Authors: Alan Wong, Stephanie Purtell

Title: Misidentified and Unidentified: Intersectionally Marginalized Asian American Student Groups at the University of Illinois

About the Authors:
Stephanie:
I’m a junior at the University at Illinois but I’m graduating in May. I’m a sociology major and I want to be a police officer. I have always been interested in the LGBT community and the problems that they have to deal with. I have several LGBT friends that have dealt with a lot of discrimination and always wanted to know if their problems were taken as seriously as the majority’s problem.

Alan:
Alan Y. Wong is an undergraduate senior at the University of Illinois majoring in economics, political science and an individual plan of study major in Asian American Studies. He has been a leader in the Asian American student community since his freshman year and is one of the current (2009-2010) co-directors of the Asian Pacific American Coalition. Following graduation, Alan plans to pursue a law degree as well as a graduate level education in race and ethnic studies. He has served multiple terms on the advisory committees of both the Asian American Cultural Center and Asian American Studies Program at the University of Illinois.

Keywords: LGBT, Asian American, International Students

Abstract:
With our research, we wanted to find out how misidentified and unidentified groups within the larger Asian American community organize and cope with minimal resources at the University of Illinois. We directed out focus mainly on international students and those of the LGBT community. We decided to interview and observe members of these communities. Our findings surprised us because we found that these groups consisted of more people than we have originally thought but also proved that these two groups need more help than the university is giving them.

Question:
How do misidentified and unidentified student groups organize and cope with minimal resources from the university?

Plan:
Stephanie:
What I want to know is why the LGBT Asian American community is so small. The way I am going to go about doing research is by talking to people who run LGBT programs on campus. An example of an LGBT community would be PRIDE. I want to talk to someone higher up in this organization. I would this person’s opinion on LGBT Asian Americans and go on from there. I also know that the Rainbow Coffee house holds events for the LGBT community and I would like to go there to see the type of people that attend and eventually interview some of the people I see there. I also want to get people’s opinion on the idea of Asian
American LGBT students being a “double minority”. My research assignment is going to have a lot to do with me asking people questions.

Alan:

As my question directly engages international Asian students who organize, I will do my best to encounter as many different internal Asian students as possible. Registered student organizations represent only a fraction of the organizing that exists within the international Asian student community here at the university. I plan on engaging non-affiliated (i.e. non-RSO) student groups as well as Champaign-Urbana community groups and religious groups. Through personal connections that I have accrued during my time as an APA student leader, I have direct contact with many such groups (e.g. Korean Cultural Center, UIUC Barkada [an informal Filipino student support group], Taiwanese Student Association, etc.).

Additionally, because my question also directly engages the university, I plan on meeting with administrators of various campus units. Campus housing is one source I hope to speak to - particularly administrators affiliated with the FAR/PAR residence halls, which have a high percentage of Asian international residents. Asian American Cultural Center director David Chih may also potentially provide some insight on the matter.

I also plan on interviewing Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs (VCSA) Renee Romano and Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs (Assoc. VCSA) and Director of the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations Anna Gonzalez about their plans (or lack thereof) to address the unique concerns of international Asian students (which form a sizeable proportion of the campus population). I also work closely with them but I have no reason to believe that either would tell me anything but the whole truth based on prior experiences. While I would like to interview Chancellor Richard Herman, I do not want to rely on the unlikely occurrence that we could work out a meeting time. There is also the distinct possibility that he will be removed from his post during the time of my research, and the current threat of this happening may engender political responses from him as well. Hopefully, the VCSA and Assoc. VCSA can direct me to other campus units and administrators that I can interview and/or acquire information from.

