

# What Are We Afraid Of? Why Silencing Asian Americans Is No Longer Tolerated

by [Peter T. Keo](#) — October 31, 2018

*This commentary argues that there is a lack of nuance on both sides of the Asian-American affirmative action debate. The author presents two nuances to stimulate further discussion aimed at dismantling a larger project of structural racism in which Asian Americans have been silenced and invisible.*

It requires smart and courageous leadership to ensure that all children from marginalized backgrounds receive the support and services they need and deserve to thrive in education and life. The challenge, however, is that “all” doesn’t necessarily mean “all,” especially when it comes to the Asian-American community. As a Southeast Asian-American scholar who grew up severely underprivileged, educated (and racialized) in American public schools, I can attest to this feeling. Though I support affirmative action, I am not at all surprised that a small group of Asian Americans have made national headlines by suing Harvard University for apparent racial discrimination.

I argue that, as a country, we need to explicitly address the invisibility and silencing of Asian Americans (across institutions) as a larger project of dismantling structural racism in America. Ignoring these issues doesn’t authentically and holistically promote an educational equity agenda.

It is no secret that for decades, [Asian Americans have been politically and unnecessarily wedged between whites and other racial minorities](#), especially African Americans and increasingly Hispanic Americans. It would also be foolhardy to suggest that Asian Americans have not been racialized in the broader American consciousness through the model minority myth, an overused and outdated theory suggesting that there is something unique about Asian-American culture that enables this group to excel in finance and academics. Of course, this myth is incorrect and bifurcates the Asian-American experience into two rigid categories: success or failure. Scholars, myself included, have invested significant resources in order to dismantle this decades-old myth.

The [Harvard admissions trial](#) is arguably one of the biggest civil rights issues of our time and could change how race-based decisions are made in college admissions. This is not the first time Harvard has come under fire from the Asian-American community: court documents reveal that [a 2013 report circulated to top Harvard administrators](#) (not to the public) indicated that “Harvard’s admissions system produces ‘negative effects’ for Asian Americans.”

As a race and equity scholar, what is perhaps most troubling to me about the Asian-American affirmative action debate is that both sides have missed key nuances that could support (not further isolate) the neediest Asian-American students, which gets back to the original intent of affirmative action: to uplift communities (mainly of color) that have been held back by systemic inequalities. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing affirmative action is the way in which race, as a single variable, is relied upon. This is problematic for the Asian-American community because race conceals tremendous disparities for marginalized subgroups (e.g., Southeast Asian Americans, who have some of the [highest poverty and high school and college attrition rates in the nation](#)). Two nuances are addressed below to encourage deeper debate on the issue.

The first nuance: The issue is bigger than race. I am not suggesting that we remove race; rather, the continued consideration of race for Asian Americans dismisses [the vast diversity within the Asian-American community and across Asian-American ethnicities](#). Those in favor of affirmative action should focus on ethnicity, not simply race, and here is why: (a) Ethnicity reveals the complex and varied stories of history, migration, economics, politics, and so on behind the numbers which race alone conceals (as a scholar who statistically disaggregates large datasets by ethnicity from sources such as the U.S. Census and the American Community Survey, I can attest that this is not hard to implement); (b) aggregated racial data (especially around math and finance) make it appear that Asians are high-performing and therefore not deserving of additional help, which is the primary cause of invisibility and silencing; and (c) affirmative action must truly target racial minority students from underprivileged families, not just students who have checked off the race box but hail from privileged families, as this is antithetical to the original intent of affirmative action.

The second nuance: We must consider the possibility of implicit bias in the treatment of Asian Americans. The real issue is the power and privilege admissions officers have and the implicit biases they could hold. Longtime Harvard

Dean William Fitzsimmons testified that [“he does not believe that \[bias\] training is necessary for Harvard's admissions office.”](#) It is perhaps no surprise that many Asian-Americans, including applicants rejected in the admissions process, are frustrated. [According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling,](#) research shows that despite our best intentions, we make assumptions about others. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest that admissions officers do not carry implicit biases with them when assessing applications. Without proper training, said biases could impact their views of Asian-American applicants. Remember: I say this as someone who supports affirmative action.

Perhaps the most important point of all: Numerous vulnerable Asian-American students from poor and low-income families who need and deserve additional support and services are being ignored in the debate. [Smaller and more vulnerable Asian-American subgroups](#) who would benefit the most from affirmative action are being silenced. We must do better to provide opportunities to this community.

Though I do not support the lawsuit against Harvard, on some level, it forces elite schools (and, indeed, faculty, staff, and students) to be more transparent (and perhaps thoughtful) in their treatment of Asian Americans in the admissions process and in the classroom. These opportunities can significantly, positively, and permanently change the lives of countless students teetering on the edge of poverty and an unproductive life. They have certainly changed my life.

Let me end by saying this: Advocating on behalf of the Asian-American community as an Asian American often feels like a battle between David and Goliath. We are overpowered, outnumbered, and often morally deflated, but know that the good fight must go on so that all children can thrive. In this regard, the good fight shouldn't pit racial minorities against each other. Asian-American students shouldn't become political and cultural fodder in holding institutions accountable for achieving greater equitable practices for larger ethnic minority students.

We must learn to work together. We need smart and courageous leadership to make the proverbial pie bigger, so that racial minority groups stop fighting for scraps on the table.