finding a sense of belonging is a fluid, ongoing, and interactional process that connects the individual to the social world (May 2011; Samura 2016; Mena 2017).

College and universities are microcosms of the broader social world making them critical environments to examine experiences and belonging. Many predominately white institutions, especially predominately white liberal arts colleges, strive to cultivate an environment that encourages the diversity and inclusivity of all identities. The dialogue surrounding diversity,



equity, and inclusion practices is an ongoing issue that some believe is an academic institution's moral obligation to its students and faculty (Dwyer and Gigliotti 2017).

In this present study, I strive to contribute to scholarly literature unveiling the lived experiences of Asian American students and their efforts in navigating a sense of belonging at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). It is also essential to recognize that even within the Asian American identity, there is a diversity of ethnic subgroups that face an array of challenges that are erased by Model Minority labels that serve to quiet the social justice demands of minority groups (Suzuki 2022). Ball (2019) argues that most research on Asian Americans tends to aggregate data preventing a genuine reflection of diverse experiences. Oh's (2022) research on Asian sub-ethnic groups revealed different forms of microaggressions and discrimination between East and Southeast Asians.

Furthermore, this study works to advance the institutional-level experience of Asian Americans by exploring how the different facets of PWIs shape these experiences, especially in the wake of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Therefore, I used the following focus questions to guide my research: What are the experiences of Asian American students at predominantly white, liberal institutions? How do Asian American students negotiate a sense of belonging and identity in the face of modern racism? Do Asian American students believe diversity, equity, and inclusion practices support Asian identities?

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Historical Experience of Asian-Identifying Groups in the United States*

#### *Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century to Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.*

Archeological findings date the first arrival of Asians in the United States to the 5<sup>th</sup> century; however, the first significant wave of Asian immigrants occurred between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fong 2008). Like many others hoping to strike gold, Asian immigrants, mostly of Chinese origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, traveled to the US in pursuit of a better life and livelihood to escape the political and economic turmoil occurring in their home country. With the rapid influx of immigrants – 52,000 Chinese immigrants within a year – many saw an opportunity for the recruitment of cheap labor for the construction of the transcontinental railroad. In 1868, the US government introduced the Burlingame Treaty to ease immigration access to increase employment at the expense of economically exploiting Chinese workers (Kim 1999; Fong 2008). After the completion of the railroad, Chinese laborers ventured into a range of businesses including agriculture, laundromats, and restaurants.

However, despite their major contributions to the completion of the transcontinental railroad, Chinese immigrants became the main scapegoats for the economic depression in the 1870s (Fong 2008). The rise of anti-Chinese sentiment, therefore, led to the passing of several anti-immigration laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which banned the entry of Chinese immigrants for a decade (Kim 1999; Fong 2008; Lee, Park, and Wong 2016; Ball 2019; Mallapragada 2021; Yi 2023). On the other hand, as the Chinese population declined into the 20th century, there was an influx of other Asian ethnic groups. Impressed with Japan's military victory against Russia, President Roosevelt vetoed exclusionary policies against Japanese immigration which allowed the Japanese to accelerate in the agricultural business (Fong 2008).

However, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japanese Americans were arrested and forced into internment camps regardless of their relationship and loyalty to Japan.

Like Japanese immigrants, Koreans, Filipinos, and South Asians also traveled to the United States to find better work opportunities; however, their immigration processes are not homogenous. While Koreans immigrated to the US to work in the agriculture field in defiance of the Japanese Rule, Filipinos' journey to the US was influenced by the United States' possession of the Philippines which made them "nationals" who had the privilege to freely travel across the country (Fong 2008). South Asians entered the country also around the same time in search of work which took the form of independent farming (Fong 2008). Nevertheless, Fong (2008) explains that the growing success of Asians in America "created a great deal of resentment among white farmers and laborers" leading to heightened anti-Chinese sentiments (20). The strong resentment towards Chinese immigrants led to the passing of the 1924 Immigration Act, an anti-Asian aimed to limit all Asian immigration by creating a ceiling of 150,000 new immigrants a year (Kim 1999; Fong 2008). Echoing the goals of the Chinese Exclusion Act, anti-Asian laws in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were administered to remind Asian immigrants of their temporary, forever foreign position in the US while simultaneously protecting the interests of white people.

### ***Post-1960s.***

Moving into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sentiments towards Asians in America shifted with the rise of the Civil Rights movement and national recognition of racial inequality. The outstanding demand for racial justice led to the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act which increased and loosened the restrictions on immigrants coming from the Eastern Hemisphere (Fong 2008). This period also marks the influx of Southeast Asian immigrants' entry into the

United States as the country began to implement humanitarian efforts into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fong (2008) emphasizes that, unlike other Asian ethnic groups who were mainly “seeking family reunification and economic opportunities”, Southeast Asian immigrants were escaping political unrest and bodily harm occurring in their home countries (34). This led the United States government to express a humanitarian and more tolerant attitude towards immigration.

By the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Asian Americans were becoming increasingly successful in highly valorized occupations (Fong 2008). The media began to take notice of these achievements and praised Asian Americans for their self-sufficiency, determination, and work ethic in comparison to other immigrant groups (Kim 1999; Suzuki 2002; Jang 2021). The media’s focus on Asian Americans as success stories framed Asians as model minorities and “quasi-whites” relative to other marginalized groups (Kim 1999; Ball 2019; Yi 2023). Not only do these racialized labels undermine the social mobility of other racial communities but it actively attempts to erase the prejudice and discriminatory policies targeting Asian identities for over a century. The historical context of Asian immigrants reveals the diversity among Asian American identities that face shifting degrees of public acceptance, tolerance, and discrimination. While Asian Americans continue to be recognized for their socioeconomic achievements, these Asian Americans are situated in a larger American narrative that conflates foreignness with Asian features (Kibria 2000). This sense of temporary status was most recently apparent during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when President Trump’s administration used racist rhetoric to stigmatize Asian Americans through the association being from Asia (Mallapragada 2021). Tessler, Choi, and Kao (2020) further stress how xenophobic rhetoric during the pandemic was used to “condemn phenotypically Asian bodies as the spreader of the virus” (637). The history and modern depictions of Asians and Asian Americans reveal how the United States’

benevolence towards Asians can easily fluctuate from the praising model minority myth to cries of “yellow peril” that threaten Asian Americans' sense of belonging and citizenship.

### ***Racial Triangulation and Modern Racism***

Some scholars argue that in the US, Asian Americans present as racial wildcards, for they do not “fit” the Black-white binary that dominates racial discourse (Suzuki 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Chou, Lee, and Ho 2015). Therefore, Asian Americans reside in an intermediate racial position that is constantly judged in comparison to other racial groups and maintained through the model minority assertions which categorize and homogenize Asian ethnic identities. (Ball 2019; Samura 2016). These racial dynamics led scholars to construct a tri-racial hierarchy that positions white people at the top, honorary whites in the middle, and the Black collective at the bottom (Bonilla-Silva 2004). While racial triangulation does expand the racial framework to include Asian identities and other overlooked minorities (i.e., Hispanic, Pacific Island, and Native American), it also shows that these middle identities are confined to a secondary status (Lee, Park, and Wong 2016). Kim (1999) speaks of second citizenship in explaining that while Black people’s success depends heavily on racial equity, Asian Americans’ success is reliant on proximity to whiteness.

Kim (1999) argues that racial triangulation continues to persist today but in a coded fashion. Scholars argue that as overt racism became less and less socially acceptable, racism has taken on a new form called “modern racism” which tends to be less obvious but not harmless (Blanton and Jaccard 2008; Kim, Kendall, and Cheon 2016; Museus and Park 2015). As mentioned previously, model minority and quasi-white labels may initially appear positive, however, these racialized framings are “performative and [do] not extend to a fundamental rethinking of racial structures” (Mallapragada 2021: 285). Put another way, racial triangulation

persists through positive stereotyping that legitimizes racial hierarchies and ultimately shields whiteness and white privilege (Chou, Lee, and Ho 2015; Kim 2022). Yi (2023) found that white standards were so deeply ingrained in institutions that they became embedded in Asian participant's normal consciousness. This insight is critical because it reveals that structural inequities shape self-perceptions and sense of belonging.

### ***Previous Theories on Belonging and Negotiating a Sense of Belonging***

A sense of belonging is the perception or feeling that one is cared for and supported within an environment or community (Nguyen 2018 as cited in Strayhorn 2012). Although many studies focus on belonging as an individual experience, sociology sees belonging as an opportunity to connect the “self” to the broader social world (May 2011). Mead (1913) argued that “The self acts with reference to others and is immediately conscious of the objects about it” (376). Other scholars echo Mead's (1913) symbolic interactionist perspective by emphasizing that the self becomes discernible through relational processes and partial disintegration from collectivity held social norms (May 2011). Therefore, social research on belonging tends to highlight the mutual relationship between individual feelings and broader socio-political hierarchies that determine who gains access and feels welcomed into various communities and spaces within an institution.