Data (observations):

Stephanie:

On Thursday, October 22, 2009, I went to the Etc. Coffee House on Goodwin and Green from 6:30 to 8:15pm. On Thursdays, the Etc. Coffee House hosts the LGBT community. I showed up with two of my friends. We walked to an empty table and sat down. In the front of the coffee house was a bar type section with coffee and cereal on top. People were walking up and getting cups of coffee or tea and then went to find somewhere to sit. It seemed to me that everyone there knew each other pretty well. People were waving across the room to one another and some were even hugging. Another reason I feel as though everyone is so close is because the director or this particular LGBT meeting came and introduced herself to us because she had never seen us there before. The atmosphere of the place was very friendly. Everyone was just hanging out and talking or doing homework. It seemed like everyone was having a good time. There were so many different people there as well.
The majority of the people there were white men. White women made up the group that
had the second most amount of people. From what I counted there were five Asian American
men, three Asian American women, three African American women and one African American
woman. The groups seemed to be segregated into men and women. Although they were
segregated into groups by gender they were not separated by race. There was a table of three
white men and an Asian American man. They sat in the corner the entire time, never changing
tables or going to mingle with other people. There was a table of like six or seven women and
this table consisted of the three Asian American women and four white women. When I was
looking around it seemed as though everyone was included into some sort of group of people.
The only person that seemed to be on his own was the African American man. He was sitting by
the coffee bar and talking to the people who run the event. He did not seem interested to go
around and talk to the other people that were there. He sat in a corner and stayed to himself.
There was also an Asian American man who sat in a corner by himself and wrote a paper of
some sort on his computer. In the beginning he was walking around talking to people but then
went to do his homework. (I now see this same guy at the gym every day). I thought this was
going to be a bunch of younger kids but I was surprised to see some older men there. They did
not seem to be affiliated with the Etc. Coffee House but seemed to be there to hang out. There
were three older white men there talking to one another.

Towards the end of the night I tried to focus more on what the Asian Americans were
doing. The girls sat quietly at their table and rarely seemed to talk. The same went for the men.
There was a table of two Asian American men and three white men and there was one Asian
American who seemed comfortable enough to talk. They spent most of their time listening or
observing the other people who were sitting at their table. They seemed like they wanted to be
there but they didn’t seem to interact as much as other people did.

Alan (#1):

On Tuesday, October 27th 2009 I sat in on a board meeting of the Korean Cultural Center
(KCC), a registered student organization (RSO) of the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign (UIUC). The meeting was scheduled for 8:00 pm to 9:00 pm, but like most meetings
of student groups I am familiar with, it started a little late and ended a little early, running from
8:07 pm to 8:54 pm. The meeting took place at the KCC house, a small house located in the heart
of campustown on Daniel Street in Champaign, between the intersections at Fifth and Sixth
Street.

I arrived with the President of the organization, a friend of mine since last year who had
met me at an intersection and walked me over to the house. I walked into the living room – a
large room with no furniture and pink painted walls. I was introduced to some people but was
told that others were on their way. As people were running late, I was given a quick tour of the
first floor, where I noted that all of what I presumed to be the living room furniture had been
moved into what would regularly be a bedroom. The other would-be bedroom contained many
Korean texts and materials. As I jotted down some notes, my tour guide (the KCC Vice
President) told me that the room was being prepared as a space for “extra classes” or tutoring for
K-12 students.
EUI Group Project

To my complete shock and amazement, the small organization (consisting of only 31 members or “staff”) informed me that they were renting the property privately for the sole purpose of having a base of operations. The house itself was clearly marked as belonging solely to KCC. There were many photos of members as well as promotional flyers for past KCC events taped all over the walls and doors of the first floor. Although the house would be considered nice quarters for UIUC students, nobody resides in it. I was told that the rooms upstairs were “like a giant closet” and that the basement was “kind of creepy.”

Before I could verify these claims myself, the late officers had arrived and my friend (the President) informed me that the meeting was beginning. Although the meeting was almost entirely in Korean, which I don’t understand, the general vibe was easy to pick up on. The meeting was laid-back and everyone seemed to be close friends – sitting on cushions on the ground in a tight circle rather than in chairs or at a table. This environment, however, did not prevent them from being professional, as discussions about upcoming events were rapid, lively and serious.

For the most part, the attendees did a good job of pretending that I was not present, but they were also very hospitable hosts and at times diverged from their usual pace and language to engage me in English. This was particularly true when the last officer walked in late and was surprised with a birthday cake. As I was typing, and noting my surroundings, my friend had procured a plate and spatula and had cut about a fifth of the cake into a slice and gave it to me. The eight officers then proceeded to eat the remaining portion uncut with spoons in what seemed to me to be another example of their communal relationship with one another.

