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Asian group tells Common Application to stop disaggregating Asian groups

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on November 13, 2017 - 3:00am

At a time of [growing scrutiny over the way elite colleges consider applications from Asian-American applicants](#) ^[1], a new issue has surfaced. The Asian American Coalition for Education has called on the Common Application to end its practice of giving Asian-Americans 10 options to describe their "Asian background."

The coalition, which has argued that elite colleges discriminate against Asian applicants, and which has applauded the Trump administration's investigation of the issue, says that disaggregation makes it easier for colleges to discriminate.

[A letter from the coalition](#) ^[2] to the Common Application notes that it does not break out different groups of people who might be classified as white in the way it does for Asian-Americans, a much smaller share of the population than are white people.

"That doesn't make any sense," says the letter. "There is no more difference between two people originally from Thailand and China, respectively, than two people originally from Ireland and Slovakia. If using similar standard across all ethnic groups, Common Application could easily use 50 or more subcategories to reflect the ethnic and ancestral origins of 'Caucasians,' who reside in more than 50 countries in Europe and other continents. Applying different classifications toward different racial groups is discriminatory, period."

Specifically, the fear of some Asian-American students and advocates is that colleges will use the data to hold some Asians, such as those with family roots in China or Japan, to higher standards, assuming that these applicants grew up in the United States with families of means and access to good high schools. Those who check some other boxes may be beneficiaries of affirmative action.

The Common Application question can be seen at right. The application of the [Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success](#) ^[3], a new application used by more than 130 colleges, has a similar question (but with 13 possible responses). The [Universal College Application](#) ^[4] gives only one box to check for Asian, but then gives applicants the options of writing in the country of their family's origin.

An official for the Asian American Coalition for Education said the group would be looking at applications beyond the Common Application and may be sending letters to other groups as well.

Officials of the Common Application and the Coalition for Access said that their use of subdivisions within the question about Asian status reflected advice received from experts on Asian students, and other Asian groups. Further, they noted that all of the questions on race and ethnicity are optional.

The admissions groups' statements were correct in that [many reports](#) ^[5] about Asian-American students have noted the problem of treating all of them alike in data collection and policy.

And some leading experts on Asian-Americans said the Common Application was in fact doing the right thing.

"Education researchers have been calling for disaggregated data for Asian-American groups for over a decade," Mitchell Chang, a professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, said via email. "When it comes to degree attainment, we have learned through empirical research that there are significant differences between different Asian ethnic groups in the U.S., i.e., Chinese vs. Cambodian. Lumping all Asians together masks those differences and makes invisible important differences in educational opportunity."

OiYan A. Poon, assistant professor of higher education leadership at Colorado State University, said via email that "the Common App's effort to ask more about student ethnic demographics is an important change that supports Asian-American students."

Poon said she has heard more concern about the issue in recent years from "mostly middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese-Americans." But she said that "decades of research" show that disaggregation is essential to understand Asian-Americans. She said those concerned about disaggregation are those with a "poor understanding" of how affirmative action works and of holistic review of applicants.

Smart Title:

Does Disaggregation Hurt Asian Applicants?

Section:

[Admissions](#) ^[6]

[Diversity](#) ^[7]

Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Which best describes your Asian background?

China

India

Japan

Korea

Pakistan

Philippines

Vietnam

Other East Asia

Other South Asia

Other Southeast Asia

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[2] http://asianamericanforeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Opposition_Letter_Against_Common_App_Subdivision_201711.pdf

[3] <http://www.coalitionforcollegeaccess.org/members.html>

[4] <https://www.universalcollegeapp.com/documents/uca-first-year.pdf>

[5] http://care.gseis.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/2008_CARE_Report.pdf

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