Another key component of belonging is not a fixed process but a fluid process that is conscious of the larger social world and the norms it holds (May 2011; Samura 2016). Goffman (1959) speaks to these collectively held norms by claiming that during various interactions, individuals will assume a particular persona or “performance” that is reflective of the accepted social script. This insight reveals that navigating a sense of belonging can also require individuals to confide in a false representation of “self” in efforts to gain acceptance into a

community. Samura's (2016) research on belonging at West University revealed that how Asian American students presented their identity to others fluctuated as they moved in and out of space on their college's campus. The combination of Asian historical experiences, theoretical frameworks on belonging, and recent research emphasize the multitude of factors that must be taken into consideration when exploring the Asian American experience. However, studies reveal that these attempts to find a sense of belonging are constantly disrupted by the monolithic categorization of Asian American individuals, racialized microaggressions, and stereotyping.

### ***Racial (Micro)aggressions, Stereotyping, and Invisibility***

Microaggressions “are subtle acts of bias that reflect a structural form of oppression towards a specific group of people, such as racism, transphobia, or sexism” (Friedlaedener 2018: 6). Scholars argue that microaggressions are the most common expression of prejudice towards Asian Americans and a chronic part of their everyday experiences (Kim, Kendall, and Cheon 2016; Friedlaedener 2018; Ching 2022). However, because microaggressions are generally unintentional or moments of subconscious biases, they are frequently overlooked and sometimes not even considered morally harmful (Friedlaedener 2018). Consequently, Asian Americans and other racial groups will second-guess if an aggression was harmful or downplay racialized treatment which can lead to adverse psychological impacts (Friedlaedener 2018; Ball 2019). Blanton and Jaccard (2008) argue that this allows for unconscious bias to persist and reinforce systemic inequalities. Regardless of whether the microaggressions are subtle or overt (slurs), racial biases do have a moral impact on individuals and are ingrained in the fabric of informal interactions and institutional environments.

### *Ethnic erasure by others.*

One common type of microaggression is the erasure of identities by others and by the harmed individuals themselves. Kibria's (2000) interviews with 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans showed that the homogenizing racial process persists through the racialization of ethnic labels such as Chinese and Japanese that "come to signify a generic Asian identity rather than a specific ethnonational one" (82). Even though Asian Americans can be broken up into distinct ethnic identities, non-Asians automatically choose to ignore these ethnic and cultural variations. Nguyen's (2018) research on Asian American graduate students advances this issue of erasure by explaining that the misnaming of Asian students in academic settings is typically considered an honest mistake rather than racial microaggression. Whether the mistake was intentional or unintentional, the impact is still significant and perpetuates the invisibility of Asian and Asian American experiences in predominantly white spaces.

### *Stereotyping.*

Other types of microaggressions present through racial stereotyping. Kibria (2000) describes many of the stereotypes directed towards Asian Americans as assuming stereotypes. For instance, non-Asians may assume an "Asian-looking" individual speaks little to no English or is deeply connected to their ethnic origins solely based on physical appearances (Kibria 2000). The model minority myth, as previously mentioned, assumes that Asian Americans are a successful minority who do not need support. Scholars claim that high-achieving and self-sufficient stereotypes reify the denial of social services for Asian Americans. Failure to achieve these high standards is therefore perceived as an individual flaw rather than an institutional and structural barrier (Suzuki 2002; Museus and Park 2015; Friedlaedener 2018; Ball 2019). Suzuki claims that this results in Asian racial complaints not being taken seriously, further silencing



moments of racial discrimination in institutional settings. When there are services available, research shows that Asian Americans find it more difficult to ask for assistance because they internalize these idealistic ideologies of the Model Minority Myth (Ball 2019; Mallapragada 2021).

### ***Environmental microaggressions.***

Another overlooked bias is environmental microaggressions that describe the relationship between individuals and the environment. Mena's (2017) research on Asian Americans in higher academic environments discovered that the lack of seeing people who looked or shared the same as them resulted in increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. Even though Asian American students are well represented in higher education, Suzuki (2002) states that Asian identities are underrepresented in higher administrative and leadership positions (Suzuki 2002). Additionally, Asian American students noticed that the education curriculum rarely spoke to their ethnic and cultural experiences further reinforcing feelings of institutional neglect. Therefore, environmental microaggression typically leads to a mistrust of the institution to support their needs forcing Asian American students to rely on alternative mechanisms to navigate a sense of belonging.

## ***I'm Not That Type of Asian: Internalized Racism and Defensive Othering***

### ***Internalized racism.***

Although perceived to be subtle and harmless, microaggressions can have a significant impact on Asian Americans' psychological and emotional well-being (Kim, Kendall, and Cheon 2016). Studies have found that racialized stereotyping and labels can lead to internalized racism and conflicts for Asian American individuals. Trieu and Lee (2018) found in their interviews with 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian students from the Midwest that the anticipation of racism towards

Asians led to internalizing being Asian as a “bad” thing. Asian-identifying participants across multiple studies have expressed ethnic self-shaming, self-mockery, and self-hatred by wishing they were white (Museus and Park 2015; Samura 2016; Trieu and Lee 2018). The pressure to assimilate to white standards presents an alternative way Asian Americans tried to increase a sense of belonging in college. For instance, research has found that Asian-identifying students will change their physical appearance and vernacular to fit dominant white standards (Samura 2016; Trieu and Lee 2018). Yi (2023) argues that this investment to fit white beauty standards and norms has resulted in Asian people putting more value on joining white spaces as a strategy against being othered by the majority. Trieu and Lee (2018) further argue that while some Asian Americans find acceptance and belonging in predominantly white spaces, many Asian American individuals still feel a certain level of estrangement not only in white spaces but in Asian spaces as well. While they may feel “white” on the inside, they are still highly aware that others may only see them as a person of color furthering the feeling of tokenism in white spaces (Museus and Park 2015).

### *Defensive othering.*

This hyperawareness of outward appearance has led to another strategy known as defensive othering or when Asian-identifying individuals dissociate from Asian communities and enclaves to avoid being othered by peers. For instance, some Asian American students expressed that they did not choose a school with a substantial Asian population because they wanted to avoid being lumped into certain racial and social stereotypes (Samura 2016). For instance, Asian American students actively avoided the Asian scene to not get labeled as Asian kids who only hang out with other Asian people (Trieu and Lee 2018). This decision to avoid connecting with Asian communities is also seen in Museus and Park’s (2015) interviews with Asian American

students who said they chose not to engage with Asian student associations and sub-ethnic affinity groups out of the fear they would be accused of self-segregating. These findings emphasize how some Asian Americans are extremely self-conscious of the social stereotypes and labels tethered to their Asian identity. Therefore, defensive othering can be understood as not only a form of dissociation but also protection from the anticipation of racial remarks and prejudice (Trieu and Lee 2018). Moreover, Pan's (2015) study found that Asian American participants felt that they were the bridge between Asian communities and whiteness. Museus and Park (2015) found that while Asian American students discussed initiating racial crossing, they noticed that their white counterparts rarely made friendships outside of their white peers (Museus and Park 2015). These findings highlight that sometimes choosing to hang with majorly white peers is not always defensive othering but just a lack of diverse and interracial friendships in predominately white spaces.

### ***Asian American Resistance: Co-Ethnic Relations and Critical Exposure***

Despite the compounding obstacles Asian Americans face in predominantly white spaces, many Asian American students have found spaces of belonging and support. Samura (2016) highlights how Asian American students found a sense of belonging through the process of re-making and re-envisioning spaces instead of attaining a certain way of being. This is mainly achieved through the joining of affinity groups where Asian-identifying students feel they can freely express and share ethnic identities with other members. Scholars found that through these co-ethnic relationships and critical exposure to Asian identities and culture, Asian American students were more likely to assert sub-ethnic identity to counteract homogeneity (Trieu 2017; Trieu and Lee 2018). When exposed to Asian and Asian American advocacy and affinity groups, Asian American students found that their pre-college views on identities and race relations

evolved (Trieu 2017). Respondents expressed having stronger connections to their ethnic identity which helped them to look beyond the white framework that attempts to constrain Asian Americans to a certain social mold (Trieu and Lee 2018). Exposure to anti-Asian discrimination through Asian affinity groups also helped Asian American students reclaim ethnic history by placing their lived experiences at the forefront of a larger American narrative (Trieu 2017).

### ***Institutional-Level Experiences: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)***

#### ***Initiatives and Affirmative Action***

Lee et al (2016) state that college campuses present a prime opportunity to examine racial processes. Research on predominately white institutions not only gives insight into individual marginalized experiences but reveals the “social practices enabled by institutional structures” (Chou, Lee, and Ho: 303) that perpetuate racial triangulation. However, as marginalized voices become increasingly publicized, many academic institutions have gradually re-evaluated their values and goals toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. While DEI services have advanced students’ sense of belonging, some scholars explain that some schools’ policies or lack thereof are confined to compliance thinking rather than seeking innovative ways to enhance student diversity (Dwyer and Gigliotti 2017). Singleton et al. (2021) also explain that DEI programming does not always cater to the intersectionality of human beings resulting in the absence of space for those experiences. Therefore, Dwyer and Gigliotti (2017) argue that DEI needs to shift to “supporting people’s whole identities (3366) and the compounding obstacles that come with them.