When discussing their plans, the officers seemed to have a good chemistry. Not once did anyone talk over another person nor did they fight to speak. A general pattern seemed to develop in their communication. First, an open question would be posed, then one other person would answer at length. This would be followed by laughter, a short chat between everyone, then group nodding and oral confirmation (characterized by the utterance of “mm”). All in all, it appeared to be an effective system of getting student leaders’ individual insights on various topics.

Alan (#2):

On Saturday, November 14th, 2009, I sat in on a social meeting of UIUC Barkada, an informal student group of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. By chance, this gathering happened to be a rather large one for the group with especially good turnout because it was the night of Filipino superstar Manny Pacquiao’s boxing match with Miguel Cotto. The meeting took place from approximately 8:00 pm to 10:00 pm at a cozy off campus apartment on Prairie Street in Champaign. There were approximately 20 people in attendance, nearly all of whom were international graduate students from the Philippines.

The atmosphere was very warm, with a smattering of Filipino foods and bottles of beer in great supply. The dialogue was mostly in a vernacular combination of Tagalog and English, with group conversations purely in English for the benefit of myself and other outsiders. Initial chats consisted of discussions on schoolwork and Pacquiao’s prospects in the night’s main fight. Due to boredom with the undercard bouts, the hosts turned to an alternative form of entertainment – the magic mic (a plug and play karaoke microphone extremely popular among
Filipinos). After several songs were sung (and I refused multiple playful demands to participate in the singing), attention was turned back to the fight coverage. More undercard coverage led to another alternative to the TV, this time an open chat on Filipino politics and current events. Most of the discussion concerned the aftermath of the Typhoon season and great displeasure with President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

One particular member of the barkada that I was acquainted with was particularly concerned for my acquisition of data from the observation. Throughout the night, he would frequently prompt me for questions regarding my research for EUI. In the midst of this discussion on Filipino politics, he singled me out by name and asked me if this was at all relevant to my research. I responded that I was surprised by their political engagement, despite a seemingly less prominent role in campus issues. The general consensus in response to my statement was that they were all too busy studying and working harder than their (American) peers in order to keep up (the host’s Colombian graduate student roommate verbally agreed).

As this discussion concluded, the last undercard fight also neared its end. I had been undecided about staying for the main bout, but the host urged me to return to my own group of friends in the Philippine Student Association for the fight. “We’re all just going to be screaming in Tagalog, anyway”, she said.

Data (interviews):
Stephanie:
On November 3, 2010 I went to the Etc. Coffee House at 7pm to conduct my interview. The woman I interviewed is the director there. I had a few questions about the LGBT community. The first question I asked was how accepting the university is towards the LGBT community. She said that there are good days and bad days but the university is fairly accepting. She believes that people lack knowledge of this group and they need to put aside stereotypes and educate themselves. I then asked how the university acts towards those who are not the majority in the LGBT community. She stated that the resources go more towards white individuals but this is changing through a great amount of effort and that this is a work in progress.

