Bias against Asian-American students is real. Affirmative action isn't the problem.

We can fight stereotypes about Asian personalities while rejecting the idea that test scores are the only kind of merit.

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Harvard University.
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The affirmative action debate is shifting again, with new faces but old arguments. The claim? Affirmative action in college admissions hurts Asian Americans, especially at elite universities like Harvard.

Like many colleges and universities, Harvard considers race and a number of non-quantitative factors to get a more holistic review of admissions applications. The New York Times recently reported that, according to one analysis of admissions files, "Harvard consistently rated Asian-American applicants lower than others on traits like 'positive personality,' likability, courage, kindness and being 'widely respected.'" Some have interpreted this finding as ironclad proof that affirmative action harms Asian Americans.

However, a week after the Times story appeared, the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (a coalition of 34 of the leading national organizations representing various Asian-American ethnic groups) issued a statement saying that they also reviewed the Harvard data and did not find intentional or implicit bias against Asian-American applicants.

The story is not as simple as some commentators suggest, in short. If

admissions officers exhibited unconscious or conscious bias against Asian Americans, then this must be addressed. But even so, it is important to recognize that the problem would be racism, not affirmative action. To conflate the two represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues.

It is also part of a pattern: Over the past few decades, challenges to anti-Asian bias have repeatedly been appropriated and reframed by opponents of affirmative action.

Yes, anti-Asian bias and stereotypes are real problems, both in higher education and in society at large. Even if Harvard admissions officers were biased against Asian Americans, the solution would not lie in abandoning holistic admissions and affirmative action, but rather in challenging anti-Asian bias in the review process, including racialized readings of Asian Americans.

While the stereotype that Asian Americans are uniformly academic powerhouses may appear to be a positive characterization (and some Asian Americans believe it is), it has long served to dehumanize and mischaracterize Asian Americans; it also pits Asian Americans against other groups of color. The "model minority" stereotype portrays Asian Americans as having "made it": They worked hard and persevered and achieved the American dream.

Data reveals a much more complicated picture, but the framing of Asian Americans as successful was never about accuracy: It was about driving a wedge between members of different ethnic groups and undermining the claims of systemic racism made by civil rights activists. (If they can make it, why can't you?)

Today, the 21st-century version of the model minority stereotype combines the idea that Asian Americans are hardworking and high-achieving with an image of them being hyper-competitive, rigid, and singularly goal-oriented — automatons or robots. The media exacerbates the problem by echoing that

stereotype in its coverage.

Certainly, some Asian Americans appear to fit the stereotype. But it fails to recognize the economic, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political diversity within the Asian-American category. Southeast Asian Americans, for example, have long had some of the lowest economic and educational attainment levels of all groups. Consider this observation from a youth coordinator at a community-based organization [serving Southeast Asian Americans in Wisconsin](#):

> I still think that a lot of people don't know who Hmong folks are. I think that a lot of people still think that we are East Asian, Chinese folks right? And that we fit into the model minority myth. … But I think we look at those statistics right, and we take out Southeast Asian folks from that, when we look at it, we see that Southeast Asian folks are the complete opposite of the model minority myth. That we are not doing well at all. We are actually really poor, we are not graduating high school and college.

Of course, there are Southeast Asian Americans who are achieving social mobility, but this youth worker is making an important point about how generalizations regarding Asian-American success make it difficult to recognize the vast disparities within the Asian-American population. In particular, the generalizations ignore the Asian-American subgroups that stand to benefit most from affirmative action.

Beneath the "model minority" stereotype, Asian Americans face distinctive problems

Even when performing at the highest levels, Asian Americans can face formidable challenges. For instance, [young Asian-American women](#) suffer among the highest rates of depression of all race and gender groups. And Asian-American college students, both women and men, experience much higher rates of [suicidal thoughts](#) than whites.

Research in psychology suggests racism negatively [affects the mental health](#) and well-being of Asian Americans. Racism can also shape their choice of which fields to study — thereby, in a feedback loop, reinforcing stereotypes.

While interviewing Asian-American students in colleges across the country, we have heard students report that their parents push them into STEM because they assume that people in STEM fields will be [judged more "objectively"](#) than in other fields and careers; racial bias will be less of a factor. Colleges and universities need to understand that Asian Americans do encounter racism and that their seemingly stereotypical behavior may be a response to this.

[One oft-cited study](#) suggests that, if elite universities restricted their admissions criteria to narrow numerical measures — standardized test scores, GPAs, and so on — rather than using their current holistic reviews, then the numbers and percentages of Asian Americans accepted for admission would increase significantly.

But test scores should not be the primary criteria for admission. If we believe universities should look at the whole student — at all of their strengths and accomplishments and potential — and if we also believe that educational experiences are enhanced by a diverse student population, then we must reject the idea of using test scores alone to determine "merit."

Universities can and should work toward holistic reviews that recognize and appreciate the diversity and complexity of Asian-American experiences. A fair version of holistic admissions would recognize the ethnic diversity among those categorized as Asian American and also recognize social-class diversity within Asian ethnic groups. Such an approach could potentially benefit Southeast Asian Americans as well as low-income East and South Asian Americans.

The various claims and portrayals emerging from this lawsuit serve as an important reminder that anti-Asian racism can play out in multiple insidious

ways. Harvard's critics think they have spotted one form of anti-Asian racism. But another variety turns Asian Americans into racial mascots of the movement opposed to affirmative action.

We reject the idea that Asian Americans are less kind or courageous than other students, of course, but we also reject the model-minority stereotype beloved of affirmative action's opponents. As legal scholar Mari Matsuda famously proclaimed, "We will not be used!"

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