Another critical facet of DEI initiatives is the retention and recruitment of diverse leadership across all academic departments (Dwyer and Gigliotti 2017). Singleton et al. (2021) stress that implementation of DEI principles cannot be limited to multi or intercultural spaces or

curriculums that already highlight marginalized identities. Instead, the success of DEI initiatives depends on an open dialogue that expands into STEM fields and draws on innovative ways to increase genuine inclusivity (Dwyer and Gigliotti 2017; Singleton et al. 2021). Moreover, scholarly literature asserts that an increase in diverse leadership, faculty, and students must not be solely understood through racial presence but how that presence is an essential component of a collaborative and thriving academic environment (Singleton et al. 20121). To that effect, colleges and universities have become an institutional model for implementing progressive DEI policies and programming.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision to overturn affirmative action and race-conscious admission in 2023 can have unintentionally or intentionally harmful implications for students of color and the effectiveness of DEI ambitions. Lyerly (2023) states that the overturning of race-conscious admission can undermine students of color's access to "scholarships, internships, and other educational programs" (6) that historically and continue to demonstrate bias based on race. Asian American voices against the continuity of race-conscious admissions were put at the forefront of Affirmative Action discourse. The myth that affirmative action harms Asian Americans was used as a political strategy to divert focus away from white incentives to notions that race-conscious admission harms minority identities (Dirks 2023). In other words, Asian Americans became the political face of the minority perspective on Affirmative Action. In addition, this political tactic created more tension between communities of color (Dirks 2013). In total, Asian Americans were used as pawns in a zero-sum game where either way Asian identities were othered and marginalized by political schemes.

## *Purpose and Significance*

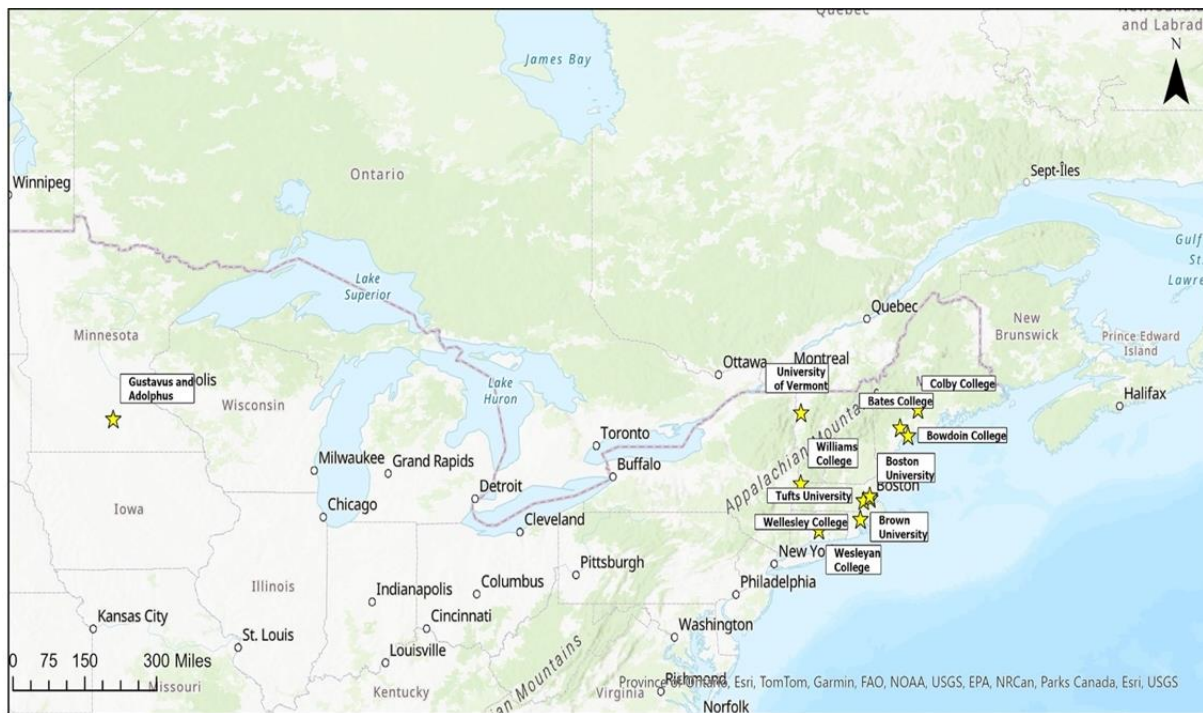
As mentioned earlier, while there has been an increase in research on Asian Americans and belonging in scholarly literature, the empirical data has largely aggregated Asian sub-ethnic identities. According to Suzuki (2002), there are at least 30 sub-ethnic groups that face varying social experiences and treatment. Therefore, this study aims to give voice to these Asian American identities and their exploration of belonging that tends to get buried by monolithic narratives by disaggregating the Asian American pan-ethnicity. This is not to say that previous research did not make major contributions to social research on racial groups but is to highlight a major limitation in past research on the Asian American experience. I specifically chose to focus on Asian American voices because identifying as both Asian and American offers intersectionality that places individuals between spheres of privileges and disadvantages that accompany certain ethnic and national identities. Therefore, race, ethnicity, and nationality can be internalized in a multitude of ways that may or may not play a significant role in Asian American students' college experiences.

This study also explores Asian American students' perception of institutional support and DEI programs. While many higher academic institutions are committed to implementing services and programming to increase intercultural diversity and community, there is a paucity of research on the institutional-level experiences of Asian Americans in higher education (Museus and Park 2015). This is not all that surprising knowing that the model minority myth supposes that all Asian Americans are highly successful and self-sufficient in academic environments; therefore, they do not require the same level of institutional support. However broad conjectures such as those protect structural flaws and support individual ideologies. This study, therefore, also seeks to bridge the gap between individual sentiments and institutional accountability.

By exploring how Asian American students' experiences navigate predominately white spaces in primarily liberal arts colleges that pride themselves on their implementation of DEI, I aim to also bring attention to racialized experiences that are not as obvious and commonly regarded as misunderstandings rather incidents of harm. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander (2012) posits that "overt bigotry are widely condemned by people across the political spectrum; they are understood to be remnants of the past, no longer reflective of the prevailing public consensus about race" (223). This new era of colorblindness makes it more challenging to combat insidious racial experiences than explicit and socially unacceptable forms of racism (i.e., slurs, lynching, hate crimes). Therefore, this thesis focuses on exploring how the dismissal of experiences is damaging and advancing conversations on race that are hard to discuss and less visible.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

For this study, I took a qualitative approach to explore the many experiences and perceptions Asian American undergraduate students have while navigating the different facets of predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Ragin and Amoroso (2011) argue that qualitative research is the primary strategy to achieve the goal of giving voice and a secondary strategy to explore diversity in research. Therefore, this research draws from 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Asian American-identifying students who attend schools primarily located in the Northeast apart from one college in the Midwest (fig. 1). The open-ended format of interviews helps to develop a comprehensive picture of the interviewees' background, feelings, and perceptions (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). The conversational structure of interviews also allows participants to drive the trajectory of the conversation and the agency to shape their lived experiences.



**Figure 1. Map of the college and universities the participants were attending**



## ***Recruiting and Participants***

Many participants were recruited through reaching out and communicating with the leadership and board members of college and university Asian affinity groups on social media. Since one of my goals is to show the diversity within the pan-Asian experience, I connected with both Asian student associations and sub-ethnic organizations (i.e., Southeast Asian Associations and South Asian Associations) to cultivate an ethnically diverse participation pool. Other students were selected through word of mouth and snowball sampling. The email sent out to potential participants included that the main purpose of this thesis is to give greater visibility to Asian American voices at predominately white institutions and provide a space for Asian American students to share their personal stories (fig. 2). Participants were then given further information on scheduling interview times and the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. The students in this study were between the ages of 18-22 and reflect all undergraduate class years (tab.1). All the participants in this study identify with the Asian American label and ethnicities in East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia. Also, several participants identified with multiple racial, ethnic, and national identities.

## ***Data Collection***

Participants answered 10 guiding questions in addition to several follow-up questions that ranged from general perceptions of belonging, racial and ethnic-related experiences, and institutional perceptions of diversity equity, and inclusion. When deciding on what questions to ask the participants, I wanted to explore if there were facets of the PWI experience that were more prominent in the day-to-day lives of Asian American students. Below are the 10 questions each participant was asked:

- 1) What does belonging/a sense of belonging mean to you in college/university?
- 2) How has your ethnic identity shaped your academic and social experiences at your academic institution?
- 3) Do you think your racial and ethnic identities affect the way students, professors, and other faculty treat or perceive you on campus?
- 4) Have you experienced microaggressions or overt racism while at your institution?
- 5) How do you find a sense of belonging at your predominately white institution?
  - a) When do you feel you can be your most authentic self?
  - b) Where do you find community and has that evolved over time?
- 6) How do you negotiate both an Asian and American identity and are there other intersecting identities that affect your sense of belonging?
- 7) Are there certain spaces on campus or at your institution that feel more or less accessible to you or other Asian American students?
- 8) Do you feel that diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and/or intercultural spaces at your institution provide support for Asian American students relative to other racial/ethnic enclaves on campus?
- 9) What do you feel is the most misunderstood about your identity and the Asian Americans community in general at PWIs?
- 10) What do you think your institution can do to better support Asian American students' experience?

Each student in this study participated in a one-on-one in-person or virtual interview. The interviews ranged from 20 to 45 minutes and took place over zoom or in various academic buildings on campus. Out of the 25 participants, 18 of the interviews were conducted over Zoom.