I then got into the minority groups involved in the LGBT community. I asked whether or not Asian Americans were present in the LGBT community. She said that certain groups only feel comfortable with the LGBT community whereas others only feel comfortable in their cultural houses. They are trying to reach out more and show these minorities that wherever they go is home and they will be accepted. I asked whether or not Asian Americans are scare due to the fact that they are considered a double minority. She talked about how Asian Americans feel that it is harder to come out because they have to rise above cultural norms and expectations and racism within the LGBT community as well. Some of those who are part of the LGBT community feel as though they are in a white space. Some minorities even feel as though being referred to as “gay” does not pertain to them because “gay” is a white term. I wanted to know more about how the families of Asian Americans reacted to the fact that their children were LGBT. She said that some of those who are part of the LGBT community here have not told their parents. They hide the things that they put on their facebooks so their parents will not see it. They have a very hide time leading two different lives but they do not want their parents to know.
I asked about the LGBT resources on campus and whether or not they were readily available for anyone who needs them. There are a few different LGBT resources on campus: Pride, Colors of Pride, Ladies loving Ladies, Building Bridges, NACHES and more. Some of these groups pertain to specific groups of people. Colors of Pride deal with people of color whereas NACHES deals with those that are Jewish. She also stated that the amount of members they have are up two or three times since last year. However, she feels as though they need to be more known on the university because people who are in their last two years of school wish that they would have known these resources were available when they were freshman. The University of Illinois LGBT community is now on facebook and twitter and have been advertising in newspapers and magazines to publish information about them. The Asian Americans community is doubling up with the LGBT community in a variety of ways in order to make them feel as though they can identify with others. Lastly, I asked whether or not the resources provided were enough to make the LGBT community feel comfortable. She said definitely not. They rely on student help, they need more resources. She said that as the needs for the LGBT community increase, the resources decline. They are reaching out to on campus and off campus help. They could be doing a better job but because they are limited on space and staff they are backed into a corner.

Alan (#1):

On Monday, November 2, 2009 at 3:45 pm at the Illini Union Courtyard Café, I interviewed a high ranking member of the Korean Cultural Center (hereby referred to by the pseudonym “Katie”). During the 45 minute interview, I presented open ended questions about the relationship between the University of Illinois and its Korean international student population. Katie’s responses were generally charged with frustration with both the university administration as well as the Korean international student community.

For the most part, Katie feels as though the university is doing most of what they can with regards to international Korean students’ concerns. However, there are some issues she feels the administration isn’t properly addressing. While Katie believes that many of these problems come from the students’ planned return to Korea following graduation (and an associated uncaring attitude), she also believes that it is the university’s charge to reach out to their students.

Katie and her peers (according to her) want the university to not just identify issues and what causes them, but also the underlying circumstances of those causes and proper ways to alleviate them. For example, she cites the racial/ethnic housing disparity in university housing. While the university accurately claims that students of Asian descent self-select their housing and choose to live in groups, it does not delve further into why. Katie stated that issues of social ostracizing and feeling unwelcome were behind this self-selection that supposedly “explains” the segregation of housing.

Katie was also critical of how the university supplies its services. Like many students in general, she finds that the university’s sheer size allows it to have many accommodations for students, but that these services must be actively attained. In the case of Korean international students, Katie believes that a high level of pride in Korean culture as well as the high socioeconomic status of the Korean international students here prevent them from seeking these
resources. In other words, they neither have the will to ask for help because of their pride nor the need to do so because of their financial status.

This unwritten rule of actively going after what one seeks as well as the general expectation of student networks by the university is what Katie finds to be a failure and/or negligence on the part of the university administration. Although students that gain entrance to Illinois have adequate English proficiency, speaking skills are generally still low among Korean international students. Katie posits that this is undoubtedly hampering to student success both academically and socially as oral communication is key to both.

Katie informed me that cheating was a major problem in the Korean international student community. She stated that this was not a character or cultural issue but rather a grade and services issue. Students are under pressure to do well, and the lack of networks available to students from Korea pushes them to academic dishonesty to succeed. Her organization, the Korean Cultural Center, reached out to International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) in order to put on a workshop for faculty members called “Understanding Students From Korea”. Although it was impactful and clearly important to the faculty (over 20+ professors RSVP’ed), Katie was further annoyed by the university’s passive role in the workshop’s planning. She and her peers have discussed possible ways for the university to improve its outreach to its students from Korea, including a Korean student convocation separate from the international student convocation (Korean students are the plurality of the international student population) as well as networking for Korean and Korean Americans to bridge the language gap.

Alan (#2):
On Friday, November 20, 2009 at 6:00 pm at Woori-Jib restaurant in Champaign, I interviewed two members of UIUC Barkada. The barkada (a Tagalog word for “group of friends”) is an informal organization of Filipino international students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. One of the student members was an undergraduate Senior (hereby referred to by the pseudonym “Vanessa”) while the other was a doctoral candidate nearing the end of her study (pseudonym “Mary”). During the two hour interview over dinner, I presented open ended questions about the relationship between the University of Illinois and its Filipino international student population.