After filling out an in-person or virtual consent form, the participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire where they recorded their names, ages, pronouns, ethnic identities, and academic institutions. The interview was then conducted with a semi-structured approach which allowed for greater clarity and a deeper investigation of the phenomenon and emerging themes and patterns (Museus and Park 2015). Toward the end of every interview, participants were allowed to expand or reflect on previous questions and speak freely on aspects of their experiences that did not have to be directly related to the previous 10 questions.



## Hey ASA,

We hope you all enjoyed a restful Fall Break!

Molly Furman, a Bates senior, recently reached out to our board looking for Asian American students at Bowdoin to participate in a sociological thesis she is currently working on. Her thesis is exploring the Asian American experience at PWIs with a focus on microaggression and navigating sense of belonging. This is a great chance to share your personal experiences being Asian American at Bowdoin and to support a fellow NESCAC student doing crucial and important work.

**If you or any other Bowdoin students you know who identify as Asian American are interested in participating in Molly's thesis or have any questions, please reach out to her at [mfurman@bates.edu](mailto:mfurman@bates.edu).**

Sincerely,  
ASA Board

**Figure 2. Example of email sent out to members of the Asian Student Association at Bowdoin College**

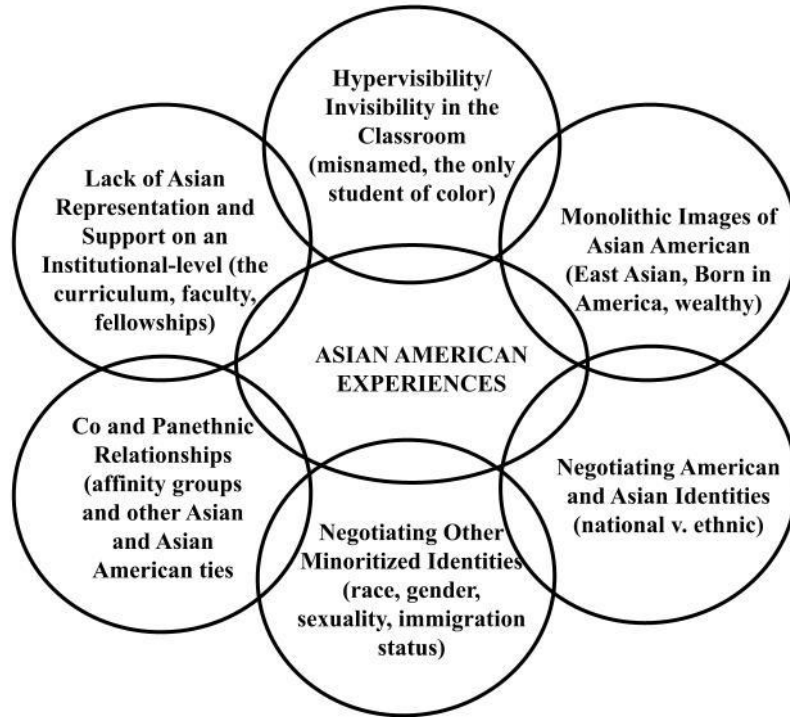
**Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Participants**

Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Institution
5 Chinese American 6 Korean American 1 Taiwanese American 7 Multi-ethnic American 1 Zomi American 1 Kazakh American 2 Indian American 2 Vietnamese American	19 Female 4 Males 2 Nonbinary	(5) 18-year-olds (6 )19-year-olds (1) 20-year-old (11) 21-year-olds (2) 22-year-olds	<b>NESCAC Schools:</b> 7 Colby College 8 Bates College 3 Bowdoin College 1 Tufts University 1 Williams College <b>Other PWIs:</b> 1 Boston University 1 Brown University 1 Wellesley College 1 Gustavus and Adolphus College 1 University of Vermont

***Data Analysis Process***

The interviews were transcribed verbatim to the extent possible with some clarifying edits and cleaning. I analyzed the data using the NVIVO Qualitative Research Software to code and organize themes. While I was transcribing, I started to recognize keywords, overlapping phrases, and preliminary patterns which helped to create a starting point after transferring the transcribed interviews into NVIVO. I used the thematic analysis process, a systematic form of qualitative analysis that uses keywords, phrases, and sentiments that are later coded into themes that are developed into a conceptual model or framework (Naeem et al. 2023) I read through each interview again to see if my previous coding supported the theme. Then, I read through all the codes and created subcodes for varying experiences that were still related to the broader theme. After I refined the themes down to 11 major themes, I created a conceptual model based on the themes emerging from the data (fig. 3). After the final revision, there were 72 codes and subcodes formed by 25 transcribed interviews.

## PREDOMINANTLY WHITE COLLEGES/UNIVERSITIES



**Figure 3. 6 major themes are cultivated through the thematic**

### *Positionality*

As a Chinese American undergraduate student who attends a predominantly white college, I resonate and empathize deeply with many of the experiences and sentiments that are mentioned in this study. I have experienced many microaggressions and insensitive comments based on the color of my skin, ethnic features, and cultural stereotypes. Growing up, people regularly commented on my “squinty” eye shape and “flat” nose which led to several years of trying to change my features to match the white girls I saw on Disney Channel or social media. I was adopted into a middle-class, white family and raised by a loving mother in a predominantly

white community. For me, finding a sense of belonging has been a frustrating, revealing, and ongoing journey. I have walked the streets of Chinatown in NYC and have been met with disappointed faces when I did not respond in Mandarin. I have also been to many sleepovers where I was met with confused faces when they tried to apply makeup to my Asian features. A large part of my understanding of what it means to be Asian American identity has resulted in disconnections to both sides of it. I hold a national and an ethnic identity that sometimes feels at odds with each other. For example, I am legally unable to have dual citizenship with China, and I am not allowed to be the president of the United States of America. Although I do not have plans on becoming the president, there are larger provisions in place that do not allow my Asian and American identities to be equal.

I share an identity with all participants in this study. Like them, I have been defined by assuming stereotypes because of my outward Asian appearance. However, unlike some of my participants, I have not been confronted with other experiences and challenges that are revealed in this study. For instance, several participants in this study are part of the low-income, first-generation community and others have been raised in traditional Asian households or by Asian parents. While I initially assumed I was going to have to concentrate on unlearning from my personal experiences, over time, I found that most of the time I was learning during the interviews.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The current analysis resulted in six overarching themes and 14 sub-themes that seek to produce a holistic representation of Asian American student's experiences at predominately white institutions. The first theme discusses how racialized experiences in the classroom produce a simultaneous sense of hypervisibility and invisibility when interacting with professors and peers. The second theme considers the dominating stereotypes that define Asian American pan ethnicity and are disproportionately represented on college campuses. This section also illustrates how domineering images of Asian Americans on predominantly white campuses can create a culture of exclusion within the Asian American community. The third and fourth themes focus on how Asian American students negotiate multiple identities including race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, sexuality, and gender. The fifth theme highlights the importance of cultivating racial and ethnic ties and the positive impact it has had on Asian American students' sense of belonging and identity formation. Finally, the sixth theme examines Asian American students' opinions on institutional practices with a focus on representation in the curriculum, fellowship programs, and DEI initiatives.

### *Hypervisibility and Invisibility in the Classroom*

*Hypervisibility: "Just because I'm from a different culture doesn't mean I'm a scholar in that."*

When participants were asked to talk about academic experiences at their college or university, many students described feelings of hypervisibility in classroom environments and other academic spaces. A few students highlighted that as one of the only Asian or students of color in their classes, there is pressure to be the spokesperson for the minority community. One Chinese American participant commented that the lack of Asian peers or students of color not

only heightened her awareness of being the only person of color in the room but also produced an uncomfortable expectation to speak to certain topics on race:

I think I'm still quite aware of it, like being a minority in a lot of different spaces, like in a lot of my classes. I'm like the only person of color, and whenever topics of race come up, or anything like that, I often get really self-conscious, because I think like, oh, people are expecting me to talk or like, say something, and I often don't say something, and I'm like, should I have said something?

Even though there was no direct pressure put on Participant 22, her perception that people are expecting her to have an opinion indicates that those who are silent on race-based topics are creating an indirect burden on Asian American students in the classroom.

Contrastingly, a few participants mentioned that professors had explicitly singled them out in class to speak on various topics. Another Chinese American reflected on how professors will call on Asian students to speak on behalf of an entire culture or country:

I understand it's for a perspective. I understand it's to challenge a certain monolithic thinking, but at the same time, to me, I don't really like to be put on the spot. Also, just because I'm from a different culture doesn't mean I'm a scholar in that, you know. That doesn't mean I'm representative of everyone else's experience. If you're speaking to a room of American students who cannot talk about their various family backgrounds, education backgrounds, experiences, then, the burden to speak about one country shouldn't be placed on me.

Another experience that made participants feel uncomfortable was when professors made assumptions based on their physical appearance. Participant 10, a multiracial student, talked



about the anxiety her classmate experienced when a professor wrongly assumed her peer's Asian ethnicity:

[The professor] asked [her], do you know how to phrase [this sentence]? I just saw her and knew she didn't know how to respond, so I was just like they're very different languages. I don't think that, like anyone in this class, unless they've learned Vietnamese knows how to pronounce that.

This situation highlights that professors and peers, although participants expressed to a lesser extent with students, presume that Asian American students automatically have a level of cultural and ethnic knowledge. Put another way, Asian phenotypes are used as a measurement of expertise in Asian-related discourse. These examples reveal that hypervisibility is both an internalized and external experience that Asian American students and Asian-appearing students grapple with daily. Furthermore, assuming stereotypes and the lack of attentiveness to Asian American diversity shows hypervisibility can also co-exist alongside invisibility.

***Invisibility: "The Professor doesn't fully understand me as a person if they can't even fully learn my name."***

Many participants expressed that classroom settings were also environments where they did not feel fully understood or seen by professors and peers. Despite the stereotype of Asian students as high achievers and super smart, some students felt that their voices and presence were not valued the same in group projects. Participant 1, a Taiwanese American female stated, "[In] group work, especially when it's like a random set of people in your class that you don't know, [are] all white, and especially upper class, rich white, I've definitely had instances where I felt like I didn't belong in a group just because of my race. Like, people weren't taking me as seriously just because of my race" At PWIs, it is common that Asian American students are

assigned to groups that are mostly composed of white students. Participant 1's response reveals that randomly assigned groups can provoke feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility simultaneously. Externally, she felt neglected by her group members, but internally, she was ultra-conscious of being the only person of color in the group.

The most common obstacle across almost all participants was being misnamed or mistaken for other Asian students in or outside of the class. Asian American students expressed that despite having a different skin tone, ethnic features, or sense of style, professors repeatedly called them another name. Participant 13, a multiracial student, discussed the frustration of being constantly misnamed in classes and how being confused for other Asian students becomes a pattern of carelessness:

I don't think it's that hard to learn people's names and especially if there aren't that many people in your class at one time. I think, like in those cases, it was just more ignorant. I think that's still an issue, and to me, that feels like you don't care. I feel like someone's name is a very basic thing. That's the first, I guess, line of respect is like learning someone's name, and I feel like it is kind of disrespectful if you can't even put in the effort to learn someone's name correctly.

Misnaming was especially upsetting when participants had frequent interactions or a working relationship with professors, faculty, or peers. Participant 24, a Vietnamese American fourth-year student, recalled that despite working with a faculty member since her first year, he still confused her for other Asian presenting students on campus:

I worked with him for the last 4 years, and he still confuses me for different Chinese international students, and my [sociology] professor, that I've had classes with twice, has called me two different Asian student names. So, microaggressions are typically from

like these, like white professors but also like when going out, and I think every single time it happens.

While being mistaken for another person is not uncommon, participants discussed that it does feel negligent when it becomes a pattern that only seems to target Asian and Asian American students. To the participants in this study, misnaming is disheartening and creates a level of mistrust, particularly between Asian American students and professors.

It's also important to note that when participants were disclosing negative experiences during interviews, many were hesitant to categorize these situations as racial microaggressions especially when relating their experiences to international Asian students and other racial minorities on campus:

There is absolutely cultural racism against Asian Americans that I have also experienced, but you hear stories of what Black students are experiencing [at Tufts] and how they're always seen as poor. Even if they're not, they're always treated as less deserving of things because of that classed image of what it means to be that race. These are things that are not just tied to cultural hegemony, which also are a thing for [Black students] but are inherently and intrinsically linked with class power dynamics, and with the racial capitalism.

This response from one Asian American student highlights that although Asian Americans faced racial microaggressions, there is a recognition that other students of color experience different harmful forms of racism. Therefore, it was not surprising when a few Asian American participants began their responses with “this is not a microaggression, but[.]” or “I wouldn't consider this a microaggression” when talking about academic experiences.

## *Dominating Image of Asian Americans at PWIs*

*East Asian centric: “They’re only seeing a specific narrative of the Asian American experience.”*

Participants also discussed how depictions of Asian Americans in the media and higher academia reinforce certain images of the Asian American identity while concealing other Asian American experiences. Therefore, in addition to navigating predominately white spaces, 60% of participants stressed the challenge of finding spaces and peers that resonated with their specific Asian American experience on campus. For example, when reflecting on his experiences navigating spaces on campus, Participant 17, a South Asian student, discussed how Asian American environments cater more to East Asian identities.

I will say that it is very often for Asian American spaces to not be accessible to Asian Americans who are not East Asian. That's been my experience. So, we have the Tufts Asian American center, which is a very, very cute house. I came to Tufts like hanging out there all the time. I still hang out there all the time. But again, the people in there don't necessarily look like me. It doesn't necessarily always feel like I am the Asian that they're thinking about.

When discussing Asian representation on campus, some participants, especially those who did not identify as East Asian, expressed frustration with the lack of sub-ethnic diversity. Participant 17, spoke about the absence of sub-ethnic diversity at Tufts University:

It perpetuates the model minority myth by exclusively bringing in Asian Americans and international students who represent a very specific Asian American experience that completely obscures and erases like just a diversity of experiences that Asian America hosts. Seldom do you see Asian Americans on campus who come from below the poverty

line. Seldom is that narrative reflected on this campus. Seldom do you see dark-skinned Southeast Asians. Seldom do you see South Asians who are not Indian. [The institutions] leave these campuses with a completely skewed idea of what Asian Americans looks like. You are like doing a disservice to not only Asian Americans but also to the surrounding student body by showing them like a really perverse and skewed image of what Asian America is.

Another participant, an Indian American student stated:

When I refer to myself as Asian, and they go, you're not Asian, you're Indian, I am like, look at a map brother. Go look at a map! There are so many [Asian ethnicities]. It's so diverse. I'm obviously not Southeast Asian, but like [Indians] are Asian.

This example shows that the skewed image of Asian identities at predominately white institutions has resulted in other students denying Asian American students' Asian identity.

***American-born Asian narrative: "You have to have an Asian family to be Asian American."***

Participants also mentioned that the Asian American narrative is commonly built on the assumption that individuals have the same cultural knowledge and immigration trajectory. When reflecting on their identity, Participant 16, a Kazakh American, discussed how the Asian American label felt restricted to a specific community of Asian students and experiences:

I think the term Asian American was very grounded in what a traditional ABC looks like. An American-born Chinese with, like growing up with an Asian family and having that culture, I guess, [for] your entire life. I think being adopted, especially internationally, the term Asian American I think is a challenging word that a lot of adoptees usually struggle with just because the term American, like, we weren't really born here.

Participant 16's reflection on how others define Asian American-ness is a common sentiment among the four other adoptees in this study. They found that their immigrant experience is commonly left out of the conversation when talking about the Asian American experience and immigration. Because of American born narrative, Participant 22, a Chinese American adoptee student stated:

I don't like strongly identifying with the entire Asian American community because I just feel like I've grown up, and I've had a distinct experience. I've talked to a lot of adoptees about this specifically, though, like I've had a very distinct experience growing up in a non-Asian household.

Participant 22's hesitance to identify as an Asian American demonstrates that the pan-ethnic label is confined to members who were born in the USA and grew up in a traditional Asian household with Asian parents.

***Crazy rich Asian narrative: "It was easier to pass as an affluent Asian adoptee than talk about intergenerational poverty and trauma."***

Because of academic and socioeconomic stereotypes mentioned earlier, two Southeast Asian American participants described that their peers were shocked that they were on financial aid or the first in their family to attend college. One participant stated:

[People] cannot comprehend that Asian people can be poor. I grew up first-generation, low-income, and in a working-class community. My parents own a nail salon in those communities. So, I think it's very, very interesting. Maybe it's the way I carry myself or maybe it's people's perceptions of proximity to whiteness.

Because of model minority stereotypes Asian students are expected to be accustomed to certain privileges and experiences. Similarly, Participant 21 talked about how people automatically assumed she had grown up with certain levels of privilege because of her outward appearance:

My parents own a nail salon in Maine, like we're Vietnamese people. We own a nail salon which is a pipeline for me that I ended up working there. I also fund my college education entirely. So, I think that's also a big shock for people because I think over 60% of the Bates student population pays 80,000, and they don't get financial aid. [People] are shocked that people like me, first-generation students, come from parents that were not able to send me to private schools and those kinds of institutions.

Because socioeconomic status is not always a visible identity, Asian American first-generation students expressed that this is an identity that is commonly overlooked when it comes to understanding their experiences navigating academic and social spaces.

### ***Negotiating Asian and American Identities: Dual Consciousness***

#### ***Racialization in multicultural spaces: "I'm not [blank] enough."***

Participants also expressed that they felt like imposters in Asian and Asian American communal spaces especially if they grew up within an American, predominately white context. For example, a female Korean American student explained that because all her formal schooling was based in the U.S, she does not get involved in Asian student associations events because she feels that she is "not Asian enough to participate, but then I don't look American, and I'm not. I don't hold the same values necessarily as my Native American classmates, so I feel like I don't particularly fit into either of them." The dual identity dissociation was also experienced by a male Korean American student who stated, "I will say, being among international Korean kids, you don't feel Korean enough, and then, obviously, among like very white kids, you don't feel

American. These responses show that Asian American students struggle to find a sense of belonging within white and Asian spaces. Even though Asian American students may phenotypically fit the type of members in the student organization, that does not automatically mean an Asian American student will find community within those spaces. Participant 13, a Chinese, Mexican American student talked about the complications of joining an affinity group as a multiethnic student:

I've been part of the Asian Student Association in the past because everyone perceives me as Asian, so that [means] it's okay for me to be part of [the club]. For the Spanish club, I've been kind of nervous to go because I feel like I don't look Mexican, so I don't want people to [think] why is this girl here? I've been having a hard time throughout my life, like viewing myself as [Mexican]. I've been trying to [tell myself], it's okay for me to join, but it's an internal battle.