Unlike my interview with sociology major “Katie” of the Korean Cultural Center, both Vanessa and Mary were admittedly confused about my research. Both students came from technical fields (engineering and animal sciences, respectively) and by their own assessment had not given much thought to the topics I was engaging. As they did not know how to respond to my questions, they asked how my other interview proceeded. While I discussed the grievances that Katie had voiced to me regarding the university’s relationship with its Korean international students, both Vanessa and Mary contributed their related thoughts and experiences on their own community’s relationship with UIUC.

In comparison to other (Asian) international student populations, Mary and Vanessa believe that the language barrier is less of a concern for Filipinos, as English is one of two official languages of the Philippines. However, Mary, who is from a rural province in the Philippines, also noted that English proficiency can still be a problem for students from non-
metropolitan areas. Vanessa agreed, citing her upbringing in metropolitan Manila as well as her elite private school education as sources of her excellent English skills (she even placed out of the undergraduate Rhetoric/Composition I requirement, a rarity among Asian international students).

When I brought up professors’ expectations of students to form networks to succeed academically, we got a reaffirmation of Katie’s concerns. Vanessa, who also grades for a class she took last year, quickly tackled the subject with bitterness. When she grades individual homework assignments, she can clearly see that the same groups of students are working together regularly, but cannot do anything about this accepted academic dishonesty. This in turn harms students like herself, who do not have the social resources available to form networks. While acknowledging that this is an issue for international students in general, Vanessa stated that “it’s even worse for us [students from the Philippines], because there are so few of us here [at the university].”

Analysis:
Our research on misidentified and unidentified groups within the larger Asian community at the University of Illinois thus far has produced both confirmations and surprises. Our research thus far has entailed profiling international students (specifically one formal Korean student organization and one informal Filipino student organization) as well as Asian American students that identify as LGBT. Additionally, we have researched trends of society at large pertaining to our groups as well as interviewed members of associations and administrative personnel to formulate our findings.

The size of both groups surprised us as their numbers surpassed our expectations. While it did not escape our initial, uninformed imaginations that there were Asian international and Asian American LGBT students on campus, seeing many of them together was a novel image for us. In our opinion, such responses only further demonstrate their lack of visibility on the purportedly “Inclusive” University of Illinois campus.

For both of our communities of focus, lack of university support was and is a critically important issue. Both the international ethnic/national Asian student communities and the LGBT community rely more on student and outside help than traditionally identified groups that receive explicit university support and attention (i.e. those housed under the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations as well as campus housing and the Office of Minority Student Affairs). Additionally, it does not aid their causes that they draw from inherently smaller populations as well.

However, we found that this need for greater student support and commitment is but one of the many stresses that the groups we researched face as students that are “intersectionally marginalized”, as Kimberlé Crenshaw calls such statuses. While there are several groups at Illinois focused on the issues of specific minorities in the LGBT community, there does not appear to be any such group (of significance) dedicated specifically to Asian Americans. For students who identify as LGBT, Asian cultural influences can be more pronounced than they are for a comparable heterosexual peer. In the article, “Gay Asian-Americans Face More Stress”, the author states that Asian Americans have to “mask homosexual behaviors to avoid alienating their
family and their parents’ communities. In their relationships with others, they often have to decide which identity will take precedence - their ethnic or sexual identity.” (8Asians.com). LGBT Asian Americans’ family members expect them to be part of their ethnic community regardless of what other factors constitute their identities.

Likewise, Asian international students feel that the various identities that describe them on this campus are problematic and misleading descriptors. These students are from foreign countries, but they do not necessarily have a great deal in common with students from countries other than their own. Additionally, these students may be Asian, but it does not necessarily mean that they have similar issues to other students of Asian descent (who may be in their own way unique – e.g., American born, mixed race, etc.).