The perception that others will judge her because she does not fit the physical expectation shows that racialization within affinity groups influenced how she racializes herself even if it does not align with how she identifies internally.

Furthermore, racialization within the Asian community can sometimes lead to ethnic fracturing. A male South Asian American student observed this when he noticed that certain South Asian organizations felt like they were not accessible to all:

The South Asian spaces are like so bifurcated here. Seldom do these groups inter exchange or mesh. That's a fascinating side of accessibility because South Asians from South Asia don't see diaspora South Asians as Indian enough. South Asian Americans think that South Asians from South Asia are too conservative or too privileged.



This example highlights that in addition to participants' perception that they are not performing enough of their Asian identity, the division between Asian and Asian international students can also exacerbate participant disengagement and bonding within a shared ethnic identity.

***Ethnic and cultural erasure: “Someone doesn't have to be completely American when they're Asian American.”***

A little over a quarter of the participants expressed that people predetermined their identities. For a few Asian American students, this took the form of peers assuming their American identity took precedence over their Asian identity. An adopted Chinese American participant described this assumption when she described how she felt her peers perceived her in social settings:

“I feel like most students when they get to know me look past my past with being adopted and being Asian. I feel like, since I am more indulged in the white American culture than I am with Asian culture, I feel like people just believe that I'm not interested whatsoever in learning about my culture.”

Another Chinese American student explained that when she tells students her first language is Mandarin, she was met with shocked reactions from peers who assumed she grew up with similar cultural experiences to them:

People assume that I am very assimilated. When I tell people that Mandarin was my first language, they're very surprised. I don't really speak Mandarin around a lot of people, but even with me, like when I look at an Asian American, I can't just assume that they've had the American background because when you first look at someone, you have absolutely no idea anything about them. So, you kind of project your own experiences onto them.

A Vietnamese American student expressed a similar perspective when talking about the expectations that come with attending a predominantly white institution as an Asian, student of color:

There's this expectation that you're supposed to understand white culture. There is this expectation that if you attend a space that's predominantly white that you have had the same exact experience as [the majority] which is just not true. I think it has created a sense of loneliness in my first couple of years here, and same loneliness and made me question like my sense of belonging.

These interactions with peers show that these assumptions of assimilation into the dominant American, specifically white culture, ignore that participants hold minority identities that fall outside the mainstream identity held by many students who attend predominantly white institutions. One Chinese American student noted that it made her uncomfortable when some of her peers actively avoided using racial or ethnic descriptors to describe her:

It almost makes me feel like I am sticking out because you don't want to acknowledge [my race]. It's like, oh, is it weird that I'm Asian? Is that why you don't want to bring it up? You don't want to acknowledge it? I just think people need to understand there's a difference between offensive and just acknowledging race.

Even though participants expressed that their peers never explicitly made racially insensitive remarks, some felt that their non-Asian peers subconsciously changed the conversations when they talked about microaggressions related to their ethnicity. Participant 18, a multiracial student stated, “When I do start to speak about like my experiences with race, especially in New York, and like kind of traumatic experiences, people's ears like slightly turn off, and they get a little like, okay, let's move on.” Many participants did acknowledge that their non-Asian friends were

mostly supportive when talking about their experiences as Asian Americans studying at a PWI, but several felt that support can only go so far.

### ***Compounding Obstacles: The Intersection of Race and Other Minoritized Identities***

***Sexuality: “Once you do that first calculation, you go to your second skin.”***

When participants were asked about how other identities affected their sense of belonging at PWIs, three Asian American participants commented on the lack of LGBTQ+ Asian students within the queer community on campus. Participant 16 discussed how whiteness dominates the queer culture at their institution:

Being like a queer Asian on campus has its roles. A lot of the queer students here on campus, especially like the queer identifying men, hook up with each other who are all white and it creates a space that the queer people of color on campus don't have that like community. There's so much racism within the queer community in itself that I feel like that's another reason why [I] dived more into my Asian identity.

This response highlights how queer Asian American students, on top of being a racial minority on campus, also feel like minorities within smaller identity-centered communities on campus. A student at Colby College expressed:

I haven't met a lot of Asian people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. So, in some ways, I feel very [by] myself with that cause. I'm like, oh, I don't see a lot more people. I don't know a lot more people like that. So, I almost feel kind of lonely.

***Race and gender: “Being specifically an Asian woman on this campus is hard!”***

20% of the female participants in this study commented on the common stereotypes and fetishization of Asian women they have experienced or fear when discussing about social life

and relationships. A female Vietnamese American student described this obstacle when explaining how she navigates the dating culture on campus:

I've done a lot of research on the Asian fetish phenomenon. I think that it has to exist here. It's a predominantly white institution with lots of white men, and I think as an Asian woman, you need to be very wary of these men who don't exactly view you as a person with value, a person with conscious thoughts, and see you more as an exotic little trophy. Oh, I slept with the Asian girl stuff like that. So being an Asian woman on this campus is definitely scary. You just have to be wary because the Asian fetish does not only apply to white men, but it also applies to all men. People expect you to act a certain way. They don't expect you to like do any drugs. They don't really expect you to drink heavily, and your kind of just expected to be chill and do your work.

Participant 25, a female Chinese American student stated:

It's actually terrifying. A lot of the guys that I've talked to in the past, I've realized, all their exes are Asian, and all their friends are Asian. The last guy I talked to his mom was even really into Asians. I think especially being a woman, I [wonder], do they like me, or do they like me cause I'm Asian and I represent some sort of idea that they have around like women.

For many Asian American women, there is a genuine concern that romantic partners on campus may be attracted for the wrong reasons that are commonly attached to submissive and exotic stereotypes.

## *Co and Pan-ethnic Relationships*

*Co-ethnic relationships: "I am a lot more comfortable like chatting with a professor of color that I know has acknowledged the struggles of PWI."*

While affinity groups are not as accessible as some thought they were going to be in college, other participants did find community especially when they were driven by ethnic ties rather than pan-ethnic ones. One female participant from Bates College talked about how joining an affinity group centered around the Southeast Asian identity helped to solidify their identity and sense of belonging on campus:

I found a Southeast Asian community, and once I found the Southeast Asian community, guess what other identities intersect it? Oh, they were also first generation. They were also coming from a working-class background. I would have never been able to find this, because on this campus, we're so dispersed and across all 4 years.

Participant 24's experience is a common sentiment among other Asian American students who found a sense of security in Asian students who not only shared the same ethnic identity but can empathize with the specific challenges and frustrations. Similarly, a Southeast Asian student who attends a separate institution described how certain experiences do not resonate across all Asian identities:

Southeast Asians tend to be on the poorer side than most of the people from East Asia, and they've had less interaction with USA [culture] if you just moved directly [from Asia]. So, I just feel like it's just a different feeling. Sometimes, personally, I feel like it's harder to connect to someone who's East Asian than Southeast Asian because our cultures are so different.

Co-ethnic relationships become an outlet for Asian American students to confide in peers whose experiences reflect their own insecurities and internal negotiations.

Other participants stressed that because of the lack of Asian-identifying professors in higher education, co-ethnic relationships with Asian professors and professors of color provide an additional level of comfort and visibility in the classroom. One Chinese American student stated:

I like to see people that at least look like me reflected like in academia. Also, when I meet with specifically Asian professors, I always feel like we connect on some level just automatically because we share at least part of an identity. Whereas with the white professors, I definitely feel more guarded when I meet with them individually.

Similarly, an Indian American student described how having multiple shared identities and experiences with her math professor helped to foster a closer bond:

I love like one of my professors in the math department like [was] born and raised in Hong Kong and like goes to India all the time for research. I think it's more so that [having a shared racial or ethnic identity] creates a better relationship with the professors of color than it does in terms of being treated differently for being a different person.

These responses reflect how co-ethnic ties between students and professors with minority identities create a sense of trust and security, for both are having to navigate institutionally white spaces.

*Discovering the Importance of the Asian Identity and Asian Peers: “I had never really experienced having Asian friends before.”*

When asked how college has shifted their views of a sense of belonging or community, nearly half of the participants described that their connection with their Asian identity has been strengthened by meeting other Asian students in college. A multiracial student stated:

My ethnic identity has helped me find people who have had similar experiences to me, which I thought was really exciting for myself. Just comparing our own stories or the little things that I feel that [as Asians] we both pick up on that maybe other people wouldn't because of differing ethnic identities. It's nice to be able to talk to someone about things like that.

For two participants, college was the first time they ever experienced having close Asian friendships. These participants explained that when one comes from a predominantly white neighborhood or high school, PWIs had the most Asian representation they had ever seen in one place. The exposure to more Asian and Asian American individuals allowed participants like Participant 13 to discover that some of her experiences were not isolated phenomena:

I had never really experienced having Asian friends before. So, I didn't know other people had similar thoughts. I just didn't know that could be an experience [someone else] could have. I think coming to Colby has brought in my sense of community in that way, and I've found more people that I can talk to and explain my feelings and have them say I've experienced or felt the same things!

Like Participant 13, Participant 7, a female Chinese American, was able to express feelings and experiences with peers that she did not talk about with her peers before coming to college:

I didn't even realize that I could have so many things like to relate with other people over, specifically about our race, which is really honestly nice to have because I never had that before! It's kind of like things that I wouldn't normally think about when I'm with my friends from back home, but like when I'm with [Asian peers], it's like, oh yeah, I didn't even think about this! It's like we can all relate, and it just makes me feel like, it's not just me so that definitely makes me feel like I belong too.

In addition to being able to express experiences related to her race and ethnicity, the conversations she had with other Asian students opened her eyes to other facets of her Asian identity she never thought about in the past.

For Participant 16, these Asian communities and relationships have influenced how they will navigate spaces and cultivate a community for themselves after college. They stated, “I know in the future, I’m going to want a specific type of Asian environment where all Asian identities are represented or at least advocated for.” This experience highlights how ethnic and pan-ethnic bonds can influence Asian American students’ priorities in the future that they never thought of before coming and meeting other Asian peers in college.

### ***On the Back Burner: Perspectives on Curriculum, Resources, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion***

#### ***Lack of Asian representation in the curriculum: “Why do we not matter?”***

When participants were explaining their academic experiences, a few students noted in addition to the lack of Asian-identifying professors that there were also little to no courses in the curriculum on the Asian American experience or Asian diaspora. Participant 17 stated:

Asian American studies at Tufts is like a very, very bleak space right now. There are very few professors who specialize in Asian American studies. There’s no longer an Asian



American study like major because there's not large enough courses or faculty for it. So, those are things where it's like, well, like that's not really support for Asian Americans to not just exist here, but also to study themselves here and to see themselves in the curriculum.

Participant 23, a multiracial student, talked about her frustration with the lack of sub-ethnic representation in comparison to other ethnic-related courses:

I'm actually very pissed off that their class selection within South Asia in particular, is very poor in terms of actually educating people about South Asia. [Bowdoin College] has very good Chinese and Korean and Japanese programs, Russian, German, and French, and like a bunch of other places like African studies and Latino studies. They're South Asian studies is very poor, and I want to come here to learn about my own culture, but I can't! I think that there's a lot in South Asia that has to offer to academia, especially in terms of like Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. I find it really aggravating.

This highlights that along with the absence of an Asian American narrative in the curriculum, there are identities within the pan-ethnicity that experience even less visibility.

***Lack of resources: "Structural things aren't built to support Asian Americans."***

While many participants noted that in general there are helpful resources that exist for all students, others mentioned that there are specific forms of support that exclude Asian and Asian American students. Participant 11, a multiracial student from Gustavus Adolphus College, discussed that Asian identities do not always qualify for certain academic programs.

I almost feel like more recently, it seems like PWIs view the Asian American community as needing less support. They're just like, you're such a go getter because you're Asian, and you're driven to succeed. Even within research, I've noticed there's a lot of research

programs for students from minority backgrounds, and in the last year, I've noticed that Asian Americans no longer qualify for a lot of those programs which I think is odd. I think that people forget that it's often still a struggle, especially if you come from a background where, like your parents, are both, not from the US.

Despite being a racial minority on campus, model minority stereotypes continue to undermine Asian American students' access to support and resources especially when they are centered around academics. Another participant, a Korean American student from Wellesley College talked about how many fellowships are catered to support other racial minorities:

The science departments have different fellowships and support programs for Black and Hispanic students about being underrepresented in science and just like there's a lot more like support systems in that kind of area. There's a specific fellow's program and things like that. I noticed there isn't anything like that for Asian students and that could be because there's like, I guess, globally a lot of Asian students in science, but I do think that's not a very nuanced take. For me personally, there's no one else in my family who does science, so when it comes to navigating like the grad school application process.

***Performative and misleading DEI: "Once specific incidents emerge, people immediately distance themselves away."***

While many participants felt that their schools are making decent strides towards creating more inclusive and equitable experiences for Asian Americans and other marginalized identities on campus, students also expressed that DEI continues to feel performative and forced. A student at Boston University stated:

Sometimes, I do feel like [the university] just putting a statement out there to put a statement out there and check it off the list [to] be [able to say], okay, we did it! We're

safe. We're not going to come under fire. But at the same time, I do feel like they're trying to follow up on what they say.

Other participants felt that DEI efforts appear productive until specific issues on race arise and the administration is directly asked to get involved. A student from Colby reflected on a time when a group of students of color went to higher administration to talk about the racial climate on campus:

Everyone talks about how we need to be more diverse. We need to do multicultural housing, like everyone talks about stuff but then, once specific incidents emerge, people immediately distance themselves away. [The students] reached out to the administration several times about sitting down, having a meeting, and talking about possible resolutions to that, but the school refused and didn't take their proposal seriously.

Furthermore, students also felt that their institution also created a misleading perception of diversity and Asian representation at predominately white institutions. A Chinese American student noticed that courses that had a disproportionate number of students of color were common targets for photographers on campus:

I remember my professors would just be kind of scared to have class outside when it's sunny. Initially, I was like, it's sunny! Let's go out! Then, I realized every time you have a class [where] the demographics [don't] reflect Maine's population or Colby's demographics, you go outside. People take pictures of you. They take pictures because they [see this] as diversity and that this is so representative of Colby's mission. My professor just felt really uncomfortable and offended because that's not why they're having the class. It's not a photo, op kind of thing.

While participants understood the importance of showcasing students of color at predominantly white institutions, at the same time, it was the way the institution approached the impression of diversity that made participants feel tokenized.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore how Asian American undergraduate students negotiate and navigate a sense of belonging and identity in predominantly white institutions. In addition, this thesis aims to understand how sub-ethnic and intersectional identities shape these perceptions to highlight the diversity of identities and lived experiences within the Asian American, pan-ethnic community. Finally, this thesis examines Asian American students' perspectives on institutional practices of diversity, resources for marginalized identities, and the effectiveness of these efforts to create equitable and inclusive spaces. Following other qualitative research on the sense of belonging and marginalized identities, this study was conducted through open-ended, semi-structured questions to gain a deeper comprehension of students' experience across different spaces at predominantly white colleges. The responses were then analyzed and resulted in the following findings that support and extend the current literature on Asian Americans in higher education.

Findings show that there are a lot of racialized experiences across academic, social, and multicultural spaces at predominantly white colleges with varying percentages of Asian representation. These racialized experiences shape students' sense of belonging and identity. For example, Asian American students experience racial microaggressions that manifest through feelings of hypervisibility and invisibility in the classroom environment. Asian Americans or Asian "appearing" face internal and external expectations to be an outside expert on Asian discourse. Although it may seem harmless at the moment, the assumption that Asian-appearing students have foreign expertise on Asian-centered topics indirectly reinforces perpetual foreigner narratives (Kibria 2000; Suzuki 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Museus and Park 2015; Yi 2023), for it assumes that any Asian student has a relationship with Asia beyond racial heritage. Put another

way, calling on Asian American students to speak to international discourse creates a label of foreign standing when many times students are born or have spent most of their adolescent life in the United States.

Furthermore, the misnaming of Asian American students by professors and peers in college settings reflects the broader issue of lumping Asian experiences into a generalized Asian identity (Kibria 2000) that not only perpetuates monolithic stereotypes (Samura 2016) but also erases sub-ethnic diversity. On an individual level, being repeatedly misnamed by peers and professors comes across as disrespectful, for peers, professors, and faculty are not taking the time or do not care enough to remember them. On a campus level, the shared experience of being confused for another Asian student shows how Asian American individuals continue to be identified as ambiguous students of color at predominantly white institutions.

This research also found that wider, societal impressions of Asian Americans are mirrored in the microcosms of predominantly white institutions. In this study, students expressed how the dominance of specific narratives (East Asian, American-born, and high socioeconomic status) establishes who is considered Asian American by people within and outside the Asian American community. Lee and Ramakrishnan (2019:10) also discovered that “the default for Asian is East Asian, especially to non-Asian identifying respondents. The findings also highlight varying forms of marginalization within the Asian American community. Museus and Park (2015) found that Southeast Asian students experienced inferior model minority stereotypes; however, in this study, Southeast Asians experienced shocked reactions when disclosing their socioeconomic status underscoring that model minority illusions continue to define Asian American community. Therefore, these findings show that there continues to be a tendency to lump the Asian diaspora into a monoculture rather than recognizing and identifying differences

within the group. Furthermore, these assumptions depreciate the strength and resilience of low-income, first-generation Asian students in higher education.

These dominating narratives explain why some Asian American students do not automatically find a sense of belonging within Asian identity organizations or peers with the same or similar racial, ethnic, or cultural identity. This research also reveals that within the Asian American community at predominately white institutions, there are majority identities (typically East Asian and American-born) that predominate Asian spaces. Therefore, students with identities outside that identity (Southeast Asian, South Asian, adopted, first-generation student) can feel uncomfortable (May 2011), lost (Trieu and Lee 2018), or marginalized (Pan 2015) in pan-ethnic communities. Therefore, the findings also illustrate that having an Asian identity does not guarantee social approval by other Asian peers. Asian American students who grew up in predominantly white environments or adopted into white families expressed not feeling “Asian enough” to connect with other Asian students and clubs. Similarly, Trieu and Lee (2018) found that Asian Americans in the study grappled with internalized racism that led them to dissociate from their perception of “true” Asians.