Although Yen Le Espiritu’s notion of a Pan-Asian identity forwarded in “Coming Together: The Asian American Movement” is extremely useful for the majority of Asian students at Illinois in both social and political ways, those students at the intersections of marginalization like the ones we researched do not reap many benefits from the construction of such a coalition. Rather, the rise of such groups to prominence often obfuscates the complexities and varying identities of the various members that comprise them, leading to a perverse system that simultaneously denies representation for minorities through the same ways and means that it offers it to begin with.

Such a system of minority-majority representation and placation exists at the university level as much as (if not more than) it does at the societal level. In his article, “The New Whiz Kids”, David Brand states that “Asian Americans consider the ‘model minority’ image a misleading stereotype that masks individuality and conceals real problems.” The model minority stereotype presents enough of an issue on its own for heteronormative Asian American students as a whole without even factoring in that collegiate notions of “Asian American” vary vastly between different students of even very similar backgrounds.

Intersectionally marginalized Asian students at Illinois, however (according to our interviewees), must at once contend with the university’s elevation of this stereotype (through its policy that Asians do not qualify as minorities) while also dealing with the other issues they face and the difficulty in reconciling the various facets of their identities. For most Asian students at Illinois, the factors of Asian cultural expectations and the institutionalized discrimination of university policies pose an extraordinary challenge on their own. For intersectionally marginalized Asian students at the university who have been misidentified or unidentified by the administration, the added impediments tied to their multiple minority identities make it even harder to succeed.

Works Cited


Research Narratives:

For our research project, we wanted to find out how misidentified and unidentified student groups organize and cope with minimal resources at the University of Illinois. In particular, we researched the LGBT and international student communities within the larger Asian student population. This particular research is related to previous EUI projects completed between 2007 and 2009. To facilitate our research, we observed as well as interviewed members of these communities.

Our research on misidentified and unidentified groups within the larger Asian community at the University of Illinois produced both confirmations and surprises. Our research entailed profiling international students (specifically one formal Korean student organization and one informal Filipino student organization) as well as Asian American students that identify as LGBT. Additionally, we have researched trends of society at large pertaining to our groups as well as interviewed members of associations and administrative personnel to formulate our findings.

One interview we conducted at the Etc. Coffeehouse on Goodwin and Green in Champaign gave us a lot of insight on the Asian LGBT sub-community at the university. There were several people in the coffeehouse we observed. We found those who were part of the greater LGBT campus community seemingly knew each other very well. Everyone at the coffeehouse seemed to know each other by name and made sure to say hello to anyone who walked in.

The director of the coffeehouse walked up and introduced herself while welcoming us to the coffeehouse even though we appeared to be outsiders there only to complete an assignment. The people there were predominantly White males but that seems to be the majority in a lot of settings on campus. Going into this observation, we assumed that the LGBT community was rather accepting of everyone, but we were informed that there are racial problems in the community as well. After our interview we found that the LGBT community is perceived to be a White space and ethnic minorities do not like being referred to as “gay” because the term is indelibly linked to the White community. For example, one African-American student we interacted with likes to be referred to collectively with her partner as “same gender lovers”. Others stated that similar divides over terminology exist within the LGBT community and its ethnic minority sub-communities.

1 “Minority Times Two”: A look at life for an LGBT student of Asian descent on campus”. Benham, Greg (2008)
2 “International Students”. Smith, Shaunette; Rong, Nancy; Kim, MinSoo; Chwe, Minjung; 09spAAS199 (2009)
According to the director of the coffeehouse in the interview we conducted, the LGBT community in Champaign-Urbana relies on a lot of student help out of necessity. They need more functional space and professional coordinators but they do not have the means to pay for these utilities and employees out of pocket. The university provides little financial support, so the students and those involved in the community are forced to either lend their houses as meeting spaces or go to public spaces to hold their meetings. Something that we were impressed with was the fact that there are several different groups on campus that related to LGBT minorities. For example, there are groups for women, people of color, Jewish people and adherents of other faiths. However, many of these groups are not well known because the community does not have the means to publicize their events or even their existence to the general public.

On another occasion, we sat in on a board meeting of the Korean Cultural Center (KCC), a registered student organization (RSO) of the University of Illinois. The meeting took place at the KCC house, a small house located in the heart of campustown on Daniel Street in Champaign, between the intersections at Fifth and Sixth Street. We were given a quick tour of the first floor which was mostly empty, save for a room that was being prepared as a space for “extra classes” or tutoring for K-12 students.

To our amazement, the small organization (consisting of only 31 members or “staff”) informed us that they were renting the property privately for the sole purpose of having a base of operations. The house itself was clearly marked as belonging solely to KCC. There were many photos of members as well as promotional flyers for past KCC events taped all over the walls and doors of the first floor. Although the house would be considered nice quarters for UIUC students, nobody resides in it.

Although the meeting was almost entirely in Korean, which we don’t understand, the general vibe was easy to pick up on. The meeting was laid-back and everyone seemed to be close friends – sitting on cushions on the ground in a tight circle rather than in chairs or at a table. This environment, however, did not prevent them from being professional, as discussions about upcoming events were rapid, lively and serious.

When discussing their plans, the officers seemed to have a good chemistry. Not once did anyone talk over another person nor did they fight to speak. A general pattern seemed to develop in their communication. First, an open question would be posed, then one other person would answer at length. This would be followed by laughter, a short chat between everyone, then group nodding and oral confirmation (characterized by the utterance of “mm”). All in all, it appeared to be an effective system of getting student leaders’ individual insights on various topics.

However, the breadth of KCC’s activities and their apparent financial security should not be read as indicative of a lack of difficulty in their organization. Following the observation, we interviewed a high ranking member of KCC (hereby referred to by the pseudonym “Katie”), presenting open ended questions about the relationship between the University of Illinois and its Korean international student population. Katie’s responses were generally charged with frustration with both the university administration as well as the Korean international student community.
For the most part, Katie feels as though the university is doing most of what they can with regards to international Korean students’ concerns. However, there are some issues she feels the administration isn’t properly addressing. While Katie believes that many of these problems come from the students’ planned return to Korea following graduation (and an associated uncaring attitude), she also believes that it is the university’s charge to reach out to their students.

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Our observation and interview of the members of another Asian international student network produced similar insights and reactions. UIUC Barkada (a Tagalog word for “group of friends”) is an informal organization of Filipino international students at the University of
Illinois. We observed them one night at a casual meeting at one of their members’ apartments, where the atmosphere was similar to the one we experienced at the KCC meeting (save for the professional focus, as the Barkada is an informal group).

One of the student members of UIUC Barkada that we interviewed was an undergraduate Senior (hereby referred to by the pseudonym “Vanessa”). The other interviewee was a doctoral candidate nearing the end of her study (pseudonym “Mary”). During the interview we presented open ended questions about the relationship between the University of Illinois and its Filipino international student population. While many of their concerns mirrored those of Katie’s of the KCC, there were also some differences as a result of their divergent communities’ inherent differences.

In comparison to other (Asian) international student populations, Mary and Vanessa believe that the language barrier is less of a concern for Filipinos, as English is one of two official languages of the Philippines. However, Mary, who is from a rural province in the Philippines, also noted that English proficiency can still be a problem for students from non-metropolitan areas. Vanessa agreed, citing her upbringing in metropolitan Manila as well as her elite private school education as sources of her excellent English skills (she even placed out of the undergraduate Rhetoric/Composition I requirement, a rarity among Asian international students).

When we brought up professors’ expectations of students to form networks to succeed academically, we got a reaffirmation of Katie’s concerns. Vanessa, who also grades for a class she took last year, quickly tackled the subject with bitterness. When she grades individual homework assignments, she can clearly see that the same groups of students are working together regularly, but cannot do anything about this accepted academic dishonesty. This in turn harms students like herself, who do not have the social resources available to form networks. While acknowledging that this is an issue for international students in general, Vanessa stated that “it’s even worse for us [students from the Philippines], because there are so few of us here [at the university].”

In reviewing our preliminary findings, certain trends, concerns and disadvantages common to both sub-communities we researched stood out. For one, the size of both groups surprised us as their numbers surpassed our expectations. While it did not escape our initial, uninformed imaginations that there were Asian international and Asian American LGBT students on campus, seeing many of them together was a novel image for us. In our opinion, such responses only further demonstrate their lack of visibility on the purportedly “Inclusive” University of Illinois campus.