Moreover, these findings reveal that racialization by peers within ethnic communities leads to fracturing between students sharing the same ethnic identity, more notably the divide between Asian American and Asian international students. The segregation between membership in sub-ethnic communities underscores the existence of an unofficial scale of “Asian-ness” that categorizes Asian students based on their cultural knowledge and upbringing. Additionally, findings from this study also revealed that Asian American students felt misunderstood by their non-Asian peers. While Museus and Park (2015) found that Asian American students felt pressured to assimilate into American culture, this study shows that peers assumed that their

Asian American peers were already assimilated to whiteness. Therefore, Asian American students felt that their peers forgot that they had a second identity and were not as sensitive when disclosing the obstacles that come with being a racial minority at a predominately white institution. The findings also show that even within a space dedicated to talking about these experiences, Asian American students are highly conscious of and acknowledge other racial adversities by racially positioning their obstacles in between white privilege and challenges for other BIPOC students. Therefore, Asian American students may minimize experiences, summing them up to uncomfortable moments or weird moments, to acknowledge support and allyship for fellow students of color.

The findings in this study also support previous literature on the intersectionality of race and gender. On top of the general challenges associated with the dating scene, Asian American women sometimes must consider whether someone's attraction reflects them as a person or a fetishized depiction of Asian women. Chou, Lee, and Ho (2015) also found that Asian American females experienced sexualized racism and other inappropriate comments in a white institutional space. Therefore, these findings emphasize how the intersection of gender and race can restrict Asian women from pursuing relationships in college, for there is a genuine fear of becoming eroticized by students in predominantly white spaces. In addition, Asian American students who identify as queer also face compounding challenges navigating the dating scene in predominantly white institutions. While many colleges have a queer community on campus, Asian American students observed that these communities tend to be predominately white and end up reflecting the wider dating scene on campus (white people dating or hooking up with other white people). While Asian American women face an eroticized hypervisibility, queer Asian American experience an invisibility in the queer dating scene.



Furthermore, the findings show that when Asian American students do make co-ethnic relationships and Asian friends, it reinforces a sense of belonging and identity. Specifically, Asian Americans felt the most seen when they found peers and professors who not only shared the same ethnic identity but shared similar life trajectories and narratives (i.e., child of immigrant parents, adopted). When the school does not provide the structure for people to find these relationships, Samura (2016) explained that Asian American students will commonly redesign space or collaborate with others to create sub-communities that cater to their identities. Additionally, this study reveals that for some Asian American students, college is the first time they have made Asian friends and immersed themselves in Asian communities. Trieu and Lee (2018) also discovered that critical exposure to Asian peers and academic courses centered around Asian experiences allows students to think outside of the white framework. In this study, some Asian American students gained this new consciousness by discovering that having a core Asian community is something they value. Therefore, these co-ethnic ties shape students' college experiences as well as influence Asian American student's future priorities and definition of community after college.

On an institutional level, these findings show that Asian American students feel that their voices are silenced in the curriculum and resource programming. Although schools may have an Asian studies department, Asian American students want to take courses that focus on Asian American narratives and the Asian diaspora. The presence of an Asian Studies department cannot act as a substitute for Asian American courses in the curriculum. Asian American students want to see themselves reflected in the courses they take and engage in the historical and contemporary social issues that continue to affect their lived experiences. Moreover, this study shows that the inaccessibility to academic fellowships and programming, specifically

advertised for minority identities, reflects the perpetuation of the model minority stereotype (Museus and Park 2015), and the illusion that all Asian Americans have the money and resources to excel outside of institutional support. These model minority tropes deny Asian American students access to resources and neglect that Asian Americans can be first-generation, low-income students who may rely on institutional programs to learn about certain academic opportunities. If Asians fail to succeed, it is seen as a reflection of individual problems rather than structural flaws which can lead to the denial of future services for Asian Americans after college (Ball 2019). Finally, findings also indicate that Asian American students find parts of DEI performative and misleading. Mainly, the study shows that the photos the institution takes of Asian students and other students of color on campus feel tokenizing, for it presents the opportunity for the school to prove fulfillment of a mission that is not always reflective of the racial realities that occur on campus.

### ***Recommendations***

The following recommendations include participant's responses and solutions based on the results and analysis of this study. In terms of curriculum changes, students want to see the addition of an Asian American concentration, or an Asian studies department that is inclusive of Asian and Asian American experiences and the diversity of ethnicities. In addition, students want to see more Asian-identifying professors in academia, and even more importantly in positions of leadership. In terms of admissions, one student suggests that institutions should be more intentional about accepting and reaching students from different regions in Asia to create a more accurate Asia instead of the East-Asian-centric one that exists across many predominantly white colleges. Not only will this benefit the Asian community on campus, but this will also benefit all

students and faculty, for it will challenge homogenized depictions of Asian Americans circulating in the media.

Another recommendation is to make Asian-centered events visible using mainstream networks to communicate with the student body. One issue that some Asian American students mentioned was that they were sometimes unaware of events and opportunities to engage with their Asian identity on campus. Therefore, students suggest that events organized by affinity groups should be included in upcoming events alongside academic opportunities and sports announcements. Asian American students also admitted that Asian traditions felt insular from the rest of campus life which reduced visibility. Two participants suggested that some of the events could be integrated into the mainstream spaces across campus. For example, if there was an event that featured lights, the campus could set up lanterns in common spaces.

Another example of this can be integrating cultural and ethnic dances into the mainstream dance showcases instead of isolating them to their own separate performance. Although the separation of showcasing diversity serves a very important purpose, these participants' recommendations come out of place for demystifying Asian events on campus. Regarding the issue of taking photos of students of color for advertising purposes, I suggest a conversation between the institution and students of color that centers on how students want to be published on the institution's social media platforms. If the institution aims to showcase diversity, equity, and inclusion, a conversation with students of color can promote a more genuine image of racial demographics on campus.

### ***Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

There are at least a few limitations in this study. Firstly, many of the schools that the participants attend are geographically limited to the Northeast. Therefore, the findings in this

thesis may be specific to the spatial politics and beliefs that define this regional setting. Future work may consider regional comparisons to build a national understanding of Asian American undergraduate experiences at PWIs. Another limitation is that there is a significantly higher proportion of female-identifying students than male and non-binary students. The finding may indicate experiences that are more associated with Asian American women than Asian American students. Finally, some of the participants were only first-year students who had less than three months of experience at their institution. Their lack of experience with a certain phenomenon may simply reflect their short duration on campus. Future studies can conduct a longitudinal study on Asian American students at PWIs that follows that evolution over the four years.

Because one of the main goals of this study was to highlight the diversity of Asian American identities and experiences, each theme and subtheme in this thesis could be examined further and discussed in greater detail in a future thesis. Future research should look at comparing predominately white institutions across the country with similar and different percentages of Asian representation. Research should also investigate how spatial politics influence a sense of belonging and diversity, equity, and inclusion practices at predominately white institutions. Second, future research should also explore the experiences of Asian international students at predominantly white institutions. This study only lightly touches on some of the reasons Asian American students feel divided from Asian international students. Future studies should focus on how international students perceive Asian American students and Asian student organizations. How do their racialized experiences compare to Asian American students?

Thirdly, this study briefly touches upon the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, and immigration status. Future research should delve deeper into how race

and other identities impact Asian Americans in higher education or other types of environments. Finally, thinking beyond the PWI framework, some participants expressed ambivalent sentiments toward the Asian American pan-ethnic label. While the label does serve to unite multiple Asian ethnicities in protest of overt racism and crimes against Asians, it also can be seen as harmful continues to perpetuate monolithic images of Asian people that as was mentioned earlier, can deny Asian Americans access to resources and does is not always inclusive of all Asian identities. Future research should delve into the relevance of the Asian American label in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to individuals and broader Asian social justice issues. Do people still identify with the Asian American identity? Do pan-ethnic labels still represent and serve the Asians living in the United States?

### ***Final Remarks***

As an Asian American student who has attended a predominately white institution for all four years of my undergraduate education, this research not only validated my own racialized experiences but was also healing and exposed me to other Asian American narratives. At predominately white institutions, especially progressive liberal arts colleges and universities, the bold presence of DEI efforts and mission statements can create the illusion that these experiences and stereotypes are fixed to the past. However, this study has revealed that many monolithic perceptions and model minority stereotypes continue to prevail and perpetuate the image of a generalized Asian collective. This study works to challenge the default to clump the Asian American community into one racial group by spotlighting diversity through individual experiences and other intersectional identities. Specifically, this thesis highlights the importance of including conversations on socioeconomic class, immigration statuses such as adoption, and

sexuality which are identities that have been underexplored when considering Asian American experiences.

Asians may be well represented in higher education in the United States, but their racialized experiences continue to be minimized in those same spaces. Therefore, I cultivated this thesis to increase awareness of subjects that are difficult for Asian American students to share with others. Instead of diving deeply into one facet of the Asian American student experience, this study explores a spectrum of experiences that recognizes diversity at a time when Asian American identities continue to be vulnerable to political manipulation.

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