For both of our communities of focus, lack of university support was and is a critically important issue. Both the international ethnic/national Asian student communities and the LGBT community rely more on student and outside help than traditionally identified groups that receive explicit university support and attention (i.e. those housed under the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations as well as campus housing and the Office of Minority Student Affairs). While some groups (e.g. KCC) have access to reliable private funding, this is an unfair expectation of them and an allocation of their unrestricted funding that may be better suited for
other purposes. Additionally, we found that it does not aid the causes of these groups that they
draw from inherently smaller populations as well.

However, we found that this need for greater student support and commitment is but one
of the many stresses that the groups we researched face as students that are “intersectionally
marginalized”, as Kimberlé Crenshaw calls such statuses. While there are several groups at
Illinois focused on the issues of specific minorities in the LGBT community, there does not
appear to be any such group (of significance) dedicated specifically to Asian Americans. For
students who identify as LGBT, Asian cultural influences can be more pronounced than they are
for a comparable heterosexual peer. In the article, “Gay Asian-Americans Face More Stress”, the
author states that Asian Americans have to “mask homosexual behaviors to avoid alienating their
family and their parents’ communities. In their relationships with others, they often have to
decide which identity will take precedence - their ethnic or sexual identity.” (8Asians.com).

Likewise, Asian international students feel that the various identities that describe them
on this campus are problematic and misleading descriptors. These students are from foreign
countries, but they do not necessarily have a great deal in common with students from countries
other than their own. Additionally, these students may be Asian, but it does not necessarily mean
that they have similar issues to other students of Asian descent (who may be in their own way
unique – e.g., American born, mixed race, etc.).

Although Yen Le Espiritu’s notion of a Pan-Asian identity forwarded in “Coming
Together: The Asian American Movement” is extremely useful for the majority of Asian
students at Illinois in both social and political ways, those students at the intersections of
marginalization like the ones we researched do not reap many benefits from the construction of
such a coalition. Rather, the rise of such groups to prominence often obfuscates the complexities
and varying identities of the various members that comprise them, leading to a perverse system
that simultaneously denies representation for minorities through the same ways and means that it
offers it to begin with.

Such a system of minority-majority representation and placation exists at the university
level as much as (if not more than) it does at the societal level. In his article, “The New Whiz
Kids”, David Brand states that “Asian Americans consider the ‘model minority’ image a
misleading stereotype that masks individuality and conceals real problems.” The model minority
stereotype presents enough of an issue on its own for heteronormative Asian American students
as a whole without even factoring in that collegiate notions of “Asian American” vary vastly
between different students of even very similar backgrounds.

Intersectionally marginalized Asian students at Illinois, however (according to our
interviewees), must at once contend with the university’s elevation of this stereotype (through its
policy that Asians do not qualify as minorities) while also dealing with the other issues they face
and the difficulty in reconciling the various facets of their identities. For most Asian students at
Illinois, the factors of Asian cultural expectations and the institutionalized discrimination of
university policies pose an extraordinary challenge on their own. For intersectionally
marginalized Asian students at the university who have been misidentified or unidentified by the administration, the added impediments tied to their multiple minority identities make it even harder to succeed.

Works Cited:


“International Students”. Smith, Shaunette; Rong, Nancy; Kim, MinSoo; Chwe, Minjung; 09spAAS199 (2009). Available at [http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/13099](http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/13099).

**Recommendations:**
Although the few individuals that we interacted with had some very good ideas, their input is no doubt just a fraction of the ideas circulating within their own communities. In terms of bringing the university's services for these multiply marginalized communities up to the level that they should be, we are not advocating for more efforts so much as more efficient efforts. Spending less money on unpopular programs and allocating funds toward garnering more insight from these students would be an excellent first step. Bringing the university's stance on Asian students as "non-minorities" into the twenty first century would probably help a great deal as well (for these communities as well as for the Asian student population as a whole).